

Second Sunday in Advent  
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### **The Beginning of the Good News**

The Gospel of Mark doesn't begin with a birth narrative like Matthew or Luke. Nor does it begin with a theological prologue like John. Instead, Mark starts his gospel with the briefest possible introduction: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

It's clear. It's concise... And it's deadly.

Imagine, for a moment, that you are living in Galilee in the year 70 AD. There's a war being waged. A group of Jewish zealots have revolted against the Roman Empire, and Jerusalem is now under siege.

Some people look at this situation and see God raising up warriors to push the infidels out of the Holy Land. But others are saying that the only way to peace and security is to submit to the powers Rome. Everyone is caught between resentment of the invading soldiers on the one hand and fear of the religious extremists on the other.

To make matters worse, Emperor Nero died last year and there is civil unrest in Rome. Four men have attempted to claim the throne, but each has been assassinated one right after the other. Now Vespasian, the very general besieging Jerusalem, has been crowned emperor.

Your village is populated by both Jews and Gentiles, so tensions are—let's say—a little high. But one small sect refuses to fight on either side: followers of a Galilean rabbi named Jesus. He was crucified for insurrection about forty years ago, and the Roman sympathizers in town suspect his followers of continuing his would-be insurrection. The rabbis call his followers heretics. And the zealots dismiss them because they refuse to take up the sword against Rome.

But you're curious about these people and their claim that Jesus' crucifixion is "good news" for both Israel and Rome. And then someone hands you a scroll with this title written on it: "The beginning of the good news about Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God."

Now this is troubling. For the Jews in your village, the Messiah is the agent of God who is supposed to liberate Israel and restore order to the world under God's reign. They would not take kindly the idea that a carpenter killed by Rome is their long-awaited liberator.

And worse yet, "Son of God" is the title of the Roman Emperor: *divi filius*. The powers of Rome operating under Caesar would be quick to crush any competing claims to absolute power and authority.

The scroll you hold in your hand is your death warrant, signed, sealed, and delivered.<sup>1</sup> And now you have to make a choice. Do you let your curiosity get the better of you and read on? Or do you avoid accusations of religious *and* political sedition and throw the scroll away?

Church, we have already read on. As we enter into the beginning of the Jesus story, we already know where it's headed: the carnage of the cross and the revolution of the resurrection. We already know that the scroll inscribed with that deadly first line contains the most life-giving story in human history.

But 2,000 years later and half a world away, we now hold that scroll so *comfortably* in our hand. I wonder if we have fully considered its risk.

The opening line of Mark's Gospel may not be a death sentence for us like it was for Mark's community or even as it is today for our Coptic and Chinese brothers and sisters, but here in the heart of American empire, it remains as seditious as ever.

Just like a Galilean villager in 70 AD, we are surrounded on every side by false Messiahs and would-be Caesars. Whether it's the prosperity gospel, the self-help industry, or even the party platform, false Messiahs constantly promise us liberation, yet leave us oppressed. In the same way, the free market, the ideal of personal liberty, and the military-industrial complex are all would-be Caesars that promise us peace and security, yet leave us in chaos.

These things promise us happiness and *greatness*, but they routinely fail to deliver. And if ever their claims to Messiah-ship or Caesar-hood were challenged by the reality of the good news, they would brutalize us the way they brutalized of Christ.

So, are you feeling the holiday spirit yet?

If by "holiday spirit" you mean, "feeling jolly," then probably not. It's hard to sing about peace on earth, if you're worried about earth falling to pieces. It's hard to sing about joy to the world when your own world is devoid of joy. But it is precisely in times such as these that the holidays become our little insurrections.

When we celebrate our holidays—our feasts and fasts—we perform little acts of resistance against those forces that hold our world captive. In this season of Advent, we prepare for the arrival of the Prince of Peace and in so doing we challenge the legitimacy of every false Messiah and would-be Caesar.

But don't just take my word for it; look at John the Baptist. John's ministry of baptism at the river Jordan prepared the way for the arrival of Jesus and resisted the forces of oppression and chaos by remembering what God had done in ages past.

In a display that is equal parts public theater *and* protest, John cloths himself with camel's hair, he puts on a leather belt, and he eats only foods found in the desert.

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<sup>1</sup> The above section is derived from the text of Christopher R. Hutson's article on Mark 1:1-8 in *Feasting on the Word, Year B*, vol. 1, pp. 44-48.

His clothes are a couple centuries out of fashion<sup>2</sup>, but anyone who saw them would have seen the likeness of the prophet Elijah. When the people saw John they knew God was about to speak like in Elijah's time.

In the same way, John's diet of locusts and honey recalled God's provision for Israel in the wilderness. But his diet also subverted the authority of the temple in Jerusalem. While domesticated honey was subject to a tithe, wild honey was not. John is living off the grid and avoiding his temple taxes. And it's here that John's celebration of God's acts in the past become seditious realities in the present.

But John's baptism is more subversive than his clothes or diet. If you were Jewish in the time of John, the only place you could go to have your sins forgiven was the temple in Jerusalem. John's ministry of baptism for the forgiveness of sins, therefore, usurped the religious authority of the entire temple system. This is *problematic* to say the least.

But John's theatrical protest has a moral cause. The temple was not accessible to everyone. Those with certain physical conditions—such as eunuchs—couldn't even step foot on the temple grounds. And the poor couldn't always afford the rituals of temple worship. By calling the people out into the wilderness, John is making God's forgiveness available to all people through a free and open baptism.

John does all of this for one purpose: To make the world ready for Jesus. The footsteps of the people walking out to the river Jordan and back literally carve a highway through the desert. The people are beckoned by John's peculiar message: "One more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie his sandals. I baptize with water; he will baptize with the Holy Spirit."

John knew that the very same God who formed humankind from the dust was now on his way, with dusty sandals on his feet. In John's time, touching someone else's feet made a person ritually unclean and untying sandals was the duty of the lowly. But the one coming after John was so holy, that John considered himself unworthy of the task. He knew that the Lord was coming and that preparation needed to be made.

By remembering the **past**, John challenged the **present** and prepared for the **future**. And we are called to do the same.

Just as John appeared in the wilderness, we are to occupy those wild places in our culture where comfort and luxury are in short supply. We don't have to live out in the woods, but we *should* be found in soup kitchens and warming shelters.

Just as John wore humble clothes and ate desert food, we are to shock the world by the manner of our living. In a world driven by consumerism, perhaps we can buy a little less and lead simpler lives.

Just as John offered a baptism for the forgiveness of sins, we are to invite every person into the new world order of the Church. By pointing people toward Jesus – we call them away from places of oppression and chaos, and into allegiance with God.

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<sup>2</sup> Phrasing from the text of Martin B. Copenhaver's article on Mark 1:1-8 in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 1, pp. 45-49.

In all these things we prepare the way for the Lord in our place and time. When false Messiahs and would-be Caesars perpetuate the ugliness of American empire and every empire, our celebratory way-making becomes a form of resistance.

If we accept the full risk of the scroll we hold in our hand, then this Advent season can become a remembrance of God's acts in ages past *as well as* a seditious reality in the present.

So, with all the world's ugliness in mind,—I leave you with this one holiday challenge: When feeling jolly seems out of reach, try feeling seditious. Amen.