

The Greatest Threat to Faith Today

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Mark 1:1-15

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There are lots of stories in the Bible; hundreds, no less. The common thread in these Biblical stories is that they tell one sprawling

story of creation, fall and redemption. That's why we make so much of Jesus. God enters creation in Jesus Christ; a creation that has been broken by the fall in order to redeem and save.

It's not surprising the Bible is written in story form. We are a composite of stories. Hang around the geriatric crowd for any length of time and they will break into stories from their past.

Chris and I drove with my 94-year-old dad to Boston over Thanksgiving to visit our son, Andrew, and family. It was my dad's first trip to our son's home in Boston and he met his newest great-granddaughter.

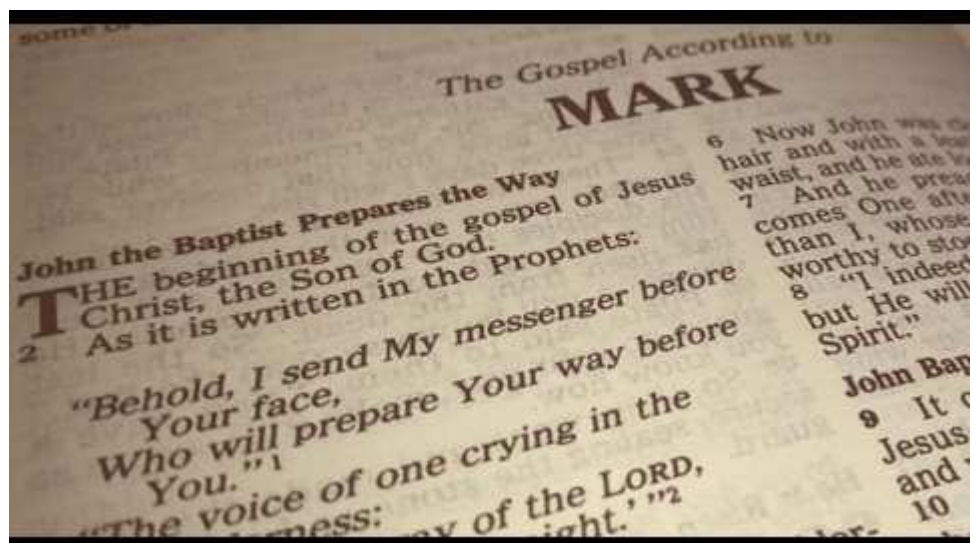
We attended a Thanksgiving service at the church where my son serves as pastor. There was an opportunity during the service for people to voice their thanksgiving. My dad expressed gratitude for 68 years of marriage to my mom, who had died five years ago. Dad didn't stop there. He proceeded to tell everyone how he met my mom. It was a bit of a reach in the context of worship but it makes for good story. My dad was 16 at the time. He was attending a dance for high school students at a local country club. It was a fancy affair with suits and satin dresses. My dad was standing on a second floor balcony. The details remain sketchy, but one of his friends threw him a fire extinguisher. Somehow, the contents of the fire extinguisher rained down on the

dance floor below. Carbon Dioxide doesn't wear well with satin. (My nephew is standing at the scene of crime in this picture on the screen.) Someone called the cops, so my dad and his buddies beat a hasty retreat. As he was exiting the building, my dad noticed my mom leaning against a pillar. They had never met, so my dad stopped to make introductions, "You're beautiful. I'll call you for a date sometime, but right now I'm on the run from the sheriff." With that, he vanished into the night.

Two years later, he called my mom for that date and the rest, as they say, is history. I suspect that story will be retold in my son's church for years to come! We are a composite of stories. We remember stories, especially unconventional ones.

The first four books of the New Testament tell us stories about Jesus. We call them gospels. The word translated *gospel* or *good news* originates from an Anglo-Saxon word *godspell* meaning good story. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are essentially good news stories about Jesus.

During Advent, we'll revisit the beginning of these four gospel stories. We began last Sunday with Matthew. Today, we turn to Mark's gospel. You may



have noticed during the reading of the opening verses of Mark's gospel, there is no Mary, Joseph or the baby Jesus. There are no shepherds or magi at the manger. Mark skips over Jesus' birth to tell the story of his baptism, which sets the stage for future ministry.

Mark opens with the words, “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God” (1:1). There is no verb in this first phrase, so it functions more as a title to his gospel than an opening sentence. It’s a tidy summary of Mark’s gospel. It’s a good story about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.

Mark wastes no time connecting Jesus’ story to the Old Testament. He references two Hebrew prophets, the more well-known, Isaiah, is identified by name. Mark references Malachi’s prophecy in verse 2: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way” (3:1). Then, in verse 3, he quotes from Isaiah: “Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him” (40:3).

John the Baptist is introduced to us in verse 4. His surname, “Baptist,” is tied to his role of baptizing people, preparing for this coming Messiah Son of God. To our modern sensibilities, John seems rather eccentric, dressed as he is in camel’s hair and leather belt and dining on a steady diet of locusts and wild honey. Astute readers will pick up his uncanny likeness to another famous Biblical prophet, Elijah. John functions as something of a transitional figure in Scripture, serving as a forerunner to this coming Messiah Son of God.

It seems all wrong for John to baptize Jesus. The One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit (1:8) is himself baptized. Jesus ought to be doing the baptism. Yet, Jesus insists on being baptized as an act of solidarity with the people he has come to save.

When Jesus emerges from the waters of baptism, Mark reports the heavens are torn



open (1:10). *Torn open* is a forceful verb meaning to tear apart. Heaven is, in effect, ripped open when Jesus is baptized to begin his ministry. A voice from heaven serves to clarify the moment, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased” (1:11).

The curtain in the temple was torn into two from top to bottom 15.38



The centurion said, “Surely this man was the Son of God.” 15.39

This same pattern of heaven ripped open and Jesus as Son of God is repeated at the end of Mark’s gospel. When Jesus takes his last breath on the cross,

Mark reports the curtain of the temple is torn in two from top to bottom (15:38). Top to bottom means without human assistance. This curtain separates the outer precincts of the temple from the most holy place where only the priest would enter once a year to offer sacrifice for people’s sins. The torn curtain represents the dynamic way in which Jesus gives us unhindered access into God’s presence.

The soldier who watches Jesus die is moved to say, “Surely this man was the Son of God” (15:39). Notice, it’s not a religious blue blood who makes this declaration. It’s a pagan Roman officer.

The first words of Jesus after his baptism must have exploded in people’s ears. “The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news” (1:15). There’s so much meaning packed into these rapid-fire phrases.

“The time has come.” There are two words for time in the Biblical Greek. The word, *chronos*, refers to clock time as

conveyed by our English word chronological. We measure *chronos* time by watches and sundials. The other word for time, the one Jesus uses here, *kairos*, expresses a moment of time. *Kairos* time marks a decisive or opportune moment in time.

“The kingdom of God has come near.” The verb “has come” indicates Jesus’ kingdom has already come and is still coming today. Our king has come. A new day has dawned.

“Repent and believe the good news.” The Greek word for repent, *metanoia*, simply means to turn. *Believe* is a word closely aligned with trust. Essentially, Jesus summons people to turn and trust him.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? During this Advent season, we’re exploring the difference Jesus can make in our lives. This sermon is intended both for guests as well as old-timers to our church.

You may be on the verge of a *kairos* moment in your life. Maybe you have come to a decisive moment when you are ready to turn to Jesus. Previously, you’ve been turned away from Jesus or absorbed with other interests. But now, the time has come to turn to Jesus. The time has come to open your life to him.

Some of you have already opened your life to Jesus but it’s time for you to reset. You need to turn and trust Jesus again with your life.

I read an article this week which appeared this past fall in New York magazine. What caught my attention to this provocative article was



its title: “I used to be a Human Being” and the byline, “An endless bombardment of news and gossip and images has rendered us *information addicts*.” Andrew Sullivan chronicles how, as a popular blogger and web-savvy writer, he came to recognize his addiction to smart phone technology and his resolve to do something about it. He expresses his weariness with the virtual community and his renewed desire for real-time relationships.

This unconventional Catholic directs a portion of his article to the church. He writes, “The greatest threat to faith today is not hedonism but distraction.” He took the words right out of my mouth. I’ve been thinking for some time that distraction is an enormous threat to faith in our day. Distraction has reached epidemic proportions. While Sullivan targets his comments to our never-stopping, always-updating mobile devices, what he writes is symptomatic of all sorts of distractions.

It may be you are distracted by your cell phone, which is fast becoming an American addiction. If you doubt what I’m saying, look up from your cell phones the next time you are standing in line at Starbucks or waiting for the Metro. Everyone, and I mean everyone, is hunched over their phones. Cell phone use has become ubiquitous, whether we are walking the dog or playing with our children. We almost forget that smart phones have only been around for ten years. How is it possible that we have gone from unknown to indispensable in ten years?

If you think I’m overreacting, I challenge you to turn off your cell phone for the balance of today. If the very thought makes you anxious, you are probably overly attached to your mobile device. I’ve suggested, in previous sermons, instituting a digital Sabbath for 24 hours. I dare you to try it!

Jesus says, “Come to me all you web-weary ones and I will give you rest.” Okay, I added the words web-weary, but doesn’t our wired world make you weary sometimes?

We mustn’t settle for virtual community. There is no substitute for actual flesh and blood real community. Yes, I know, real life relationships are messier than online ones. It’s so much more convenient to rely on Facebook images.

The greatest threat to faith is distraction. I’m asking you to cut out all the extraneous noise and inane talking about inconsequential stuff. I’m asking you to give priority to this good news story about Jesus this Advent and Christmas season. The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Turn and trust Jesus.

