“Our Mightily Tender Messiah”

A sermon for Advent II, 2017

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Scripture references: Isaiah 40: 1-11, Mark 1:1-8

So, this lectionary year, we journey through the Gospel of Mark. Mark is the king of high drama—everything happens “immediately.” The disciples will be called and follow “immediately”…people will be healed and get up “immediately”…and, as we see today, the Good News of Jesus Christ starts, immediately. There’s no meandering birth story…no subsequent glimpses of Jesus as a boy, wandering to the temple without telling anyone where he went. Instead, there’s only the unsettling voice of John the Baptist, hairy and wild, yelling on about sin and repentance --and the promise of the adult Jesus, who will baptize not just with water, but with The Holy Spirit.

There is an urgency to Mark’s Gospel. And this year, I am finding that I welcome it. That I crave it. In a different year, I might prefer the longer journey. I might prefer the chance to welcome Jesus in his most vulnerable form, as an infant struggling for life in a dirty stable. But this year, maybe because of all of the #metoos, maybe because I feel encouraged in nearly every moment to alienate those with whom I disagree, maybe because I can sometimes hear the earth groaning under the pressure we have put on it, and...just so you don’t worry that I am wildly self-ignorant--maybe also because my mother died 4 months ago, I am ready for Mark’s urgent, bold, unsettling beginning of the Good News. I am ready to skip past the whole tender birth scenes and head right to baptism. This Advent I am ready for more than a reorientation of my life[[1]](#footnote-1)…I am ready for a radical change--as Chris so powerfully put it last week[[2]](#footnote-2)—a change all the way down at the roots. So, like Mark’s community, I am ready not for a helpless baby, but for the powerful, mighty Messiah.

As I’ve confessed to many of you, I have not read the entire bible—far from it. I’ve promised myself many times that I would do one of those “read the bible” in a year things, but I never seem to last past Genesis. There always seem to be other things competing for my time or attention.

Except, I realized recently…in the car. On my drives to and from St. Paul’s, I got nothing but time! And in the afternoons, especially, nothing at all on the radio that seems to engage me. So, for the small price of one audible credit, I recently purchased an audio version of the entire bible. You will understand what a steal the one credit price tag is when I tell you that it bought me 98 hours of listening content! And, boy is it an attention-grabber! The version that came most highly recommended is a theatrical version…there are sound effects (think seagulls and water lapping when Jesus walks on water and digitized echoey-voices when demons identify him as the Son of God)…it is wildly cheesy…and, therefore, to me, totally awesome. Craving a powerful, mighty Messiah, I have listened to the entirety of the Gospel of Mark at least 5 times in the past month. And boy, the dramatization of Jesus’ voice gives me everything I have been wanting…Jesus is anything but the infant in the manger. Jesus is pretty much Arnold Schwarzennegar as the Terminator. You can almost hear “I’ll be back” at the end of Jesus’ apocalyptic predictions.

In Jesus, we, indeed, have been given a powerful, mighty Messiah. As I consider my own life and the life of our world, this is Good News.

And, the best part is, it is not the end of the Good News. Because God’s power and might are not that of the Terminator—harsh and unrelenting and something to be feared. God’s power and might are that of a first responder—courageous and strong, with a mission of love, of justice, of life-saving. Isaiah proclaims in our text this morning that the arm of God comes not to harm but to gather God’s sheep to his bosom. So, too, even in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus, God incarnate, is not the Terminator, but the EMT or the firewoman. Jesus breaks through the doors we are locked behind not to destroy us, or even those we see as against us, but to breathe life into us all. The arms of a first responder are strong enough to carry an unconscious body out of a burning building and to crack ribs as they literally keep a heart beating. AND they are also gentle enough to provide a calming touch and to lay a warm blanket across shivering shoulders. The awe-some fullness of our Messiah is that in him, too, both powerful might and tenderness are woven together. And, in him, too, their purpose is to love, to heal, and to liberate.

As Mark tells us, Jesus comes not to threaten us, but to baptize us. And not just with water, but with the Holy Spirit…Some scholars actually suggest that rather than “with the Holy Spirit”, a better translation would be “in a Holy Spirit.” I prefer that translation, especially within the boldness of Mark’s Gospel. Jesus baptizing us *with* *The* Holy Spirit evokes the “fire,” risk, and purposeful upending that are often our sole associations with *The* Holy Spirit. But, Jesus baptizing us *in a* Holy Spirit, evokes, for me, a tender space—a space in which we, and everything we bring with us, become sacred.

Jesus comes in a spirit of holiness, and baptizes us--immerses us--in that same spirit of holiness. What a powerful image—a life-changing image, and yet, a gentle image, too.

The mystery, beauty and empowerment of the incarnation—God made flesh—is that we discover that our God’s might is a gentle might—it is a might that gathers us into a Holy Spirit. A spirit inside which all becomes sacred—even those things which seem to contradict each other. In each moment that Jesus baptizes us in a spirit of holiness, might is woven with gentleness…righteous anger is woven with forgiveness…speaking is woven with listening, and all of it is pronounced sacred. Within a spirit of holiness all of ourselves and our lives come into mutual relationship with each other. And therefore, that space has the power to make us whole.

For example, for many of us, the draw of work seems to constantly bump up against the draw of family…except within a Spirit of Holiness. When we set up our workspace within that Spirit, we are at work not only as experts, but also as mothers and fathers—as competent employees… who also bring tenderness and nurture to our labors. Conversely, when we center our living rooms within that Spirit, we are at home not only as mothers and fathers, but also as experts in our fields--as caregivers….who also bring creativity and step-by-step plans to our lego-building. When we remind ourselves that we are living within a spirit of holiness, our identities and gifts as working people, and our identities and gifts as parents are each made sacred and welcomed into the present moment.

There are countless other aspects of our lives which seem irreconcilable…our aging bodies that house a deepening yearning for play and adventure…our love and commitment to our families even as we battle the increasing abandonment of them that our addiction leads us into…our yearning to give away all that we have and our fear that we just don’t have enough to get us to our deaths.

What tender strength our Messiah has, to gather us all into a place where each of us and all of these tensions we bring, become sacred, beloved by God, and welcomed.

The Good News of this gentle might is not limited to this Advent and the urgency we hear in Mark’s Gospel. The coming of the powerfully tender Jesus is something we can count on every Advent. Even in the meandering birth stories of Luke and Matthew, we get the same Messiah. For, what is birth, except the excruciatingly beautiful weaving together of the powerful and the gentle?

So, I wonder, what things are in tension within you or your life?

Are you willing to allow Jesus’ coming again to immerse you in a Spirit of Holiness, where you can rest from trying to subdue one or the other? Where you can, instead, see them both as sacred, beloved, and part of the divine fullness that, at least right now, is you?

This day, may we all be baptized, immersed, in a Spirit of Holiness, of gentle might, of rest from trying to reconcile what seems irreconcilable. May we bathe ourselves in the space of allowing all things simply to be, or to be on their way, and to be made sacred. AMEN.

1. The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary on Mark argues that baptism with water suggests only a reorientation of one’s life, while baptism with the Holy Spirit suggests a permanent change in an individual’s relationship with God. Accessed through the MinistryMatters website on 12/5/17. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From “When the Stars Begin to Fall,” a sermon for Advent I, 2017, by the Rev. Christopher Wendell, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA. Access it at: <http://www.stpaulsbedford.org/communications/sermons/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)