

**Christmas Parade of Homes: Celebrating with Mark
Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8; 16:5-8
First Sunday of Advent
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M. Michelle Fincher
Calvary Presbyterian Church**

Well, it's here. The season of excess has officially begun. If you're anything like most folks, your Thanksgiving dinner plate didn't just have a single slice of turkey with a dab of dressing and potatoes on the side. No, your plate looked like mine—a rich assortment of colors and textures piled so high there was no plate left showing. And, that was before we go back for seconds, then take a short rest to make room for dessert. When it's all over, we need the annual Thanksgiving nap just to recover from our gluttony—which, by the way, I hope you enjoyed every bit as much as I enjoyed mine.

The excesses of the Thanksgiving meal are hardly cleared from the table when the excesses of Black Friday begin, and from here to Christmas, we will embark on a marathon of baking, shopping, wrapping, decorating, gift-giving, partying and cooking. There is much about these activities that is fun, warms our hearts, and leaves us with good memories. We appreciate our family traditions and enjoy carrying them on. But then there's the other side of the holidays—when we are stretched and stressed by the busyness and demands of the season. There's so much to do and so little time in which to do it that the joy and anticipation of awaiting the birth of the Christ child is replaced by fatigue, short fuses, apathy, even depression.

Some people are pushing back. Say hello to celebration minimalists. There are celebration minimalists who take it to the extreme—no wreath on the door, no lights in the windows, no sign of a Christmas tree. But, more often, celebration minimalists are trying to keep the joy of the season by simplifying, scaling back and resisting the temptations to overspend, over-give, overeat and generally cram more into one month than anyone can sanely enjoy. When I googled “Christmas minimalist” there were 2.6 million responses that appeared. Obviously, Christmas minimalists have a lot of company, and, you might be surprised to discover that there's even a biblical story of the incarnation of Jesus Christ especially for them—and for you, if you're one of them.

The gospel of Mark reveals Jesus as the Son of God for celebration minimalists. During our Advent worship this year we are going on a Parade of Homes that will take us to the four gospel writers' homes to see how each one celebrates the birth of Jesus. Next week we will travel through the dark to John's house. He will not yet have a Christmas tree up but there will be lights in every window; maybe a Moravian star on the front porch with its thirty-some points shining in every direction. Then John, the theology professor, will welcome us in and we'll sit by the fire in his living room and discuss the multi-layered meaning of things.

We'll stop by Matthew's house for a family reunion with Jesus' entire clan – ancient grandparents, and aunts and uncles we've never heard of, waiting for travelers from afar. We will barely fit in Matthew's house for the crowd, but it'll be a fun, boisterous time, like most family reunions. And then, at last, on Christmas Eve we'll gather at Luke's with angels and birth announcements, and we'll circle up and sing Christmas carols late into the night. I promise – a tree will be decorated and there will be candles everywhere – no one will ever accuse Luke of being a “celebration minimalist.”

But today – here at the beginning of Advent – we come first to Mark's house. It's true, there are no decorations, no wreath on the door, no presents under a tree. There is an emptiness here, but it is an emptiness that proclaims a holy power like none other. You might think it strange to stop at Mark's house on our seasonal Parade of Homes, because he says not one word about Christmas. His gospel starts: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God...” and then Mark goes straight to a grown up Jesus appearing in the desert to be baptized by John.

Have you ever wondered why Mark dispenses with Christmas altogether, bypasses Bethlehem completely, and leads us from the get-go out into the rocky terrain of the Jordan wilderness? Biblical scholars have speculated a number of reasons.

First, Mark is the earliest gospel written and maybe he did not know about the stories of Mary and Joseph and the Roman census. Or perhaps he assumed everyone in his congregation already knew the stories and he did not need to spill any ink retelling them. After all, his is the shortest gospel, the most sparing of details, and if you think he's a Christmas minimalist, just look at how he handles Easter!

From the empty tomb, he says, the women went out and fled, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid. They do not run into the risen Christ; there are no resurrection appearances in Mark. Folks, this is no way to end a gospel! So unsatisfied was the early church with Mark's closing words, that not one, but two separate endings were added by later editors!

The gospel leaves you dangling with an open-ended conclusion, which really concludes nothing at all. But this is why Mark's unfinished ending actually helps us understand why there is no Nativity at the beginning. Mark leaves us dangling at the end of the gospel because he wants us to go back and re-read the whole story again in light of Jesus' resurrection. We cannot understand any aspect of Jesus' life apart from reading it through Easter eyes.

According to Mark, the strongest evidence that Jesus is the Son of God is not from some miraculous birth, but rather from his life and ministry in which he healed the sick and forgave sinners; welcomed outcasts and little children; proclaimed the Kingdom of God, and how it upends our usual ways of being in this world of power and privilege. The key to understanding who Jesus is, according to Mark, is to illumine his whole life with resurrection light. At Mark's house the absence of holiday adornment and decoration is ultimately reminiscent of the empty tomb.

Now, as I said, before Advent is over we will tour the other gospel homes. We will go star gazing with magi and kings, we will have smelled hay in the manger and felt the puffs of sheep and oxen breath in the cold night air; we will have considered how a light shines in darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it; we will have heard angels hovering over the earth and raised our own voices to sing of healing in his wings. But for right now, here at the beginning of Advent, I am so grateful for Mark. His silence on the birth of Jesus "cuts to the heart of the matter, which is that there would be nothing to celebrate at Christmas" if it were not for Easter.¹

Mark's Christmas story, then, is for those who need to see Jesus in the hurting, grief-filled places of life – in hospital wards and war zones; in the brokenness of families and relationships; in the context of dashed hopes and unfulfilled dreams; in the injustices and violence of our world. This is the gospel for "celebration minimalists" but it is much more than that – it's for all of us who

¹ Walton, Christmas at Mark's House: The Less Said the Better," p.4.

need a little Easter dawn shining over the horizon of what may otherwise appear to be bleak tomorrows. It is for those of us who miss someone who has died, and that missing is especially acute at this time of year. It is for those of us who yearn to hum some Easter “Alleluias” along with our Advent “Gloria’s” to fill our hearts with hope in the resurrection, as well as joy in the birth of a child.

Rev. Dr. Welford Hobbie arrived on the campus of Union Seminary to serve as preaching professor after years of being on the front lines of the Civil Rights Movement in Little Rock, Arkansas where he pastored in the 1960’s. Little Rock was then what Ferguson, Missouri is today, with racial tensions that were palpable and dangerous. Dr. Hobbie’s son Peter recounts a story from 1968 or 69 when he and his brother, Todd, were home from college for the holidays.

One morning the local newspaper, *The Arkansas Gazette*, reported that someone had stolen Baby Jesus from the manger scene downtown in front of the State Capital. “Baby Jesus has been kidnapped,” the paper said. So that evening, home from school and with little to do, Peter and Todd decided to go downtown and check out the crime scene. They parked their car and noticed a number of police cars around the capital. A guard was stationed by the crèche. When they went up the capital steps and stood before Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and wise men they looked down into the manger, where they saw that the replacement Baby Jesus was in leg irons, chained inside the manger.

It is tempting to want to keep baby Jesus safe and warm, tucked inside the crèche where we can keep an eye on him. But, that is a mistake. We cannot keep baby Jesus from growing up; we cannot keep him from living a radical life; we cannot keep him from dying a very human death, any more than Pilate’s guards could keep him in the tomb. He has been raised from the dead; he is alive and on the loose. In this violent, death-dealing world of ours, this is really good news for us during Advent! Mark invites us into his home to remind us to read about the incarnation of Jesus through the lens of Easter.

Because the birth we celebrate is so much more than a baby to hold. Christ holds us as Lord of Life. He leads us down paths of righteousness and grace that we would fear to tread, were he not beside us. To follow him is to go to the places where he goes – proclaiming good news among the down and out, eating with outcasts and sinners, and finding in the dead ends of our lives, possibilities for resurrection.

Amid all our cherished Christmas traditions, the truth is that we cannot place God exactly where we would like him to be. Jesus Christ is free – and in him – so are we. Free to follow him wherever he calls us after he comes up out of the water of his own baptism and shouts, “The Kingdom of God is at hand. Come – follow me.”

AMEN.