

Advent 2B 2023

Unlike Luke and Matthew, Mark does not begin his gospel at the birth of Jesus.

There are no shepherds watching their flocks by night, no magi visiting from the east.

John is uninterested in the back story, the birth and childhood of Jesus.

He does not care about connecting Jesus ancestrally with the house of David to convince people that Jesus is the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy.

For Mark, the story itself is the proof.

His gospel moves immediately to the salient point, the beginning of the good news.

What is the good news and what is its beginning?

Mark starts with the story of John the Baptist.

He tells us how people went out into the desert to confess their sins, to admit their imperfection.

They are acknowledging that they cannot do it alone.

They are accepting their dependence upon God and upon one another.

Going out to the river and getting baptized is exactly the kind of revival we need in a nation where people have become, as my colleague was saying, the centers of their own universes.

People keep trying to fulfill the emptiness inside by doing more and more of what they want and by getting more and more attention, but in reality, that emptiness can only be filled by giving of ourselves.

It begins with confession, which is not about beating our breast.

It is not a profession of abjection before a selfish, demanding God, but is a humble admission that we are human and thus necessarily less than God.

When we say the confession in the liturgy, we are not begging for mercy, but are joyfully affirming God's forgiving embrace.

As long as we pretend to be without weakness, to be something called normal—maybe even a little better than normal—we are living an illusion that prevents us from connecting with others.

Jesus makes this point through the parable of the two sons.

The younger son takes his half of the inheritance, goes out into the world, and wastes it away.

When he realizes his error, full of newfound *humility*, he returns to his family, where he is welcomed with a joyous celebration.

People interpret this story to mean that we can be horrible people, but God will still tolerate us.

That is, however, not the message here at all.

Such an interpretation does not account for the role of the older brother who thinks he is perfect and refuses to go to the banquet.

The older brother excludes *himself*, in other words, from the joy of communion.

“I’ve done everything right.”

His father, which is to say, God, is willing to welcome the older brother in, as well, but he thinks he is above it.

He cannot be with *those* people celebrating *that* brother.

His standards are higher than God’s, who willingly looks past our inadequacies and joyfully embraces all.

The older brother wants to force God to choose between him and his brother, but God loves both.

Similarly, people want to force us to choose between Palestinians and Jews, but it is so easy to embrace both, to decry both anti-semitism and islamophobia as unacceptable scapegoating.

The elder brother does not understand that our paths to God all differ.

His brother’s path led through partying and spending all of his inheritance.

It is just that exuberance coupled with newfound humility that can be put to use in building the kingdom.

That was perhaps the only way he could get to God.

We rejoice that he made it, and are saddened that the older brother is as yet unsuccessful, unable to be humble, unable to rejoice in the good news that we are *all* already welcome to a joyous relationship with God and one another.

I recently watched a movie, “What We Did on Our Holiday,” this week that made the point beautifully.

I knew when I saw it that it had to be included in the homily.

In it, two brothers and their wives are always angry, bickering, betraying one another.

The children of one brother are tired of it and dislike being with the grownups.

When their family is invited to their grandfather’s seventy-fifth and last birthday party (because he is dying), the adults decide to try to put on a good show for him.

One daughter resignedly takes out her notebook and asks what lies they will be telling because she wants to get it clear before arriving.

Her parents respond, “Don’t lie. Just don’t tell him that we are not living together and that we are getting a divorce.”

As an elaborate party is being prepared, the grandfather takes his three grandchildren out to the shore, where the children learn that the grandfather is dying and the grandfather learns that their parents are getting divorced.

Because he is dying, the grandfather no longer needs to play by the rules, to pretend, to keep up appearances (although one gets the impression that he was always a bit eccentric).

When his granddaughter expresses her frustration with her parents, he tells her not to let these things come between her and those whom she loves.

In life, he explains, he has realized that “There’s no point in being angry with people I loved for being what they are. . . . The truth is, every human being on this planet is ridiculous in their own way, so we shouldn’t judge and we shouldn’t fight because in the end, in the end, none of it matters, none of that stuff.”

If the older brother in the parable had understood that everyone is ridiculous in his or her own way, he readily would have joined in celebrating the return of his younger brother.

The grandfather embraces his ridiculousness and manages to have fun with it, at one point even pretending to be dead and then sitting up quickly to shock them.

He has realized that others were not placed here to fulfill our egos, but to travel their own paths and to support one another along the way.

Not long after, the grandfather in fact does die on the beach, and the children do not want to involve the bickering adults.

Their misgivings are confirmed when two of them go back to the house and find their parents, aunt, and uncle all yelling at each other.

Taking matters into their own hands, they decide to give their grandfather the viking funeral he wanted.

They build a barge, put grandpa on it, set the whole thing ablaze, and push it out to sea.

The press do not appreciate the gesture, but in the end, there is reconciliation in the family.

The good news that Jesus brings is that everyone is invited to the celebration.

God is ready to welcome us, and even seeks us out, but sadly, we often exclude *ourselves* because we are unable to confess, that is, we are unable to acknowledge that we are just as ridiculous as the next person, and we need not be ashamed of it.

It is just part of the journey.

When we refuse to confess and to be washed clean of our pretenses, we fight, we play games, we hurt others.

John's baptism by water, letting go of our pretensions, is the beginning.

From there, we start to grow and, eventually, come to embrace God in our hearts, which is the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Mark tells us that God is always waiting for us.

Embracing God's love begins with humility, with confessing that we are as ridiculous as the next person.