

The nativity story without the nativity. The scripture we just heard is the nativity story according to Mark, but you may have noticed that it doesn't include any of the usual nativity images. There's no mention of Mary or Joseph. No angels, no shepherds, no manger, no star. Where are the perfect animals lowing nearby?

Mark's gospel "begins not with a birth story of Jesus (as in Matthew), not with the birth story of John the Baptist (as in Luke), and not with the beginning of time (as in John).¹ Mark begins his gospel by simply saying: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (v.1). But, don't let his simplicity fool you. There is a birth story there. A birth is a new beginning, and God is about to birth a new beginning for the people of Israel and for the world, in the person of Jesus Christ.

Mark tells his birth story by focusing on "the good news" of the story because his audience really needs some good news. The first-century Christians "struggled to survive the years during or just after the Jewish war with Rome."² They were defeated and under Rome's rule. They watched their temple burn to the ground. They witnessed Nero martyr the eyewitnesses of Jesus. Many more of them were persecuted and killed for their beliefs. Hostility and violence engulfed their way of life. They desperately needed some good news, "the" good news, in fact.

Yet, Mark knew that it was not a time when images of God in baby-form would be convincing or comforting to the people. I can hear the exchange.

Mark: God is coming to rescue us.

People: Great! Where? When? How?

Mark: As a baby born in a stable with animals.

People: Ok, great (sarcasm). A tiny baby is coming to save us.

Mark: (hesitant) Yes.

Mark's audience thought they needed a mighty warrior as their Messiah because the Roman soldiers were mighty warriors. In their minds, they wanted a Savior who won their wars, destroyed their enemies, redeemed them back to their glory days. They could not see that a tiny baby could do that. They could not wait for that baby to grow up. They needed a Messiah now!

Mark knew his audience. Telling the story of a child being born was not the best way to tell the story of God's arrival in human form. Instead, he reminds them that God is the God of new beginnings, and their new beginning was coming in the person of Jesus Christ. And, this is very good news.

Mark also refers back to Isaiah's prophecy like Matthew did. He chooses a different prophecy, but he uses it as evidence that he isn't just making this up. He's not giving them false hope. Mark chooses the prophesy about John the Baptist because he knew his audience was more familiar with John the Baptist.

They knew more about John the Baptist than Jesus. John was more vocal as "the voice crying in the wilderness" (v.3). The Greek word for crying is *boao*, which means "to cry out with great feeling."³ He was crying out passionately to the people.

¹ Judy Yates Siker, *Feasting on the Word*, location 1797.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Life Application Commentary: Mark*, 5.

He was preaching and baptizing people. He definitely stood out in a crowd with his outdated clothes and his wild diet. They had heard about this crazy guy who didn't seem anything like all the other religious types they've known.

Mark also chose this prophesy because he knew that his audience could relate to being in the wilderness with John. They were in a wilderness, a lonely uninhabitable place. Their ancestors had been lost in the wilderness many times. Mark reminds them that God is in the wilderness with them. God sent a messenger to the wilderness to show them the way out.

Mark doesn't expand about John's life like Luke does. Some of the people already think too much of John and actually claim he's the Messiah. Mark focuses on John's purpose to prepare the way for Christ. We see this in John's own words: "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals" (v.7). Mark portrays this image of Jesus in his nativity story, the Son of God who is more powerful than anyone they've known.

Mark needed to give the people hope that things would get better, that God is with them and will rescue them. God is in the new beginning that is Jesus Christ. God breaks in with good news. It may not be the way expected or anticipated, but God breaks in nevertheless. God comes as a child who will save the world.

Obstacles and barriers blocked the way for Christ to come, so God sent a messenger to prepare the way. God is with John the Baptist in the wilderness to prepare

them to open their hearts and minds to receive the Christ child.

God comes despite human's preconceived notions of a Savior. God will not be confined to human's finite expectations. God is a God of beginnings. When things seemed to be the end for them in Rome, God breaks in with a new beginning that is beyond their wildest dreams. We can trust that for ourselves as well.

Mark doesn't use the word, Emmanuel, like Matthew does to tell that God is with us. But he shows us that God is with us in new beginnings, in the wilderness, in the arrival of good news. The birth story without the birth still gives us hope in new beginnings and still gives us the good news. And, it is very good news. Amen.

May you continue looking for Emmanuel, God with us, during this season of Advent.