

# HOLY DISRUPTION

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# HOLY DISRUPTION

*Discovering Advent  
in the Gospel of Mark*

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## Introduction

# WHERE'S THE BABY?

IMAGINE IT'S EARLY DECEMBER AND, LIKE many folks, you head up to the attic to retrieve the Christmas decorations. One of the boxes you carefully open is the nativity set. To your surprise, you cannot find the stable with its giant star glued to the roof. Nor can you find shepherds grasping their crooks or any fluffy sheep to group around them. The box contains no

regal-looking magi, no weary camels, no winged angels in long flowing robes. You are shocked to discover that the box contains no infant Jesus or his little manger bed either. “Wait a minute,” you wonder. “Where’s the *baby*?”

Turning to the Gospel of Mark at Christmas-time is like trying to arrange a nativity set without the key characters. Mark’s Gospel contains no story of Jesus’ birth. There are no shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night, no heavenly band of angels announcing the Messiah’s birth, no wise men who follow the star, meet up with King Herod, and offer gifts to the Christ child. Most significantly, there is no baby Jesus. Those characters that populate our nativity sets come entirely from the birth narratives in Matthew’s and Luke’s Gospels. Admittedly we are drawn to these nativity stories because in the midst of a very hard and harsh world, the babe is a gift of tenderness, hope, and innocence. Matthew’s and Luke’s birth narratives provide origin stories to explain the beginnings of this extraordinary man of God, this extraordinary man of love. He began as a baby, a gift of love

wrapped in swaddling clothes. We can't imagine Christmas without the baby!

While the Gospel of John does not include the birth of the baby Jesus, it does provide a type of origin story for Jesus. John offers a *theological* explanation for Jesus' entry into the world. Describing Jesus as "the Word," John writes that "the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God." And then John offers his version of Jesus' birth when he writes, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:1, 14). John's Gospel supplies the fundamental theological meaning of Christmas, which is the belief that in some mysterious way, God became human in the person of Jesus. These passages about what Christians refer to as *the incarnation* are cherished Christmas-time Scriptures and join the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke in providing glimpses into Jesus' origins.

In noticeable contrast to Matthew, Luke, and John, Mark offers no origin story for Jesus



at all. Mark bypasses Jesus' birth and his childhood entirely, makes no mention whatsoever of Jesus' father, and offers only a few passing references to Jesus' mother, Mary. Instead, Mark begins his account with a fully grown Jesus as he commences his ministry.

It could be argued that Mark's "beginning" story for Jesus is found at Jesus' baptism, where God declares, "You are my Son, the Beloved" (1:11). A case could also be made that Mark considered his entire Gospel to be Jesus' "beginning" story. Mark opens his Gospel by stating in the very first sentence, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," giving the impression that the entire sixteen chapters are but the start of the story of Jesus—a story that continues to unfold in the lives of Christ's followers even today. Nevertheless, since Mark offers readers no account of Jesus' origins prior to his official ministry, it might strike us as incongruous that we would have any use for the Gospel of Mark when celebrating Christmas.

Yet the Gospel of Mark does indeed have very important implications for this season of

incarnation, especially if we understand Christmas not merely as the birth of the baby Jesus but more broadly as the coming of Christ into our lives and world. However, be warned! Like a jolt of electricity, Mark's message about the coming of Christ should absolutely shock us from our often complacent and self-satisfied lives. Mark will not permit us the soothing, sentimentalized Christmas our cultures have created from the nativity stories of Matthew and Luke, nor will it let us reduce John's incarnational message into a set of abstract and remote ideas. For Mark, the coming of Christ is a thoroughly countercultural event, disrupting our lives and calling for an inversion of the prevailing social order. The Christmases we construct for ourselves often amount to a kind of passive adoration of the sweet smiling baby in the manger—a reverence that romanticizes the child and asks little from us. In Mark, however, the incarnate presence of God comes in the One who challenges the status quo, engages the harsh realities of our world, and summons his followers to join him in a costly kind of commitment.

The Jesus we meet in Mark is edgy and

confrontational, a Savior who challenges us and upends the state of our hearts and communities. While Mark's Gospel will not give us a conventional cozy Christmas message, through this Gospel we can discover a fresh understanding of the holiness of Christmas—the holiness found when God's transformative love is born in us.

This book is designed to be a companion through the four weeks of Advent and Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. Each of the five chapters offers a reflection based on a different Markan theme and concludes with questions for group discussion or individual contemplation.

Chapter 1 explores Mark's idea of what it means to anticipate Christ's coming into the world. Chapter 2 examines what is really meant when we speak about the peace on earth that Christ brings. Chapter 3 focuses on our human longing for home and how God offers us a place of belonging in and through Christ. Chapter 4 explores Mark's unusual approach to the revelation of the Messiah. The final chapter examines Mark's concept of the incarnation, the hope we have in "God with us."

Mark gives us an unusual stack of gifts for Advent and Christmas: apocalyptic portents, open conflict, a new home filled with surprising relatives, a secret realm with its hidden Messiah, and the shadow of the cross. Such odd and disruptive gifts, to be sure! Yet sometimes the unconventional and unexpected gifts are the ones that bring deep meaning and lasting value. May your journey with the Gospel of Mark lead you to the Savior's abundant gifts.