

CHRISTMAS IN THE FOUR GOSPEL HOMES

An Advent Study

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INTRODUCTION

ONCE AGAIN, WE ARE PUTTING UP THE DECORATIONS; we are singing carols and buying gifts. Once again, it is Advent. In these days between Thanksgiving and New Year's, many of us visit other people's homes. We may drop in for coffee or be invited to an open house. Some spend several days with relatives who live out of town. When we do this, it is always so interesting to

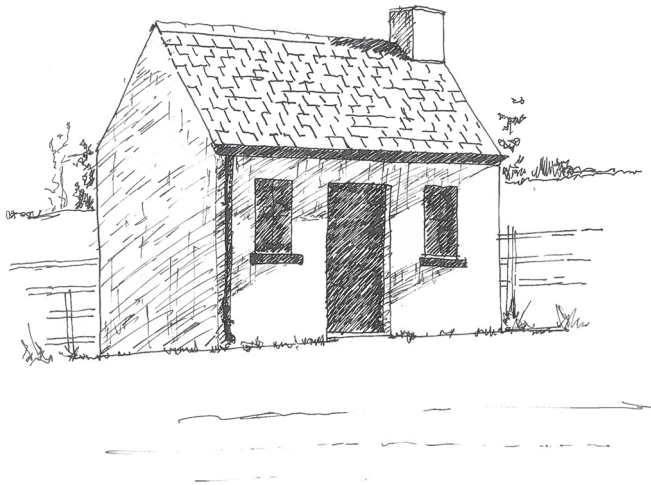
see other people's homes—how they decorate, what kinds of things they cherish, how their styles mesh with their personalities. Tom Long, distinguished professor of preaching, has compared the church's lectionary (the three-year cycle of Sunday readings) to homes that the church goes to visit. The first year, the Gospel readings take us to Matthew's house; then we move on to Mark; finally, we visit Luke. Every year, on special occasions (notably in the season of Easter and some other special days) we go to visit John. Just like our own homes, each gospel house is quite different—decor and ambience reflect the family that lives there and their individual traditions. Some are cluttered; others are spare. Some are decorated within an inch of their lives; others are haphazard. We each like some more than others, but moving around allows us to savor the same things from different perspectives.

Some years ago, Jon Walton, then pastor of The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, used this idea as the basis for a sermon series during Advent. Building on his

idea, I invite you on a journey to visit our four Gospel homes. The purpose of our journey is to experience what Christmas means from that perspective and how Christmas is celebrated there. Each chapter of this book is accompanied by a drawing of a house, the design of which is suggested by the shape and character of the Gospel. These drawings originally appeared on the cover of the Sunday bulletin when these chapters were preached as sermons. They are the creation of Kevin Burns, who has written his own interpretations of the Gospel home that welcomes us. Burns is an architect by profession and a deeply knowledgeable Bible teacher. I am deeply grateful to Kevin for making these theological reflections find visual expression. We hope that pondering each of the illustrations will draw you more deeply into this journey as we reflect on the mystery of Jesus, Son of God, born of Mary.

This book is for individual or group study. It includes prayers and questions for reflection for each chapter near the end of the book. Readers can respond in writing in the space given.

Finally, the book concludes with suggestions for leading a group study. I am grateful to Martha Bettis Gee for providing the original version of this guide and to David Maxwell for his valuable contributions in editing this material.



Week 1

CHRISTMAS AT MARK'S HOUSE

Mark 1:1–11

WE BEGIN BY GOING TO VISIT COUSIN MARK. He lives in a spare, simple home, because Mark is kind of like the police detective who says, “Just the facts, ma’am.” His house has just what it needs and not much more: a door, a couple of widows, a chimney. The surprising thing is that there isn’t much in the way of Christmas going on here. There are no decorations to speak of,

not a lot that makes us think of holiday cheer. As far as we know, Mark is the first of these writings that we call “Gospels,” and we call them that largely because of how Mark starts: “The beginning of the good news [that is, the “gospel”] of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” It’s an odd way to start, don’t you think? I mean, why would you announce the beginning of something that the reader knows is the beginning? It would be like starting a sermon by saying, “Now I am starting my sermon for Advent, week one.” Well, obviously.

Perhaps Mark means something else by “beginning.” Where does the Gospel begin? How does this whole thing get launched? According to Mark, it starts with John the Baptist. In the ancient world, the arrival of the monarch required a herald. The herald (or messenger) was the press release or the Facebook post or the tweet of the ancient world. Back then, a guy was sent into the city to say, “Heads up—monarch sighting! Sweep the streets and clean up your act!” The good news begins with the messenger, and the message is, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” Out in the

wilderness, at the edge of civilization, in a sort-of-scary liminal space, John is calling out for people to repent, to change their hearts and lives.

Baptism was the sign John offered people to signify their desire to prepare for the new thing John believed God was doing. Washed in the water of the River Jordan, the people were ready to start their lives with God anew. Some scholars suggest that this act of going through this water was to remind people of how God led their ancestors out of slavery and into freedom by passing through the water of the Red Sea. Among those who came to John was Jesus from Nazareth. When he came up from the water, Mark says, he saw the heavens torn open and the Spirit of God coming down like a dove. And he heard a voice saying to him, "You are my Beloved, my Son, my Child." Then that same Spirit drove Jesus deeper into the wilderness, where he fasted and prayed for forty days. His faith, his understanding of God, and his very identity were tested. When he returned to Galilee, he began to say, "The reign of God has come near." Jesus called a few followers and began a ministry of teaching and healing. By the end of

chapter 1, Jesus is surrounded by crowds eager to hear his message. They are anxious, as well, for healing. For Mark, Jesus' acts of healing aren't just miracles; they are demonstrations of power. They point to the end of this Gospel and the truly good news that God is more powerful than suffering and death.

NO CHRISTMAS STORY?

That's it. That's Mark's beginning. In a very few quick brushstrokes, the saga of the good news is launched. Why no Christmas story? Why no hint even of Jesus' beginnings? All we know is that he came from Nazareth. A pretty slim résumé and not very enlightening. Some think that Mark doesn't include a story about Jesus' birth because he doesn't know one. Mark is writing about thirty years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Tradition says that, by this time, Peter and Paul have already been put to death in Rome. Other eyewitnesses are surely dying off. Mark wants to capture the story as it is being told in small communities of believers around the Mediterranean. He is the first one to commit

this story to writing. Maybe he just doesn't know the part about Jesus' birth.

Frankly, I doubt that. I think Mark is both a skillful writer and an editor. Some think that Mark may have been a companion or protégé of Paul's. As we know, Paul is famously uninterested in the details of Jesus' life and ministry. "I preach Christ and him crucified," Paul wrote. Perhaps it is this theology, focused on the scandal of Christ's crucifixion and the triumph of resurrection, that shapes Mark's writing. Some have even called Mark's Gospel "a passion narrative with a long introduction." Indeed, this Gospel is structured around Jesus' predictions of his death and builds steadily to its dramatic conclusion. Christmas stories are left on the cutting room floor because they don't serve Mark's purposes. Mark knows (and tells us in his opening words) that Jesus is the Son of God. He doesn't need stories of a miraculous or mysterious birth to "prove" that. Jesus is the power of life over death. Birth stories are simply a distraction.

Mark may have been the first to think that Christmas was a distraction, but he was certainly not the last Christian to think so. Long before

Christmas became a festival of selling and buying, groups of Christians were skeptical about Christmas excess. Did you know that Christmas carols didn't appear in some Protestant hymnals until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States? There was a lot of Christmas celebration in colonial Williamsburg but not much in Puritan New England. Why? Because those followers of John Calvin believed that Sunday was the most important day and that Sunday observance should not be cluttered with other saints or festivals, including Christmas! Like Mark, those Christians held that the core of the Gospel was Jesus' death and resurrection. Therefore Sunday, the Lord's Day, should celebrate that alone. Anything else would be a distraction.

Don't panic. I know that many of you just got all the Christmas decorations out, and I'm not going to argue that we should put them back! I am proud to be a Reformed Christian, but there are things that well-meaning Reformers got wrong, and getting rid of Christmas was one of them. Reformed tradition is not wrong about what is at the heart of the good news: The good news of the gospel is not only the birth of a child. The good news is that the man who was

the Son of God laid down his life for his friends and that God raised him from the dead as a sign that God's love conquers death.

FINDING HOPE

The Christmas season is well under way. Cherished traditions are surely appearing in your church, such as Advent wreaths, carol singing, special giving projects. There may be an upcoming children's Christmas pageant and Christmas Eve services to look forward to. But as the days grow shorter and light diminishes, many of us are anxious. So many things in our world seem unsettled and unknown. The nation seems to be deeply divided on major political issues. Many feel overlooked or sidelined. Racial injustice, particularly as that relates to poverty, unequal education, and incarceration, is once again in the news. Anti-immigrant sentiments have become common. Hateful and divisive rhetoric has taken the place of honest debate. Many are anxious, and the times seem out of joint.

Chirpy songs about Santa Clause won't get us very far in the face of the troubles we confront. Shopping, fun as it is, doesn't keep

anxiety at bay for long. Old-time Christmas nostalgia doesn't insulate us from a broken and fearful world. Hope is what we need, but as Cousin Mark reminds us, hope is to be found in the manger only because it is found first on the cross. The hope that Mark offers is not in spite of suffering; it is hope that has been through suffering and emerged on the other side. From the very beginning of this fast-paced Gospel story, we know that Jesus is headed toward his death. Three times he attempts to prepare his disciples; three times they fail to understand; three times he explains (patiently) that following him means following the way of the cross. It seems utterly counterintuitive, but this is God's way. As Leonard Cohen wrote: "There's a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in."¹

As a child, my family decorated for Christmas on the day after Thanksgiving. We didn't shop; we unwrapped boxes of Christmas decorations. Then on New Year's Day, after the Rose Parade was over, we put it all away. That's one of the problems with Christmas: we have a tendency to

1. Leonard Cohen, "Anthem," *The Future*, Columbia, 1992, compact disc.

think Christmas is something we get out once a year and then put away. We think of the Christmas season as something that has a beginning and an end. We celebrate the “holidays,” and then we go back to business as usual, largely unchanged except maybe for the weight we’ve gained. But that’s not the gospel. It’s not a moment in time to be celebrated and then largely forgotten. The good news is about transformation. Jesus told us that the kingdom of God is at hand. He came to change your life forever. He came to bring you hope for your despair, and peace for your anxiety, and love so that you can stare down death.

Some of those really old Christmas carols got it right. One dates back to medieval times and was sung in Latin until it was translated in the mid-nineteenth century. “Good Christian friends, rejoice with heart and soul and voice; now ye need not fear the grave: Jesus Christ was born to save! / Calls you one and calls you all to gain the everlasting hall. / Christ was born to save! Christ was born to save!”²

2. John Mason Neale, “Good Christian Men, Rejoice,” *Glory to God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 132.

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