

Grace in the Margins

Mark 1:4-11

A Sermon from the front pew
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
Matt Matthews

I want to thank our Easy English Bible Study Sunday School Class for the poem they shared with us recently called “The Work of Christmas” by Howard Thurman. Remember their great video clip a few weeks ago?

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart.*

That’s the challenge for those of us who enjoy so much the season of Christmas. The challenge is that we don’t just pack Christmas away with the Christmas decorations, but, rather, we do the work of the Christian who follows the Christ.

The angels have stopped their song. The star has faded away. Our house guests and the shepherds and magi have gone home. The Christmas tree is down. And we Christians get busy living the gospel that this baby would grow to embody. This work of Christmas begins—and lasts year-round, and takes us, sometimes, to places we cannot imagine.

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You know how I love the snow. I walked in the snow around the park and neighborhoods this week. When you walk through snow, you can look back and tell exactly where you’ve been. You can also look around and tell what has come before you. In our back yard, for example, I can tell that rabbits and squirrels have been around. If I look closely enough, I can see the footprints of birds more lightly etched in the crust of snow. I cannot tell the prints from my dog apart from the prints of our neighborhood fox. And judging from the giant footprints I found at Hessel Park, it appears that Big Foot is alive and well and living somewhere near Jarling’s Custard Cup.

The work of Christmas invites us to ponder the footsteps of Jesus. We see where he has gone in the Bible and we go there. We go to places that we expect we might find Jesus, or that we might find the work of Jesus to do. And this journey almost always takes us out of our comfort zone. To follow Jesus means to be open to the interruptions of ministry. Following Jesus means being willing to journey to the margins.

That’s what the crowd had done when they gathered for Jesus’s baptism. Notice this baptism didn’t happen in the temple, at the center of religious power. Notice that baptism didn’t happen in Jerusalem, at the center of political power. No, it happens on the fringe, in the wilderness, at the Jordan River.

And notice, too, that people from both Jerusalem and *the whole Judean countryside* gathered. They left the warm fires of their home and camp and they traveled to the wilderness, to a place of danger, to a place of transformation.

If want to be safe, turn around and follow your footprints through the snow back to your house where your kitchen is, where your television and entertainments are. If you want to be safe, retrace your steps. Go back. Be comfortable.

If you want to be faithful, turn around and listen. don't move. Be quiet. Observe. Notice the people and the situations around you and ask yourself: Is Jesus out here on the fringe? Does Jesus have somebody for me to meet out here? Something for me to do?

Angela Parker is an assistant professor of New Testament and Greek at Mercer University. She says that out here in the wilderness we might find what she calls a "divine fragmentation." That is, a thin place where God will *tear into* our reality and awaken us to the holy (*see Christian Century, December 2020*).

We might miss this in our living rooms.

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Let me be clear.

I like my living room. I like my house. I like my safe places. I enjoy losing myself in the pictures at the Chicago Institute of Art. I love walking a warm beach. I love doing safe things like playing with my dog, and playing Scrabble with my wife and sons. God has blessed me with safe places where I can grow, rest, write, laugh, and be.

But the work of Christmas *necessarily* calls us out from the center, out to serve, out to meet people I don't know yet, out to stand with those who feel like they have no voice, people who feel like they have no allies in the center.

I'm called to leave my safe center to meet them.

It's the work of Christmas.

John was busy baptizing at the Jordan, and people from the center came out to listen to him. He memorably said:

"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. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

I—John the Baptist—am a cool dude. I come from a hallowed family line. Zechariah is my prophet-father. Elizabeth is my mother who talks with angels. I'm important, but it's Jesus who I pay attention to. And Jesus is the person YOU need to pay attention to, too—if you really want to live a rich, joy-filled life, possibly unpredictable life.

Like it or not, Jesus leads us to the fringe. When he says, "Follow me," these are the places we often end up. Jesus calls us to places where the heavens sometimes rip wide open, and God's voice thunders. At the fringe we find people who have felt forsaken, who have no place in the comfortable center.

I have no political power. I'm not part of the University elite. I cannot afford to hang out in the coffee shops downtown. I don't have season tickets to Krannert. I'm not part of close-knit religious community. I don't have a home in church, temple, synagogue, or mosque. I am voiceless and alone.

No, you aren't forsaken, we tell them. You are a beloved child of God. By the grace of God, I am trying to be your friend. Jesus the Christ, son of the most high God, is our brother.

I harken back to Thurman's poem:

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
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To feed the hungry,
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To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart. (Howard Thurman)*

This is the ministry into which we were baptized. Let us step out into the world this year and *be* the church of Jesus Christ.

AMEN.

Affirmation of Faith **Both/Blue, Rachel/Red, Matt/Black**

In life and in death we belong to God.

**Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,**

**and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
whom alone we worship and serve.**

**We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life.**

**The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,
sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor,
and binds us together with all believers**

in the one body of Christ, the Church.

**The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture,
engages us through the Word proclaimed,
claims us in the waters of baptism,
feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation,
and calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.**

In a broken and fearful world

the Spirit gives us courage

to pray without ceasing,

to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,

to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,

to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,

and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.

**In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
and to live holy and joyful lives,
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"**

With believers in every time and place,

we rejoice that nothing in life or in death

can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Glory be to the Father,

and to the Son,

and to the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Mark 1:4-11 4John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7He proclaimed, "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. 8I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." 9In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee

and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."