

## Portraits of the Promised Incarnation: Mystic Messiah

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt  
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA  
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### *Mark 1:1-8*

This evening I continue a series of sermons I began last week, one I'm calling Portraits of the Promised Incarnation. Last Sunday we looked at Isaiah's view of the One who is to come. Tonight we examine the Gospel of Mark's take on the One for whom we wait in this season of Advent.

Mark is widely held by scholars to be the first of the gospels to be written. It is marked by an almost breathless urgency. The word *immediately* occurs again and again in its pages. Mark wants you to know that Jesus is a man of action. But, more than that, Mark wants you to know that what he has to say about Jesus is of vital importance. It requires a decision.

At the same time, Mark also communicates that the message of Jesus, the message about Jesus, is not at all easy to understand. In that vein, Mark portrays the disciples as sort of a clueless lot, or, as Dan Thomas calls them, "the Duh-sciples." They always seem to not quite grasp Jesus' message. James and John asking for seats of honor on his right and his left, Peter rebuking him for saying that he must suffer and die. All of the disciples arguing about who among them is the greatest and trying to forbid people from being little children to him. None of them can seem to quite get Jesus' call to embrace vulnerability; to put others first, to not return evil for evil. To them it just doesn't compute. They can't wrap their minds around the type of Messiah he is.

Mark's is the gospel whose original ending concludes in an open-ended fashion— with the women fleeing the tomb, saying nothing to anyone for they are scared. What will *they* do with the message that vulnerable love will triumph over the worst life brings? It sort of leaves you hanging.

Mark also begins somewhat strangely. Not with the story of Jesus' birth—as the gospels of Matthew and Luke do. Not with the grand poetry of the gospel of John's prologue. There is no birth narrative, no great poetry, just John the Baptist appearing in the wilderness. A voice crying out—"Prepare the way of the Lord." Declaring a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and saying that there is one who is to come whose sandals he's not worthy to untie.

Listen now to the very beginning of Mark's gospel:

*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight," ' John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And 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. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He 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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'*

This week, the world mourned the passing, at the ripe old age of 95, of Nelson Mandela, the great South African leader. You know his story by now, I hope. Born in 1918, he was committed from his youth to resisting Apartheid. Apartheid, that longstanding system which oppressed black South Africans; treating them as worse than second class citizens and subjecting them to violent repression. After a time, Mandela became willing to embrace violence to overthrow Apartheid. It was the Sharpeville massacre, where the peaceful resistance of Black South Africans was put down in an extremely bloody fashion, which really radicalized him. In 1963, with other members of the ANC, Mandela was put on trial for planning and engaging in sabotage. In his testimony at the trial in Rivonia, he said this:

*During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination.*

*I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.*

Though he was not killed for that ideal, he was imprisoned for it. For 27 years—27 years—Mandela was in prison on Robben Island. 19 of those years were spent in a tiny 10' by 10' cell.

You go through something like that, and when you come out, you are going to hold a grudge, right? You are going to want revenge on the people who put you there. You go through that, and you are not at all interested in dealing peacefully with the people who imprisoned you or working for reconciliation with those who mistreated you. But that's not what happened with Nelson Mandela.

This past week, in an essay on the *On Faith* section of the Post, Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote of him:

*He set aside the bitterness of enduring 27 years in apartheid prisons – and the weight of centuries of colonial division, subjugation and repression – to personify the spirit and practice of ubuntu (that a person is a person through other people). He perfectly understood that people are dependent on other people in order for individuals and society to prosper.<sup>i</sup>*

In doing so, Mandela worked in such a way that peace became more than a pipe dream. After acknowledging that Mandela wouldn't take sole credit for the accolades that came his way, because many people worked together with him to make them happen, Tutu said this about his friend:

*The truth is that the 27 years Madiba spent in the belly of the apartheid beast deepened his compassion and capacity to empathize with others. On top of the lessons about leadership and culture to which he was exposed growing up, and his developing a voice for young people in anti-apartheid politics, prison seemed to add an understanding of the human condition.*

*Like a most precious diamond honed deep beneath the surface of the earth, the Madiba who emerged from prison in January 1990 was virtually flawless.<sup>ii</sup>*

Now let's be perfectly clear. Nelson Mandela was not Jesus. Desmond Tutu can say that his friend emerged from prison virtually flawless, but those who knew him best, including his wives, knew that he wasn't and he himself never pretended that he was. That being said, I have to tell you, something in me can't help but see the fingerprints of Jesus on that man.

Because the way Mandela came out of his experience of prison not vengeful, but hopeful, not resentful, but working for reconciliation, well, let's just be honest about how remarkable that is, how unexpected, how it just doesn't seem to make sense, not in any terms the world can understand.

I'd call it almost mystical, how those 27 years shaped him, if you define mystical as Webster's does: "having a spiritual meaning or reality that is neither apparent to the senses nor obvious to the intelligence." The way the Gospel of Mark depicts Jesus and his message, they too are mystical.

Jesus is the Christ, which is Greek for Messiah, anointed deliverer, but *at the same time* he is the suffering son of God.

He's the One who came to save his people from oppression. However, he does so not through the exercise of violence, as people might have expected, but through a love which is willing to challenge the system and suffer at the hands of it.

That the world would be saved not through force, but through a willingness to suffer and to not respond to evil with evil, that's neither readily apparent to the senses nor obvious to the intelligence.

We can nod our heads and say, "Yes, yes, the way of non-violence, the way of loving your enemy is our only hope." But the fact of the matter is that in a 'might makes right', 'win at all costs', 'take revenge or better yet get the other guy before he gets you' world, where the threat level is always at least orange and we have to acknowledge, on the one year anniversary of Sandy Hook, that we have done nothing, nothing at all to reduce gun violence. No, the triumph of vulnerable love is neither readily apparent to the senses nor obvious to the intelligence.

That's why the Apostle Paul called the message of Jesus a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. It's no wonder the disciples can't seem to grasp Jesus message in Mark. They

wanted a Savior who kicked butt and took names, not one who talked about dying on a cross and then did it. Vulnerability can't be real strength. Forgiving your enemies is foolish, if not impossible. Putting yourself in a place where you are might get hurt, even for love, seems to work against self-interest.

So on the road to Caesarea Philippi, Peter is able to declare, sure enough, that Jesus is the Messiah, but when Jesus tells him what that means the impetuous disciple says, "God forbid, that shall never happen to You!" And Peter's fellow followers don't do any better than he does at embracing the way of vulnerability. All the way up to the end they are jockeying for position, avoiding taking the costly stand, missing the message.

This is the kind of Messiah we are waiting for, Mark says. One who comes with a message that is just not easy to understand or to live.

I think that's why Mark starts his gospel not with a receptive peasant girl saying, so quickly it seems, "Let it be to me according to Your word," but with crazy John the Baptist, camel's hair loin cloth and eating bugs appearing, as if out of nowhere, in the wilderness. Preaching a baptism of repentance; preparing the way for one who is to come after him. Repentance.

In Hebrew the word for repentance is *shuv*, which literally means to turn, turn back to God. But in Greek the word translated repentance is different. The word is *metanoia*. To have a changed mind, a different way of knowing, a different way of looking at the world.

One, perhaps, that sees things that are not readily apparent to the senses or obvious to the intelligence. Like the common humanity of an adversary. Like the hope in the middle of despair. Like the possibility in the pain.

You have to learn to see and know differently.

That's why, at the center of Mark's gospel, there is the story of a man whose sight is restored in stages. First he sees people, but as trees walking. Then he comes to see all things clearly. It takes some time to begin to see like that.

But when you go through that kind of transformation you can come out of prison after 27 years like a honed diamond. Because you are open to how Love might work through you.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.faithstreet.com/onfaith/2013/12/05/the-moral-courage-of-nelson-mandela>

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.