

**"The Kingdom Life"**  
**Mark 1:1-8**  
**December 10, 2017**  
**Second Sunday in Advent**

The good news of Jesus Christ—the Message!—begins here, following to the letter the scroll of the prophet Isaiah.

*"Watch closely: I'm sending my preacher ahead of you;  
He'll make the road smooth for you.  
Thunder in the desert!  
Prepare for God's arrival!  
Make the road smooth and straight!"*

*John the Baptizer appeared in the wild, preaching a baptism of life-change that leads to forgiveness of sins. People thronged to him from Judea and Jerusalem and, as they confessed their sins, were baptized by him in the Jordan River into a changed life. John wore a camel-hair habit, tied at the waist with a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild field honey.*

*As he preached he said, "The real action comes next: The star in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will change your life. I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. His baptism—a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit—will change you from the inside out."*

In the first three words of Mark's Gospel, he wants the reader to know that Jesus brings good news. Mark is an urgent writer; somewhere, he has heard about Jesus—his life, his message, and his

sacrifice for that message. Mark is afire in the years 65-70 with a burning desire to tell others his gospel truth-his good news.

The first of the *Gospel* writers, Mark is a true maverick. He doesn't know Paul. The other *Gospels* have not yet been penned. He doesn't have the benefit of any other Jesus accounts, at least none that can be identified by other than letters like Q or M, letters which refer to obscure and unrecovered extraneous information about the life and teachings of Jesus and his disciples. Mark is on his own with the stories he has been told and with the message he is driven to proclaim. It is no coincidence that he starts off his proclamation with the story of the very first of the Christian evangelicals, John the Baptizer.

Mark's writing makes for an interesting Advent challenge, for Baby Jesus never makes an appearance in his *Gospel*. While Matthew and Luke create their Jesus birth narratives from other sources and stories they have heard, these tales do not come from Mark. He is completely silent on the origins of the Christ. For Mark, it is irrelevant how or where Jesus was born, under which star, or attended to by what animals, shepherds, angels, or magic men from afar. For Mark, Jesus' real story is formed when he is "born again" in the waters of the Jordan River.

The Baptist is on fire with anticipation when we first meet him. Mark wants us to be like John; he wants us to eagerly await the appearance of Jesus, whom heaven has blessed and given an extraordinary role in human history. Mark introduces Jesus as a king at the head of a new kingdom, a kingdom unlike any other in history. This king and this kingdom are divinely blessed by none other than the Holy Spirit of God. This king and this kingdom bring with them a changed life, a new focus, and a new way of being in the world. For this king, the kingdom is at hand for all people and for all time.

Mark's is a message of hope. Last week, this hopeful message was seen and heard through the eyes and song of the social pariah, the hope-less leper who, after speaking his truth and singing his faith that change was going to come, is cured by Jesus. Mark taught us about hope in the story of the hopelessly afflicted.

Mark's is also a message of peace. This week, John the Baptizer delivers the message that a king is coming, a king of peace. John's message also is that change is coming to a peace-less people, to the people hopelessly afflicted by tyrannies visited upon them from external forces and internal demons.

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In 1967, the musical film "Camelot," came to the movie theatres of America. At that time, I worked at the Cooper Cinerama Theatre on S. Colorado Blvd. in Denver. I have told you before of this summer job I had there as an usher. We stood in the back of the theatre with our flashlights, ready to help persons who needed to leave their seats during the movie to go have a smoke in the side wings of the theatre (no kidding!), or to buy something from the candy counter, or to use the restroom or go use the payphone. Whatever the reason for leaving their seat, I was there to escort them to and from.

As an usher, I was treated to free screenings of the films being shown there at the Cooper. In the time that the 3-hour plus long "Camelot" had its run at the Cooper, I got to see it some 60 times! Ugh! I can sing along to every song in the film and speak along with every line. I can also tell you every mistake in that movie. For example, there is a scene where Lancelot rides his steed toward his opponent in a jousting match. The first two shots of him have his helmet firmly in place down over his face, but the third shows his helmet flipped up on the top of his head.

In another scene, Guinevere is holding a red rose in her hand while she speaks an impassioned monologue about loving both Arthur and Lancelot. The film cuts to Lancelot singing, "If Ever I Would Leave You." Then we see King Arthur enter the bedroom chamber

where Guinevere is looking out the window. In his hand is the red rose and he gives it to her. Whoops!

No matter, though, because I love that movie. Vanessa Redgrave is radiant as the femme fatale and Franco Nero is perfectly charming with his boyish Italian accent and his sky-blue eyes, doomed by his naïve infatuation with the Queen.

Here's a fun fact to know and tell: Vanessa Redgrave and Franco Nero combined again 40 years after "Camelot" for another iconic performance - they got married in 2006! The love affair that ensnared them in the fictional time of the Knights of the Roundtable in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD saved them 16 centuries later.

I love both Guinevere and Sir Lancelot in that film, but what really captures me is Richard Harris's understated characterization of King Arthur. Richard Harris was not the best-looking actor in Hollywood in the 1960s. He was no Paul Newman or Sean Connery. He really couldn't sing a lick (anyone remember his iconic recording of Jim Webb's "Mac Arthur Park" in 1968?). He was kind of skinny and awkward in his mannerisms. Not exactly an imposing figure. Not exactly a powerhouse. Not exactly what you think of when you think of a king.

And yet, there he was, King Arthur of Camelot, a proud but doomed figure, for the King's vision of peaceful utopia was eventually

sucked down the well of human failure and limitation and Camelot was to be no more.

I think Mark's king, Jesus, is a bit like the King Arthur envisioned by Camelot's casting director. In all the picture books, in our mind's eye, we picture a king how? As a tall man with blonde or black hair, but a lot of it in either case. There are no bald kings; that would not do! Kings are tall, full-hair-headed, bejeweled, and arrogant. They wear expensive silk or suede clothing, hunting boots or pointy-toed shoes. They ride about on a white steed or in an equally bejeweled carriage, ordering their subjects around with fingers sporting all kinds of big, expensive rings. They wear necklaces of gold and silver. They have many attendants and mistresses hovering about them at all times, and they live in massive castles on acres and acres of prime land.

That's a true king. Yet, John the Baptist declares a kingdom and a king of that kingdom that is hard to picture. Jesus has no royal attributes—no land, no armies, no jewels or gems, no horses or cattle, and no education. He does not wear fancy clothing or ride around in a gold carriage. He has no bank account, no mistresses, and no servants.

The pictures of Jesus that we saw as children all have him looking radiant. His hair is soft and silky and groomed to perfection. His face has no blemishes or wrinkles. His robe is clean and white or muslin, and

his sandals are in perfect shape. That is the picture that was stamped into our minds' eye.

But, how could this be? How could someone constantly on the road-and I DO mean "on the road," without a home, without a carriage, a wardrobe or a tailor or an expense account, possibly look all laundry-starched and freshly washed at every moment? Doubtful. Our Lord, our king of the New Kingdom, might have been less a Lancelot-ala-Franco Nero figure and more a King Arthur-ala-Richard Harris one.

And that's precisely how I can relate to him. I can't relate to kings and riches and attendants and protocols and royal decrees and a pompous certainty about everything. I CAN relate to a king who takes on my imperfections, my wrinkles, my sore back, my thinning and graying hair, and my questions and doubts. That's my king; that's my Jesus.

And as John calls to the people of his day to start living a "kingdom life," so then are we called to do the same today. We are called to live the kingdom life that seeks peace at the roundtable. We are called to live the kingdom life that proclaims a faith in the essential positive characteristics of humankind as created by our Creator.

We are called to live the kingdom life that takes us down off our thrones and elevates the least of them onto the velvet cushions. We

are called to feed the people, clothe the children, house the vagrants, cure the lepers, and embrace the unembraceable. We are called to detest war, to resist the urge to have more and get more and keep more to ourselves. We are called to meet might with right, to seek joy in the inconsequential, and to lead always from the place of love.

We are called to the kingdom life in the Jesus way. Mark's Gospel makes that calling central to his writing. Mark is not impressed with magical kings from afar or with angels waking up the night with their songs. He has no persons of importance giving the baby Jesus gold or other precious metals and resins. He has no theology of Jesus as the royal son of God.

For him, Jesus is a man, a man called to do extraordinary work for God and for God's creation. His hair does not have to be neatly combed and his beard perfectly trimmed. His sandals do not need to be polished. His robe does not need to be made of the finest cloth.

For Mark, Jesus is a king because of his heart. Jesus is king because he cares for God's people above himself. Jesus is king because he lives the kingdom life-God's kingdom life. And, as Eugene Peterson writes, "There's an air of breathless excitement in nearly every sentence [Mark] writes. The sooner we get the message, the better off we'll be, for the message is good. God is here, and [God's] on our side."

This Advent season, let us all embrace the kingdom life, the one John the Baptist invites us to have. We need only need know God to know the kingdom life; we need only know Jesus to know how to live it. Faith and peace, joy and love. Advent framing for the kingdom life.

May it Be So.