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“A Compassionate Herald”
A sermon by Marilyn Hedgpeth

December 10, 2017
Mark 1:1-8

This pre-nativity scene is beautiful, with the animals,
the expectant parents, the shepherds, and the angels.

Everyone is waiting serenely for the baby Jesus to be born.

But who’s missing from this scene?

Where is John the Baptist, and why isn’t he ever included in our manger scenes?

Mark begins *his* Gospel about *the good news of Jesus Christ,*
the Son of God - with John!

John the Baptist is the genesis of Mark’s gospel, in the beginning.

He comes as *the herald*, the harbinger of hope,
the one who points to Christ,
reminding us that *Christ is the focus of the good news*, not us.

So, would John the Baptist please come down and join our pageant.

(Vern Neece enters the scene).

Ah, now our nativity scene is almost complete!

Karl Barth, the twentieth-century Swiss-Reformed theologian,

kept a picture behind the desk in his office:

a reproduction of Matthias Grunewald's Crucifixion Scene

from the Isenheim altarpiece.

The picture shows Christ on the cross with his mother, Mary, grief-stricken,

yet adoring her son on one side, and John the Baptist on the other side,

insistently pointing to Jesus, the object of their mutual admiration:

God's beloved, only-begotten Son.

There John stands, dressed in scratchy camel's hair, bare-footed and bearded,

holding an open book in his left hand,

and pointing to Jesus with his right hand.

John's index finger, his pointer, is disproportionately long in the picture,

so we get the message: *it's not about us; it's all about Christ crucified.*

We must decrease, so that he might increase.

The picture depicted for Barth, what he tried to do throughout his entire life,

through his relationships and through his work: to point to Christ crucified

as a faithful herald; to divert attention away from himself;

and testify to the One who alone *reveals God to us*

and *reconciles us to God.*

Likewise, it is the calling of the church, *to serve as a herald* –

to extend that long finger away from ourselves, saying:

we do not consider ourselves above others;

we do not proclaim our innate goodness;

we do not justify our actions as always right,

nor do we do not claim to have all the answers.

No, we point to Christ, and we put our trust, our faith,

and our admiration

in Christ, alone.

In that way, we are called to be heralds, like John.

Which I think is why it is important to include him in our pageant.

Furthermore, like John, I think the church is called not only to be a herald,

but also to be *a compassionate herald*.

In the beginning Mark's gospel quotes from Isaiah 40:

a prophetic passage of hope

in the midst of Israel's despair, coming as Israel

lay despondently in a state of captivity in Babylon.

Their homes had been destroyed, their families torn apart.

They had been carted away to live as strangers in a strange land.

Yet, out of their deep darkness of displacement, suffering, and hopelessness,

Isaiah comes along as a compassionate herald, identifying with their pain

yet telling them that God has not forgotten them,

that God desires to comfort them,

and that their time of suffering is coming to an end.

Mountains of their worry will be laid low;

valleys of their despair will be lifted up,

and God will restore and save God's people, as promised.

Friends, that compassionate herald is part of our manger scene, too,

and it is us, all of us, the church,

called to point relentlessly to the saving power of Christ crucified;

hopefully and compassionately heralding, to those who suffer:

to the sick and frightened, the opioid-addicted,

to the grief-stricken, the guilty,

to the chronically-homeless, the lonely, the at-risk,

to the helpless dreamers, the hungry, the harassed,

to the abused, and to the mentally and emotionally fragile;

that the comforting and restoring power of God is with us,

in our midst, Immanuel, the Christ.

Thank you, John, for stepping into our nativity scene,

to remind the church of our clarion calling

to be God's compassionate heralds, too.

Let us pray....

Come God. Come with the frightened. Come with the poor. Come with the children. Come with those who have always been your friends. Come and lead us to where you are living, and show us what you want us to do. Amen.

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