

# *Struggling Toward Ash Wednesday: Preaching Epiphany at the Beginning of a New Millennium*

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Any preacher who has rolled through the Christian year a time or two is familiar with the stretch of liturgical real estate that lies between the ancient Feast of Epiphany (January 6) and the beginning of Lent (Ash Wednesday). Sometimes called — helpfully, but not really accurately — the “Season of Epiphany,” or just plain “Epiphany,” this gaggle of Sundays is not properly a liturgical *season* at all. Instead, these weeks are a bridge *between* seasons, and accordingly they form one of two spans of the liturgical calendar labeled as “Ordinary Time,” the other being the sun-baked stretch of blacktop that meanders from Pentecost to Advent.

But homiletically speaking, so what? So, the liturgical calendar fills in the gap between the ending of the season of Christmas and the start of Lent with a handful of Sundays and assorted texts—is there anything special preachers should do about it? Are there themes that should be lifted up, events or doctrines or concerns that should be addressed? We have all made our theological puns about “ordinary time,” of course, about how the ordinary is the landscape for the encounter with holy mystery but, beyond this, is there anything that can or should be said as we make our way from the twelve days of Christmas to the forty days of Lent?<sup>1</sup>

At one level, of course, the whole business of “Sundays after Epiphany” is simply one more specific reminder of the embarrassment of the liturgical calendar more generally in the culture—namely that it mainly marks time in a way few notice on the way to festivals even fewer celebrate. Ask to see the daytimer of any business person in the congregation, and chances are good that January 30, 2000 will be marked “Super Bowl XXXIV,” not Epiphany IV.

The liturgical calendar is basically an attempt to nestle the sacred Christological story into an agricultural and astronomical timetable, which means that it is based upon two elements from which contemporary society is especially estranged: God and nature. As a case in point, the post-Epiphany period is a liturgical accordion that expands and contracts between two milestones on the sacred journey — the Christmas season and Lent — and the exact number of Sundays is governed by the date of Easter, which is dependent upon natural phenomena: the relationship between the spring equinox and various phases of the moon (according to a complicated formula probably known only to makers of liturgical calendars, the editors of *The Farmers’ Almanac*, and the residents of Easter Island).

In short, the church’s calendar, which once regulated the movements of the whole of medieval culture, is now in many ways an alien calendar, marking only the rhythms of a portion of the church and is, thereby, officially counter-cultural. It is tempting, therefore, to talk ourselves into the notion that it is our solemn responsibility to spend huge amounts of energy persuading our congregations to abandon the superficial calendars by which they number their days in favor of the sacred rhythms of the liturgical calendar. To be sure, we would all be better off if we lived January and February, 2000 as “Epiphany People,” shaped by the pilgrimage from the birth of Jesus

to the Passion, rather than as “Episodic People,” bouncing randomly from millennial meltdown parties to Valentine’s Day to Presidents’ Day sales. But there are two problems, at least, with any effort to get most in our culture to do so.

First, to try to talk people into saying seriously something like “Well, here we are on the second Sunday after Epiphany!” necessarily requires an overly painstaking scheme of education. Make no mistake—I think that the task of education is an urgent one in the church today, perhaps the most urgent one before us. Given the need to rebuild the whole theological and biblical infrastructure of most congregations, however, bringing people up to speed on the turnings of the ecclesiastical calendar is several rungs down on my ladder.

On a trip to the Holy Land several years ago, I was amused to find, posted over the doorway of the little church near the Garden of Gethsemane a sign reading, “No Explanations Allowed in the Church!” Presumably this message was intended to prevent the drone of tour guides from spoiling the mood in the lovely sanctuary, but it could well serve, by extension, as a warning to excessively didactic preachers everywhere who attempt to connect the hipbone of sanctification to the thighbone of predestination, to provide exploding diagrams of the Trinity, and to pop the crystal off the face of the Christian calendar to expose the gears and springs. I admit that I myself have said such things as, “Today on the church’s calendar is ‘Baptism of the Lord Sunday,’ and it is important for us to know the meaning of this great festival” to people who had struggled out of bed on a gray winter’s Sunday and had no earthly idea they had stumbled into church on a high liturgical occasion. Maybe that’s all right, but trying to tell people there is a calendar they know nothing about that is humming away in the background and exerting influence over their lives always seemed to me faintly like watching midwesterners in a Chinese restaurant scrutinizing the place mats: “Gee, did you know it’s the Year of the Rat?” Interesting, but not particularly formative.

Second, and more important, at this late date A.D. the church is hardly in the position of muscling the culture away from its calendars toward those of Christendom. Instead, we are in an urgently evangelistic and missional posture, continually negotiating a hearing, proclaiming the good news to a society no longer automatically interested in our pronouncements, under the terrible and exhilarating obligation of winning the right to be heard—for our faith, our convictions, our gospel, and our ways of marking time. In other words, our job is not to blow the whistle on the culture and put them in the penalty box until they learn how to count the Sundays to Lent. Our job, instead, is to walk that pathway ourselves, to move with Christ from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, and to announce with joy to all who will listen—even those who haven’t the foggiest notion of epiphany or transfiguration or baptism of the Lord, what good news and trustworthy promises are meant for them.

In 2000, the Sundays after Epiphany cover the period from January 9 to March 5. In essence, then, we will begin the new year—and also what is considered the new millennium—in this span of Ordinary Time. So, what can we see of importance when we hike through the lectionary texts between Epiphany and Ash Wednesday, 2000? Several observations:

*No One Seated After the Curtain Rises*—In terms of the gospel lessons, the post-Epiphany period serves up a nice thick slice of the beginning of Mark’s Gospel—virtually all of the first two chapters in fact. The individual passages here each have

their own treasures, but there is something also to be said for the whole, for the overall impact of this material when we view the entire panel from Mark 1:1 through to the end of Mark 2.

What we notice first about this section of the Gospel is its breakneck, sprinting pace. Mark begins in rapid-fire fashion, and, indeed, never slows down, racing breathlessly through the entire story of Jesus. In these opening two chapters, the prophet Isaiah is summoned to sing a 15-second “National Anthem,” then without delay it’s “batter up!” John the Baptist appears, then Jesus is baptized and tempted, begins his ministry, calls some disciples, heals many people, tours Galilee, performs miracles, eats with sinners, crosses swords with the Pharisees — bang, bang, bang. Most Broadway theaters post a statement in the lobby to the effect, “No one will be seated after the curtain rises,” recognizing that causing a disruption at the beginning of a play can spoil the whole dramatic event for the audience. Just so, don’t try to slip into Mark’s theater ten minutes late; you won’t be seated. Mark the dramatist will have left you in the dust; Jesus will be deep into his ministry, and he will have already performed enough mighty acts to whip up a large crowd and stirred up enough trouble to be on the brink of a death threat.

Mark’s pacing contrasts markedly to that of his colleagues, the other evangelists. For his part, John starts lyrically, even dreamily, with a great poetic prologue that begins a million years and a million miles away: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God....” Luke also takes his time with his “orderly account,” savoring the story of Jesus’ birth and delaying the start of the ministry until the fourth chapter. The opening of Matthew is molasses in comparison to Mark, a genealogical recitation that goes on at length followed by several chapters of preparation before Jesus gets down to work.

These differences in style are not, by the way, merely technique. Beneath them are theological aims and convictions, and, in Mark’s case, the non-stop, high-energy unfolding of events embodies Mark’s stringently apocalyptic view of Jesus as God’s “strong man,” one who invades human history to establish the kingdom and to vanquish the powers of evil. In short, for Mark the human prospect is literally running out of time. It is late in the game of human history, and the home team is hopelessly behind. The forces of the demonic, of disease, of sin, of arrogance, of self-serving power, indeed of all the toxic acids that eat away at human life and hope, are having their way, and we do not need another strategy, another pep talk, another “Successories” poster on the wall with the picture of an eagle and the motto “Your attitude almost always determines your altitude....” What we need is a savior, the strong agent of God, “one who is more powerful than I.” Thus, Jesus of Nazareth steps onto the Markan stage, and before the sun goes down on his first day of ministry, the kingdom has been announced, a new and hopeful community has been formed, the relentless march of disease and despair has been ebbed, and the spine of the old slithering serpent has been snapped.

Not long ago, I was talking with a friend who serves as a teacher for the senior high class in his church. He was speaking of the joys and challenges of working with that age group, and he happened to mention in passing that the most effective Bible study he had done with his group was on the Gospel of Mark. I considered this an interesting, but puzzling and unexpected remark, since I could imagine adolescents rallying around the more mystical sayings of the Gospel of John or the maybe the inclusiveness

of Luke, but the Gospel of Mark? When I pressed him, he said, “I think it’s the apocalyptic stuff in Mark. My kids know that life’s a pitched battle. It’s no longer the old questions we talked about in our day, like ‘Christian dating.’ Now it’s powers and principalities, the sheer threat of evil, the stark perils of life. They knew immediately what Mark is talking about.”

Indeed, here at the turning of the millennium, chances are good that all of our hearers, younger and older, will know immediately what Mark is talking about. With our children passing through metal detectors at school and genocide the method of choice in modern warfare and our proud ocean-liner economy beginning to shiver and groan below, as if something terrible has been struck somewhere back there in the dark, cold sea, even as the partying continues in first class, many people know in their hearts that the real issues are not how to manage stress or how to acquire the seven habits of highly successful people but how to fend off the fearful powers and principalities that surround us. Mark’s Gospel pulls the mask off all superficial talk and gets down to the basic realities. Jesus advances toward the world’s death camp, and as he moves toward Jerusalem, battling the ancient foe every step of the way, most of the world bounces along oblivious to what is happening. But there are two groups — the demons and the faithful, hell’s guards and its despairing prisoners — who recognize the truth of impending liberation and cry out, one with alarm and the other with tearful gratitude, “I know who you are! The Holy One of God.”

*Signs of the Times: Between the Golden Arches and the Uzi* — Twice during the Sundays after Epiphany we will hear a command of Jesus that will become a refrain in Mark: “*Follow me*” (1:17 and 2:14). To my child’s ear in Sunday School long ago, that sounded like such a gentle word — “follow me” — something like the whispered beckoning of a kindly maitre d’ in God’s banquet hall, holding menus with one hand and crooking a finger of the other. For Mark’s readers, though, Jesus’ call to follow is far more radical, and it involves choices that, to borrow symbols from our own time, could be represented by the symbols of the Golden Arches and the Uzi.

First, the Golden Arches. Thomas Friedman in *The New York Times* has recently advanced what he calls the “Golden Arches Theory of Conflict Prevention.” Noting that no two countries possessing a McDonald’s franchise have ever gone to war against each other, Friedman muses that countries can support a McDonald’s only when they have reached a sufficient level of economic prosperity and political stability to make war unattractive to its people. Thus, the theory goes, economic development capitalist style is the key to world peace. In many ways, Friedman’s idea is a popularization of Francis Fukuyama’s controversial essay (and then book) “The End of History,” which, in a more sophisticated way than Friedman, asserts that history is essentially a struggle to achieve two goals — the sovereignty of nations and individual recognition. Since capitalistic democratic liberalism is the only social process that provides for both, it forms, Fukuyama argues, the inevitable and orderly “end of history.”

If Friedman pictures a world at peace because we need order and stability in order to sell things to each other, then the symbol that stands over against that is the Uzi automatic weapon — the image of random, unpredictable, socially disruptive violence, whether perpetrated by a hate-filled loner toward a Jewish day-care center or by international terrorists or by agents of “ethnic cleansing.”

Order and violence, stability and disruption, prosperity and protest — the Golden

Arches and the Uzi — these two forces are at work in every age. Indeed, the Christians who first read Mark's Gospel knew their own versions of the Golden Arches and the Uzi. On the side of order, Mark's readers were beneficiaries of the *Pax Romana*, a decades-long period of unparalleled social peace held firmly in place by the Roman eagle. The well-stocked Roman garrison was, in Mark's time, the same sign of economic prosperity and political stability that Friedman finds today in a consumerist society's Golden Arches.

On the violence side, Mark's readers were well acquainted with the Jewish revolutionary movements roiling through Palestine, seeking at every turn to overthrow the despised Romans. Perhaps, as Joel Marcus has suggested, Mark's audience was even under pressure and duress "from Jewish revolutionaries who see their own movement as a fulfillment of the Deutero-Isaian prophecy of victorious holy war."<sup>2</sup>

So, the choice for Mark's congregation — as it is for every human group — was between the Golden Arches and the Uzi, between working to buttress the best of the social order versus acting in rage to undermine the worst of it. Given the options, Mark's readers probably leaned toward messianic revolution — the Uzi — while most of the congregations to which we preach have chosen the Golden Arches. Some have done so crassly, singing "God Bless America" when the offering is received in worship, but most have done so in a more complex, well-reasoned way, genuinely seeing the Christian faith as a force to uphold democratic principles, family values, strong institutions, and stable social structures. This is certainly to be preferred to anarchy, ravaging unemployment, social disruption, and chaotic violence.

Mark, however, proclaims that Jesus summons us to a third way. On the one hand, Mark has no truck with the Golden Arches. Writing from a perspective of suffering and weakness, Mark is persuaded that worldly powers, for all their promise of order and peace, are antithetical to God's reign. Of the Romans, Tacitus reports Calgacus' observation, "*Atque ubi colitudinum faciunt pacem apellant*" ("They create a desolation and call it a peace"), and Mark would have concurred.

In fact, Mark, to be blunt, favors holy war, much like the Jewish revolutionaries of his day — indeed sees Jesus as having waged it. However, this "holy war" of Jesus is an ironic one. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus and his "troops" will march on the capital city and fulfill the Old Testament vision of a divinely ordained victory restoring to God's people their true homeland, but Jesus will do so not by slaying his enemies, but by being killed by them, not by storming the citadel, but by pouring out his life, not with Uzis, but on a cross.

Thus, Jesus' followers are beckoned to the way of the cross — not the way of the Golden Arches, with its contrived stability and pseudo peace, or the way of the Uzi, with its trust in violence and humanly contrived revolutionary schemes. Mark writes his Gospel to disclose for those with eyes to see the almost incredible irony that, as Marcus phrases it, "the fearful trek of the befuddled, bedraggled little band of disciples *is* the return of Israel to Zion, and Jesus' suffering and death there *are* the prophesied... victory of the divine warrior."<sup>3</sup>

So, in the middle times of Epiphany, when Jesus summons us once again to follow, we are called to walk down the roads of our lives like he walked to Jerusalem, teaching the good news, reaching out with compassion and forgiveness, accepting with peace and understanding the suffering that comes our way, confident that picking up the cross is no mere act of self-abnegation but instead a participation in God's cosmic

victory over all those forces that harm human life. Those who do so, like those Christians who first read Mark's Gospel...

...will believe that they can already see God's triumph in the present, that they can discern its contours in a form bespeaking suffering love and vindication, which seems to rise above the smoke of the ruined city, that they can hear the strains of the hallelujah song in a voice that cuts through the groaning caused by war, social ostracism, and persecution, and that speaks a word of insistent and empowering presence.... "Come, follow me."<sup>4</sup>

*A Winter's Tale* — When we read through the Gospel lessons for these winter weeks after Epiphany, it is impressive how much trouble they contain. In short span, there is sin and sickness, temptation and conflict, distress and the beginnings of a murder plot. The ministry of Jesus, for all its good news and good works, is tumbling inevitably toward the passion. For every patch of good soil, where the word Jesus proclaims and embodies takes root, there are acres of thorns, hardscrabble, and rocks.

But that is Mark. His picture of Jesus' ministry is realistic sometimes to the point of bleakness. When Peter comes seeking Jesus in the desert, where he has gone to pray in the early morning darkness, his words are effectively an attempt to persuade Jesus to return to the warmth and cheer of his successes in Capernaum: "Everyone is searching for you" (1:37). In other words, "You did well there. Come back." But Jesus will not go back to the lush green place; he will instead keep on the desolate way to the cross: "Let us go on to the other towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came out to do" (1:38).

This is bad news, of course, for those who have what Karl Rahner called "a summery spirituality," those who always want the gospel to be unfailingly positive and uplifting, but it is good news indeed to others, those Rahner named as possessing "a wintry" spirituality. "Wintry frost comes in the void left when love dies or a lover grows distant," observes Martin Marty. "...The fury and bleakness within the soul can remain, no matter what the season or the weather. Who tends the spirit where winter takes it over?"<sup>5</sup>

So, Mark writes a "wintry sort" of Gospel, refusing to turn it into a romance novel or a Broadway musical. Jesus sets out on the path to Jerusalem and walks right through the worst that human beings can offer — apathy, hatred, betrayal, murder — because that is what he "came out to do." That is what God always intends to do — to walk redemptively through all of human life, offering mercy and making peace.

A friend told me recently about taking off from work to attend an Ash Wednesday service. When he returned to the office, he was wearing the smudged mark of the ashes on his forehead. His office assistant, a "summery" Christian if there ever was one, whose daily conversation was consistently punctuated with frequent cries of "Praise the Lord!", greeted him with a smile and then, noticing the ashes, said, "Oh look, you've gotten a bit of dirt on your forehead." Reaching for a tissue, she added, "Here, let me take care of that."

"No, no," said my friend. "These are ashes. I've just come from church; it's Ash Wednesday."

The assistant looked perplexed, clearly confused. My friend explained Ash

Wednesday and its customs, summing it up by saying, “So I am wearing these ashes all day as a reminder that God is present with me not just on the good days, but the dreary ones, too. That even though I will someday die, that I will be dust and ashes, that God’s love doesn’t leave me in seasons of sorrow and loss and death. I wear these ashes because God loves me even when life is horrible...when I am horrible.”

He stopped, wondering if he had made any sense, wondering what his assistant’s stunned expression might mean. Then she reached up with her finger and wiped a bit of the ashes from his forehead and slowly touched them to her own face. “I need these, too,” she said softly.

“Let us go to the other towns...that is why I came out” said Jesus. Thank God he did, even through the suffering and the rejection, because in ways we can never know until our lightweight, summery faith comes apart in the gales of winter, “We need this, too.”

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sometimes it is assumed that “Ordinary Time” is so called in contrast to other times that are truly extraordinary, like Easter. However, in *Calendar: Christ’s Time for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) Larry Stookey reminds us that the actual derivation of the term is from the custom of numbering the Sundays between the proper seasons with ordinal numbers (e.g., 1st, 2nd, 3rd). See Stookey, pages 133-140.

<sup>2</sup> Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 36.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>5</sup> Martin E. Marty, *A Cry of Absence: Reflections for the Winter of the Heart* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), 2.