

What's the Hurry?

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Mark 1:4)



Our patron St. Mark is an evangelist in a hurry. The other gospel writers take the time to give us proper introductions to their books. Matthew lays out Jesus' whole genealogy starting from Abraham. Both Matthew and Luke regal us with the stories around Jesus' birth that we lovingly retell in countless Christmas pageants. John crafts a magnificent prologue of light overcoming darkness. Of Word made flesh. Of glory, grace and truth.

But not Mark. In three verses, dense with nods to Genesis, Israel's story and quotes from the prophets Malachi and Isaiah, Mark sweeps all salvation history up into the current moment. Then, in the fourth verse, John appears in the wilderness. Just suddenly shows up. Blink your eyes, and there he is, Elijah returned, "clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist." (Mark 1:6a) And John is bringing a brand new ritual, a baptism of repentance. Preparing people for Christ's world-transforming baptism in the Holy Spirit. In four short verses, the world pivots, and the new age of salvation arrives.

The astonishing richness of the beginning of Mark's gospel is a thing of beauty, and a wonderful discussion topic for a future scripture study. That said, today I'm wondering why Mark seems to be in such a rush. It's not only how much ground he covers in today's reading. Things happen quickly in Mark's Gospel. The Greek word for "immediately" or "at once" shows up over 40 times in this shortest of the Gospels. What's the hurry?

One might think that Mark's is a gospel for our times. We live in a technological society that is in a hurry like never before. And the weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas bring it all to a head, a mad rush of frenetic activity. Family, food, decorations, shopping. It's cold and the bloom is off the rose, so there's no stopping to smell the flowers. We may not even take the time to grieve the losses that seem to well up in what is supposed to be a season of joy.

My problem with being in such a hurry is that I get overwhelmed. Paradoxically, pandemic isolation seems to make me feel even more snowed under. I can lose my sense of balance and harmony. I end up reacting to all the busyness, and grow short and crotchety. Or I just shut down.

Many of us walk through the world with an inborn rhythm. Like a finely tuned string on a piano or guitar, we make a beautiful sound when we vibrate at our natural frequency. But force that string outside of its sweet spot, and the result is noise, or a broken string. That's what the rush of this season can do. Push me into Christmas too hard, and I break. Tell me I need to hurry into the mystery of the Incarnation and I may end up missing its richness, its saving graces, its joy. Or perhaps even miss the good news of Jesus Christ altogether. And that would be a sad Advent.

Peter offers a counterpoint to Mark's urgency. He reminds us that God does time differently: "One day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day." (2 Peter 3:8b) Oh, "the day of the Lord will come like a thief," (2 Peter 3:10a) and we best be ready as we wait for and even hasten its coming. But a hallmark of God's time is patience. "The Lord...is patient with you," Peter says, "not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance...Therefore beloved...regard the patience of the Lord as salvation." (2 Peter 3:9,14,15)

God's patient love brings comfort. God takes the time to speak tenderly to us, gathering us as a shepherd gathers his lambs into his arms, gently bringing us, in his good time, into his plan of salvation. As one of our Eucharistic prayers puts it: "And in the fullness of time you sent your only Son, born of a woman, to fulfill your Law, to open for us the way of freedom and peace." The fullness of time. Patient time born of timeless love.

So given God's patient time, what's the hurry?

I see Peter and Mark as two sides of the same great truth. The apostle and the evangelist walked in the same circles. There is an ancient tradition that Mark was the interpreter of Peter, and that much of his Gospel comes directly from Peter's own stories. Perhaps the young evangelist, inspired by Peter's fierce apostleship, could not resist sharing his good news with the urgency of one who has been set afire by his own baptism in the Holy Spirit. Who among us has not felt the immediacy, the urgency, born of such youthful exuberance?

Mark wants to proclaim the awesome truth that the arrival of Jesus is the dawn of a new creation. So he gives the old world a nod with a mere three verses. John appears in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance. And in the fullness of time, the new age suddenly arrives. This is the mystery - or as Peter calls it, the fact - that for God, a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.

My friends, comforted by God's patient love, let us take time this holy season of Advent to breathe in hope. Take time to pray, to wonder, to connect with loved ones as best we can. To rethink the hows and whys of the ways we spend our days. God, who is ever patient, always forgiving, completely loving, will lead us into the new age by the rhythms he wove into us at our own incarnation. Together, we form a marvelous instrument, the harmonies of our many strings making beautiful music of praise and thanksgiving for Emmanuel. And if we take the time to listen, we may be able to hear why Mark is in such a hurry to proclaim this good news of God with us. In the words of the grand old hymn:

*Since love is lord of heaven and earth
How can I keep from singing?*