

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

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First Sunday of Advent

“A Stranger”

Part I of the Advent Sermon Series, “Who’s at the Door”

Mark 1:1-11

George C. Anderson

Our New Testament passage is from the prologue of Mark. Before we get to that prologue, I want to talk about John’s prologue which includes these lines:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

...⁹The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. ¹¹He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; ¹³who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.

On the Sunday morning of the 2001 Edmunds Lectures, the brilliant biblical scholar, Dale Bruner, stood in this pulpit and told us that he rarely preached. He recalled preparing a sermon on John’s prologue for a church where he was going to talk about Jesus who is a stranger, one who comes into the world, but whom the world neither knows nor receives... but becomes family to those who believe.

The minister of the church where he was to preach was himself celebrated for his preaching and particularly for his illustrations. Bruner did not want to let the congregation down and was desperate to find illustrations that would help his message be human and accessible.

He remembered reading an article by a German movie critic who made the point that in most American Westerns, the hero comes into town. Bruner had not seen many Westerns, so he



went to Blockbuster and rented four movies: *Shane*, *High Noon*, *Jeremiah Johnson*, and *Unforgiven*. Bingo! In the early part of all four movies, the hero comes from out of town. Bruner thought that wouldn't be the case in *High Noon* because the hero is the town's sheriff. But the movie begins with his leaving town for his honeymoon, but then changes his mind because he knew that some unsavory characters are arriving by train at noon. You then see in the distance the dust being kicked up by his wagon moving away, then stopping, then reversing direction as the wagon with the sheriff *comes back into town*.

I wanted to watch the beginning of one of those movies to see what Bruner was talking about. I went about it a different way. I didn't go to Blockbuster because I wasn't hungry for a Firehouse Sub. I didn't even have to find the movie on Amazon Prime, Netflix or Cox on Demand. I just googled "Opening scene of *Shane*" and got myself a free home viewing. That, my friends, is called "sermon preparation."

The movie opens with an intimidating delegation from a neighboring ranch riding onto the property of a homesteader, trampling his garden and stakes for a new fence. The menacing head of this crew stares down at the homesteader, standing in front of his house with his wife and son, holding only his son's rifle, which isn't even loaded. The leader lets them know that the owner of the neighboring ranch claims this land as his own and demands that, by winter, the homesteader and his family be gone. The homesteader says he won't leave. Just as it looks as if the riders might get violent, a stranger who happens to be riding through comes around the corner of the house and stands at the homesteader's side. The leader of the pack asks, "Who are you, stranger?" "I'm a friend," Shane says. The leader utters another threat, but seeing Shane's hand near his gun, thinks better of doing anything and they ride off.

The homesteader looks at this stranger and says he is grateful. He invites him into the house for a meal, and a friendship begins with someone who will later help save the place from being taken.

Bruner went on to explain that is how it is with John's prologue. The Word comes from out of town. The Word that is in the beginning with God becomes flesh and dwells among us... and faces hostility... but also befriends those who receive him.

That is John's prologue. How about Mark's prologue? Let's give a listen and see.

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,

"Behold, I send my messenger before thy face,
who shall prepare thy way;

³the voice of one crying in the wilderness:

Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight—"

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts



and wild honey. ⁷ And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; ¹¹ and a voice came from heaven, “Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.”

Something we need to be clear about in hearing this passage is that we are not hearing Matthew or Luke’s version where John the Baptist seems already to know that Jesus is the chosen one, the messiah who will deliver Israel from its current oppression. No, Mark’s Gospel, written before the other two, tells it this way: John, a prophet, condemns sin and calls people to a baptism of repentance. Jesus is among those who are baptized. John doesn’t say Jesus doesn’t need to repent. He simply baptizes him.

Later in Mark’s Gospel we hear John express doubt as to whether Jesus is the messiah. He sends him a message: “Are you the one, or shall we look for another?”

In fact, the rest of Mark’s Gospel is like a classic Western; it is a story of people trying to figure out who is this stranger who has come into town. The question, “Who is this?” is asked in different ways over and over again.

Twice Peter is asked that question, and his answers get right to the heart of Mark’s story and also Mark’s message. Jesus asks him, “Who do people say that I am?” and Peter answers. Jesus then asks Peter, “Who do you think that I am.” Peter’s answer is right, but only half right according to what we readers were told at the beginning. He calls Jesus the Christ, but *not* the Son of God.

At the Gospel’s end, Peter sneaks into the courtyard outside where Jesus is on trial. Three times someone asks him if he is “one of them.” All three times he denies it. The last time he actually blurts out, “*I do not know the man!*”

Yes, he’s lies to save his own skin... but ironically, also tells the truth. Over and over in Mark’s Gospel, it has been proven that while Peter knows Jesus, he doesn’t *really* know him. That is the way it was with Peter.

That is the way it is with us. At best, God can be loved fully but can’t be fully known.

In a way, that’s no different than any relationship we have. Perhaps there are no deeper ways to get to know another than through the focused study of hate and love. Hate is a topic for another day (although in a shadow sense, what I say about love can be said about hate). Love is dynamic, not static. To love another rightly is not to define, and thereby control. It is to explore another’s mystery without destroying it.¹

¹ Soren Kierkegaard was speaking of God but was accurate about marriage when he said, “The key to a happy marriage is to love the other without destroying the mystery of the other.”



At the beginning of a poem where Robert Penn Warren wants to say something truthful, he says, “Here is the shadow of truth, for *only the shadow is true.*”

“Only the shadow is true.” That might be the best image I’ve heard to describe the truth that is another... the truth that is God. For the shadow cannot be seen without the light revealing something and darkness is an image of something else.

But, as we know from the soap opera, *Dark Shadows*, shadows can be threatening. Even the heroes in those Westerns Bruner rented are perceived at first to be threats. Look at the different times in scripture when God makes some kind of first appearance... or if not a first appearance, a new one revealing God in a way not previously known. God speaks, someone quakes. God appears, someone shakes. Whether it is God’s voice or the appearance of an angel, the first thought often expressed is, “Go away!”

- God walks in the garden, and this is new since it is the first time God appears since Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. They hide.
- God speaks from the bush, and Moses crumbles.
- God is at least in some sense present in the one Jacob meets at the River Jabbok. A fight breaks out.
- Think of Isaiah being confronted by angels in the Temple. He begs them to leave, blurting confession of his and his people’s sins.
- Think of the angel that appears to Zachariah leaving him speechless... literally unable to talk for nine months.

And think of Jesus first being revealed as someone through whom God speaks;

- fishermen hauling in the net bulging with fish after fishing all night and catching nothing, with eyes bulging, begging this stranger who simply told them to cast the net on the other side to go away,
- Jesus preaching his first sermon in his hometown and it not being the Gospel they wanted to hear and their trying to throw him over a cliff to get rid of him;
- even demons who have been cast out begging Jesus to go away.

These divine visits exemplify “Stranger Danger” of a special sort because you know that with this stranger, something is going to have to change. Things are going to be different. You are not going to stay the same.

With the stranger being a Savior, why would we not want to get to know him? Maybe when

- we have fallen too in love with our own reflection-
- with our own settled ideas and ways,
- with our own easy answers to who we love and hate, who is in and who is out; when we are comfortable with how we spend our time, our money, our lives.



Why would we want to get to know the Jesus we don't know when we are satisfied with the Jesus we think we already know and cite him as a personal reference? Why would we want to risk his offering not a reference, but a critique instead? Why would we want to learn that God might be different from whom we thought, and we might need to be different from who we are?

Scripture makes the point in a particularly challenging way when the parable is told where people failed to recognize Jesus. Jesus explains that whenever they did or did not feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, or visit the prisoner, they did or did not feed, give water, welcome or visit *him*. Jesus is identifying those whom we might want to avoid, or despise, or fear, or control, or beat, and he says to look into their eyes deep enough and you'll see somewhere glowing the light- the image, that is him. When you recognize him in them, you get to know him in ways that will change how you see yourself and the world.

But this is not Lent. It is Advent. We anticipate the scene where, after shepherds quake with fear from angels appearing, they hear the angels say, "Fear not, for behold I bring you glad tidings. Unto you a child is born, unto you a son is given." We remember about those Westerns that the stranger is not only presented as a threat, but also a hero.

We depend on the kindness of this Stranger who is God, who for no better reason than love, shows up at our side as we stand vulnerable in the world, and says he is our friend. The homesteader invited Shane into his house, and this Advent we invite Jesus the stranger into our house of worship and into our lives. Getting to know this stranger that is God can change everything for the better.

Isn't that the point of the story we looked at two Sundays ago (the Samaritan woman at the well getting to know Jesus)? "Come and meet this man who knew me better than I know myself," she told her townspeople after her long conversation with him. And then, Bruner would excitedly point out, they left town to meet Jesus, and brought this stranger back into town to get to know him.

God does not have to remain some philosophical idea. Jesus does not have to remain a figure of history. We can get to know Jesus better if we're open to surprise and discovery. By the loving interaction of our spirit with God's, we can come to better know this out-of-towner.

- We can come to better know Jesus as the one who can lead us in facing the world's dangers and challenges. We'll learn more of Jesus in that way next Sunday.
- We can come to better know Jesus as a friend who is there for us and asks us to be there for him. We'll learn more of Jesus in that way in two Sundays.
- And we can come to better know Jesus as the one who saves us from threats outside us and within us (saves us from getting lost in our own reflection). We'll learn more of Jesus in that way in three Sundays.

We have invited Jesus into our home for Advent to get to know him better. Go spread the news that a stranger has come into town who has potential to be our best leader, our best friend, our needed savior. Some might resist or be threatened. But maybe others will come to get to know him too.

