

Advent 2
Mark 1.1-8
The Rev. Chip Graves

Am I the only one here who's been technically challenged by the Heinz ketchup bottle? No matter how much I try, I can never get the ketchup out quickly. Simply impossible. However, as a young man, ketchup was extremely important, covering dreaded vegetables, other unmentionables, or for that matter anything labeled, nutritious. I suppose ketchup was my food camouflage, yes indeed, hiding those enemy foods, making them almost bearable to ingest. And do you remember the cute television ads a few years back. The ever-so-slow yet joyous tune, anticipation. I can hear it now, anticipation, the word itself rolling out in 6, no 7 syllables. And finally, the long awaited ketchup. It finally appears. It's amazing. All this build-up for the eventual flow of a red liquid. We're a silly bunch. And yet we're consistent; if we really desire something, we'll *just wait*.

In Mark's gospel, we realize the significance of waiting. Mark does not simply spring us into Christ, but instead ever so slowly he builds a case for Christ. Immediately, he introduces us to the prophet, Isaiah. And then later he brings forth John the Baptist. Both able messengers are preparing the way for the Son of God. We hear that prophecy will be fulfilled, "I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness." As Isaiah cries out to those cast into 8th century B.C. Babylonian exile, so too John the Baptist cry out to first century Jews.

And though he is unfit to untie Christ's sandals, this locust eating, wild man later baptizes Jesus. This is key, allowing for a connection between God and society outcasts. Furthermore, John the Baptist's proclamation of someone greater fulfills Jewish prophecy, a new kingdom has come. But this King wears a torn, disheveled tunic not a fine bejeweled robe. It is this very king who eats with sinners, casts out demons, speaks to women and commits several atrocities outside the Law. This is the king who continues to amaze us even today. *So how do we prepare the way for such a king? Just wait.*

Perhaps it's discerning Mark's term, *metanoia*, Greek for repentance, or better translated as *turning another way* that best answers this question. As Isaiah and John the Baptist called for a change of heart in ancient times, we too have been called. But we have a new enemy to refrain. Our enemy does not shackle us with chains or outdated laws but with overabundance and gluttony, perhaps best seen in this holiday season. .

Just the other day, Black Friday, I was among the 'crazy shoppers'. Yes, I know. I must be into pain. What was I thinking? Getting up at 5:30 in the morning to join the retail madness. Though compelling with a dizzying array of price discounts and great buys, the Big Sale day is indeed black; it's dark and misguided. It's not that I'm above a good sale, it's just that the rush and frantic pursuit of *obtaining and buying* seems to be misplaced. *Where's God in all of this?*

As I relate this Black Friday event to our gospel lesson, I realize one thing in common, the textual icon for today's sermon, *waiting*. *Waiting*, believe it or not, is deeply entrenched in both our lesson and Black Friday. On Black Friday, I remember walking past a 60 year old man in Wal-Mart. He was grumbling that he'd have to *wait* for a new Play Station game that had just sold out. Not so happy. And then later as I scurried past the electronics section at Target, I witnessed numerous zombies *waiting* in line to pay at the cash register. Again, not happy. And then as I drove outside the mall parking lot, I noticed over 50 people waiting to enter Best Buy. *No sale is worth that*. Am I the only one who thinks this is crazy? Good people, our focus has gone astray. It's certainly not on God. It's certainly not on the coming of Christ. Our focus is to gather and obtain things. The temporal gods seem to be winning. *But just wait*.

As if this ensemble of retail gluttony was not enough, I recently learned that a 33 year old man was trampled to death at a New Jersey Wal-Mart. One passerby noted, "No one would help him". Another screamed, "Everyone just kept going." To read of this horrific incident, you'd think it was a herd of animals in hot pursuit. The police explained later that as the crowd had assembled outside Wal-Mart, the security guard was unable to control them. The crowd literally ripped off the outer door, pushing forward until death and injury ensued. It was truly a Black Friday.

In times like these we need a hero. A hero of another kind; not a movie star or a professional athlete but some common, everyday hero. And it could be you. This is what God is calling us to be, heroes in Christ. "But how?" you ask. Most recently, CNN came out with their annual Heroes segment, introducing common people as heroes and their unbelievable feats. The most remarkable thing about this list of ten is that they are unsung *heroes* helping others in need. .

One comes to mind. Born in Malawi, South Africa, Maria Da Silva knew what devastation looked like first hand. She lost 14 of her closest relatives to aids at a young age. Life was grim. But this did not stop her. It ignited her to fight back. She waited for the right opportunity. And then it came. Now, a Los Angeles resident, she sets aside a third of her salary or \$1,000 per month to fund the Jacaranda school, a safe-haven for nearly 200 aids-orphaned children in Malawi. And because of her financial support, these children now have a home and access to education. As she helps these children, she's paving the road for Christ.

This is a perfect example of how we too can prepare the way for the coming Christ. That is, we can discontinue our pursuit of gathering, obtaining for ourselves and begin life anew in helping others. In sum, I believe the birth of Christ allows us each year to renew ourselves in him. As we anticipate his birth, we can ponder our past, our present and our future, realizing those things we've done and those things we've left undone. We're almost there. *Just wait*.
Amen.