

What's With the Stories?

Mark 1:1

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ December 24, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



There are four Gospels in the New Testament; Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These are four different accounts of the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus. Each one of them includes a retelling of the Christmas story, which you came here tonight expecting to hear. In many churches you'll hear at least a portion of Matthew's version on Christmas Eve, either something about Joseph learning in a dream that he's going to be a father, or magi following a wandering star to Bethlehem. The most popular choice will be Luke's account, which Rebecca read to begin our service. We never tire of hearing about the manger, and the angels, and the shepherds. This is the version even Linus chooses to read when Charlie Brown asks if there is anyone left who knows what Christmas is all about. In John's much more abstract version, we hear how the Word, which was there from before the beginning, takes on human flesh and dwells among us.

It's Mark's version which is by far the most neglected or overlooked this time of year. In fact, I'm willing to bet that this might be the only Christmas Eve service in the city tonight where this is the version the preacher chooses to highlight. That's probably because Mark's version is painfully short. It's only one sentence, and doesn't include any of the Christmas imagery which we have come to love. But don't judge Mark because he's a man of few words when it comes to Christmas. As is often said this time of year, good things come in small packages.

So listen to the account of Christmas as told by Mark at the beginning of his Gospel account. Mark 1:1...

"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ."



I love having adult children. Christmas is easier with adult children. But one of the things I miss about having little kids around, especially this time of year, is story time. We read a lot of stories in our house when our kids were growing up, almost every night. And we had a whole box of children's Christmas books which, after being stored away for eleven months each year, were always fresh with wonder each December. Do you

have a favorite Christmas story you read to your children or grandchildren, or even one you remember being read to you as a child?

Christmas movies can also be magical. My guess is that each of you has a favorite Christmas movie, perhaps even one you watch each year at this time. A friend of mine recently told me his favorite Christmas movie was *Die Hard*. Ah yes, nothing captures the spirit of Christmas like Bruce Willis shooting up East German terrorists. I actually came across a new story this week report the debate among film historians as to whether *Die Hard* is a Christmas movie. I'll let you look it up and decide for yourself.¹

Our of curiosity, this week I looked up the list of the highest-grossing Christmas films of all time. The most recent adaptation of *Grinch* is number one.² We watched that recently as a family. It was good, but I still prefer the original cartoon which came out the year I was born. *Home Alone* is number two, a movie my boys watched 573 times when they were kids. Number three was surprising to me - *Alvin and the Chipmunks* is the third highest-grossing Christmas movie of all time. Is there anybody here who ranks this as the ultimate holiday classic?

Why do we keep telling these stories, year after year after year? Why do some people watch *It's a Wonderful Life* over and over again? I've probably seen it a dozen times. I wonder if it's because these stories all seem to fulfill a profound longing that is imbedded deep in every human heart. In the story of George Bailey, for instance, we are captivated by the idea that a person who lives what seems to be a very ordinary, even seemingly pointless, life might one day discover that in the end his life actually made a remarkable difference in the lives of others. Don't you wish that were true? Or when we hear Santa say to Rudolph, "Won't you guide my sleigh tonight?", isn't there something in us that wants to live in a reality where those who are considered to be castoffs and misfits are actually designed to fulfill noble purposes in this world, even called to come and save the day? And what is stirred in your heart when a mean-spirited Scrooge, whose heart is at least three sizes too small, is transformed into a

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/videos/entertainment/2023/12/22/die-hard-christmas-movie-lead-vpx.cnn>

² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_highest-grossing_Christmas_films#:~:text=Highest-](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_highest-grossing_Christmas_films#:~:text=Highest-grossing%20Christmas%20films%20%20%20Rank%20,%20%20%5B22%5D%20%2034%20more%20rows%20)

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person of extraordinary generosity and kindness because of an encounter with uncommon love.

What's interesting to me is that none of these stories are true, at least true in the historical sense. The Rudolph story doesn't begin with the line, "Based on actual events." Even George Bailey and Ebenezer Scrooge are pure fiction. These stories, like all good stories, are written not to recount history but to make a point, even to leave us with a moral. To put it crudely, they are giving us advice. Don't underestimate your ordinary life. Don't overlook the misfits in this world. Don't let your heart grow cold. It's good advice, advice that we should heed. But this is where these Christmas stories depart from *the* Christmas story. As Mark tells it, it doesn't begin, "**The beginning of the good advice of Jesus Christ**", which is another way to say, "Once upon a time..." No, this is the beginning of the good *news* of Jesus Christ. It's that one word "news" that I want you to consider just for a moment tonight.

As others before me have pointed out, advice urges you to make something happen.³ News, on the other hand, tells you what has *already happened*, and then invites you to respond to it. Advice says it's up to you to act. News says that somebody else has already acted. The story of Jesus does not begin with "Once upon a time..." This is not presented as fiction with a moral. Mark and the other Gospel Writers are instead relaying news. Instead of presenting a moral to the story, they are bearing witness to actual events which have massive implications for our lives today.

It's what makes these writings unique among all other sacred texts in our world. The holy books in other religious traditions include mostly teachings, or commands, or wisdom, or esoteric visions, which are to help us guide the way we live. In a way, they are mostly advice. Uniquely, the Bible, though it includes these things as well, is primarily an account of actual historical events. As John, one of the Gospel writers, puts it, "**We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.**"⁴

The fact that it is history does not make the story of Jesus any less fantastic or wondrous. Sure, flying reindeer with illuminated noses, or nighttime visitations from ghostly spirits are wildly spectacular, but nothing compared with the Creator of the universe stepping into his creation and not only becoming one of us, but choosing to embrace the hardest parts of being one of us. This is the one great story, to which all other stories point. Do you see it? Can you see it? All the

things which captivate our hearts in these other make-believe stories point us to the good news that these things are not just unsatisfied longings in the human heart, but possibilities presented to us in real life. In Christ, ordinary lives can become extraordinary. The misfit child in the manger really does come to save the day. The hardest heart in the world can grow three sizes or more when exposed to the sort of other-worldly love we see Christ demonstrate to even those who want nothing to do with him. This is the good *news* of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

It's not a Christmas movie, but I loved the recent Tom Hanks film called *News of the World*? In the movie, Hanks plays Captain Jefferson Kyle Kidd, a former Confederate officer who served in the 3rd Texas Infantry and now, after the Civil War, makes a meager living by traveling from town to town in Texas reading newspaper stories to local residents who are willing to pay an admission fee of ten cents to hear the latest. People in these remote places have no access to the news, so Captain Kidd shows up and tells them about the parts of the news which will have a bearing on people like them who live in places like they live. For example, he shares news that the Pacific Railroad Committee recently voted that the Missouri Fort Scott and Gulf Lines are to be consolidated in a new line which will run from the Kansas border all the way to Galveston, Texas. This news is met with hearty applause because it is good news which significantly impacts the lives of those who hear it.

In a way, that's my role tonight, and not just tonight but every time I step up here to preach. My job as a minister of Jesus Christ is not to give you advice. Forgive me when I forget this, and start telling you what to do, especially when it's unsolicited. My primary job is not even to present you with a moral to the story that might inspire you towards imitation. My main job as a preacher, which isn't all that different from your job as witness in this world, is simply to report the news of the world. In this case, the most important news of the world. Thankfully, it's good news I have to report.

So here's the news I have for you tonight. God really did come into this world and become one of us. The baby in the manger was the eternal Son of God who created the world. He wasn't pretending. He actually did become human without shedding his divinity. The stories we read about him in this book are told to us by eyewitnesses. They really did happen. Jesus taught others with unparalleled authority. He performed supernatural signs that could not be explained. He really did die on a Roman cross. You would have

³ I'm indebted here to Timothy Keller, *Hidden Christmas* (Penguin Books, 2008), 21-28.

⁴ 1st John 1:1. This and all other biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

watched it happen had you been there. And then he really did rise from the dead three days later. You also would have seen this had you been there. And he did it all because of love; that's part of the news, what makes the news good. He loves us. He loves you, more than you know. He is offering you life, and forgiveness, and purpose, and a place in his family forever. If you trust him with your life you will eventually find all the deep longings of your heart, the ones stirred by all those other Christmas stories, ultimately fulfilled in him beyond your wildest imagination.

This is the news I have for you tonight. Having received it, you are now left in the position of deciding two things. First, you have to decide whether or not to believe it. After all, not all news is true. Fake news is not hard to find these days. Lots of people believe the news I'm telling you tonight is fake as well. It's not my job to make you believe it; it's just my job to report it. Though I do pray you will come to believe it. Even if you don't believe it's true, don't you want it to be true?

Secondly, you need to decide how to adjust your life in response to this news. When Octavian, who later became Emperor Augustus, won his great victory at the Battle of Actium over Cleopatra, news of the victory was sent back to Rome. The messengers declared, "Good news! Octavian has won the battle! He is now on his way back to Rome, and when he arrives he will set all things right in the empire." Everyone in Rome at once realized, or at least had been told, that they were now living between Octavian's victory and his final return as king. This wasn't a story with a moral that invited consideration, it was news with clear implications which demanded a response.

Military victories by human emperors are one thing. Yes, adjustments need to be made. But what we are talking about here is the total redemption and ultimate renewal of all creation by a loving God who, having entered into our lives, now invites us to enter into his life. The news is that he came to this earth long ago. There are also reports that he is coming again someday soon to finish what he started. This is not advice. There isn't a moral here, at least that's not at the heart of it. This is news, good news, of what God has done and has promised to do. This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. Do you believe it? How does it change things? Those are the questions I hope you are asking tonight.

Amen.