

The Messengers

Mark 1: 1 - 8

by

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Swarming around my dorm room, I was in a frantic. As I scanned over my desk, my dresser, and my closet, I quickly looked to make sure everything was in place as to how I was instructed. My socks and undershirts had to be rolled and planted to the left hand of my dresser. My shoes had to be aligned by type with the shoelaces placed inside the shoes themselves. My pants had to be hung with the seems out and my jacket had to be buttoned and placed a quarter of an inch from one another. My toothbrush had to be upside down, my toothpaste needed to place on the opposite side of my razor. Oh, and there had to be hospital corners on all my sheets.

The anxiety of preparing for the arrival of a drill sergeant can be overwhelming. Just as when you are expecting family coming in for the holidays. From making sure you have the guest room ready to get the house fully cleaned. From making sure Christmas Eve dinner is started ahead of time to wrapping last minute Christmas presents. From dealing with your screaming children throwing tantrums on the floor. To wait for the arrival of your father in law who will talk about his ulcers while your mother in law makes snarky comments about your parenting skills. Let's face it, arrivals of others often equivocate anxiety. And as we find ourselves feeling unprepared and undervalued in what seems to be nothing but a season of preparation, we miss what Advent is really about which is a season of appreciation.

For the Jews, it was the anticipation of the arrival of "the one" who would save them from the Roman Empire which caused them anxiety. And for Christians today, it's our anticipation as we wait for "the one" who will liberate us from our political, social, and personal persecutors in our world that causes us to be "in the waiting."

However, much like those in Jesus time, we have been given some good news that was given twice before. First, we see it in Isaiah where it was written at a time when most of the Israelites were off in captivity in Babylon. Then it was given at a time when Jews were living under an oppressive Roman Empire and corruption could be found not only in the political governments but also within the temples and in the conscious of the religious leaders. And now with all what we face in our society today, this good news still resonates.

This "good news" is foremost a story about a hero. Is this a story about a hero who establishes political order and side with Israel against pagan oppressors? Or is this story about a hero who is a forerunner that preaches repentance as the faith in which God's people have lived in Messianic hope serves as the inaugural word, bringing together the anticipation and fulfillment times of God's salvation? Who is "the hero" who will be "the good news?"

In our current American political spectrum, we are always looking out for heroes who

we believe will save us from what we believe is the deterioration of our cultural values and moral responsibilities. For some of you here, it might have been the promise that America would be Made great again by someone who promised to bring back American jobs which went overseas, slash federal regulations, and protect our borders by building a wall in Mexico and make Mexico pay for it.

However, for some of you here, perhaps you are looking for a hero who will save millions from losing health care, provide the proper funding to help our veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan suffering from PTSD, and a hero who will push to keep our public education and head start programs funded.

It is, of course, the job of a preacher to sometimes make those in the congregation feel a little uncomfortable, and I am sure many of you might be starting to feel that way. But don't worry, I won't do one of those sermons here. But I do want to talk about what it means to be a hero

Believe it or not, the word hero derives from the Greek term "heroes" meaning demi-god. A demi-god is one who possesses more power than a mortal being but is not quite a god. The word was actually first used in the 14th century to describe men of superhuman strength or physical courage, according to the Online Etymology Dictionary.

In 1934, Lord Raglan, a British soldier, and scholar, examined the lives of Greek and Jewish heroes, what he called the "heroes of tradition," and found 22 common incidents weaved throughout their stories. Some examples included the hero's father being a king, the audience knowing little of the hero's childhood and the hero's uneventful reign as king. Raglan then evaluated individual stories of heroes and scored them on the number of these common occurrences their individual story contained.

The story of Oedipus, the basis for this study, contained all 22 of the plot points, while the stories of Elijah and Sigurd received nine points each, the fewest in the list.

Often it's our perception of what we want our hero to be that clouds the reality of what our heroes actually are. For those of us in ministry, it's often the perception by many in the congregation that when we go into a new church, he or she will deliver sermons that will leave everyone in tears every week, there will be youth coming in droves who will, in turn, bring in families, and the pews will once again fill up as they once were in 1958. However, as a ministry colleague once joked when he looked at the list of expectations his new congregation set upon him he said, "I don't think Jesus can even do this level of recruiting."

But there is also personal perceptions of what a hero means to us. For those who are single and never been married before, it's the perception that when they find someone, they will be swept off their feet, and their love will be like the ones seen in those cheesy Hallmark movies where no one fights, everyone is always happy, and everyone is thin and looks attractive. As most of us can attest, love and relationships are a beautiful gift. However, it requires commitment, patience, and the understanding that your partner isn't perfect and neither are you.

And finally, there are perceptions of what heroes mean to us. For those of you with children, it's the tired nights of staying up to help your child with their homework or shuttling them around to their various after-school activities which you hope in turn allows your child to see you as a hero someday. For those of you caring for an older parent, it's the endless

amount of doctor appointments, the visitations, errands, and responsibilities you take on in an effort to try and live up to being the image you may have as your parent as being a hero to you and now you must try and duplicate that sense of reality. And when you fall short with your parents, your child, or perhaps with your co-workers or boss, you feel a sense of guilt, shame, and disappointment.

How do we reconcile when our political heroes fail to live up to their campaign promises? How do we reconcile when our inspirational heroes are caught in scandals, are exposed to major character flaws, or it's revealed they make decisions based on poor judgment? And what about us, how do we feel when that parent, that child, that friend, or that co-worker disappointing us in ways we cannot imagine? How do we reconcile with ourselves when those who look up to us are hurt when we find ourselves making a poor moral decision or fail to live up to who they hoped we would be?

One such movie that fits along these lines is the 2014 film called "The Judge" which stars Robert Duvall and Robert Downey Jr.

Robert Downey Jr's character, Hank Palmer, is a big shot, slick, city lawyer in Chicago who returns home to his estranged father and town judge, played by Duvall after his father is suspected of murder. The film, which is centered around the case of Hank representing his distant father whom he hasn't had a relationship with since he was a teenager, showcases the strained relationship between The Judge and his son that began when Hank was in high school and his father sent him away for being a reckless youth. Hank's resentment towards his father and his father's regret of this decision towards the end of the movie, highlights how The Judge realizing that despite making intentions which he thought were best in his son's best interest at the time, he doesn't end up being the hero which saves his son from his reckless before. Rather, pushing his son away causes his son to feel pain and permanently damages their relationship.

In a scene where The Judge, who was known for coming down hard on offenders, finds his decision to release a young man without any penalty coming under scrutiny, The Judge finally breaks down and gets emotional.

"Same willful disobedience... same recklessness. I looked at him and saw my middle son. My little boy. My little boy. I watched him cry right there. I wanted to put my arms around him and tell him it didn't have to be like this. I wanted someone to help him... like I'd want someone to help my boy... if he lost his way. It was my chance to be... that someone. Is that so much to ask?"

Most of us as individuals seek to be "that someone." We seek to be that someone who makes a difference in the lives of our kids, our parents, our friends, our co-workers, our strangers. And when we fail to help someone who has veered off course or someone help someone who is suffering, we experience remorse, regret, weaknesses, and a failure to be a hero.

"There are three things we have to let go of," writes Richard Rohr. "The first is the compulsion to be successful. Second, is the compulsion to be right-especially theologically right. Finally, there is the compulsion to be powerful, to have everything under control."

For us as individuals, it's important for us to see ourselves not as the message, but the messengers. We must not feel it's our responsibility of carrying the burden of trying to live up

to the expectations of our children, our parents, our spouses, or our congregations and save those we care about from their sufferings. Because we are human and are unable to do that. Rather, like John, we must see ourselves as the messengers, the ones in the flesh who through acts of compassion, love, justice, shows previews of who is to come and the deliverance which all are to receive. God understands our shortcomings, our character flaws, and our weaknesses which sometimes let not only ourselves down, but those we love down. Yet it isn't upon us to carry the weight of the world. That is something Jesus has already agreed to do on the cross. No, for us we are merely to be vessels of compassion as best we can.

"Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish," writes Henri Nouwen. "Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human."

My friends, in two weeks our Savior will be born. And this time of year, unfortunately, serves as a reminder of all that we have left to do—the shopping, the gift wrapping, the changing of the bedsheets in the guest room so your sister doesn't have to sleep on a pile of cat fur. But this time of year, unfortunately, reminds us of the expectations of ourselves we expected to meet at the beginning of the year, the money we didn't save, the weight we didn't lose, the relationships we didn't mend, or perhaps the reconciliation with others we are seeking. However, as we find ourselves in the waiting for the arrival of Jesus Christ, know that we aren't expected to be fully prepared, fully liberated, or full-filled all the expectations of those who love us and those we care for. That baby which is to become our savior will be doing that for us. Our job is to simply be the messengers in our world who share the good news while living out to the best of our ability, full actions of love, compassion, and grace which are sneak peeks of what is to come for all of us.

Yes, we are still waiting for the arrival of our liberator. But do not fret about anticipating his arrival. Instead, express appreciation for what he very soon is going to do.

Bartlett, David Lyon, and Barbara Brown Taylor. *Feasting on the word: preaching the revised common lectionary*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.

"Commentary on Mark 1:1-8 by Paul S. Berge." *Mark 1:1-8 Commentary by Paul S. Berge - Working Preacher - Preaching This Week (RCL)*, www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=185.