

“And It Happened”
Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Colorado Springs, CO
January 11, 2015

Mark 1:4-11 (*Mark as Story* translation)¹

[The messenger] was John baptizing in the desert and proclaiming a baptism of turning around for pardon of sins. And the whole Judean countryside and all the Jerusalemites were going out to him and being baptized by him in the Jordan River, publicly admitting their sins. And John was wearing camel’s hair with a leather band around his waist, and he was eating grasshoppers and wild honey. And he was proclaiming, saying, “After me is coming one stronger than I am, the strap of whose sandals I’m not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with holy spirit.” And it happened – in those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. And coming up from the water, immediately he saw the heavens being ripped open and the spirit like a dove coming down onto him. And there was a voice from the heavens, “You are my beloved son. I delighted choosing you.”

“And it happened.” Three little words, that could easily be taken for granted by us, who know the story of Jesus, who *know* that Jesus came to be baptized, who know the ministry that he did in his life, who know of his death, and of his resurrection. But would what those three words mean to all those people who had come to be baptized by John, who had heard him proclaiming that someone else was coming, someone else who had even greater power? What if the town baker who had come to be baptized by John and turn away from his sins, who had gone back home to try his best to live his life differently now, heard those words, “and it happened”? I can imagine him in the marketplace as he is buying his stores; he catches the name of John as people talk around him. He stops, and turns to listen carefully – “You know that guy in the desert, John the Baptist? Well everything that he was saying – it happened! Someone named Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee. That’s all I know right now, but it happened!” I can imagine a new energy coming into the baker’s step as he continues about his day, energy that he’d had when baptized, but that had begun to wane because of how difficult it was to actually keep those sins that he had turned from away. But now! It had happened! John the

¹ Rhoads, David; Dewey, Joanna; Michie, Donald. *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (2nd edition). Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999.

Baptist really was right! That meant that there was *reason* to continue to repent, continue to live with God, continue to hope.

“And it happened.” Do you know what happens in those three words? A prophecy that has been in place for thousands of years is fulfilled. A hermit who’s eating *grasshoppers* in the desert is vindicated. The future of the *whole world* changes.

What *would* the world be like right now if “it” had never “happened”? What would the last 2000 years have been like if Jesus from Nazareth had never decided to go to the river to be baptized, if he had never made the choice to take up the life to which God called him, the life for which God chose *him*? What would *we* be doing if a carpenter had remained a carpenter rather than becoming a homeless transient proclaiming God’s good news?

“And it happened.” Three little words. Of course, when I read them I also thought of the big thing happening in the congregation’s life right now. The thing that we have been preparing for, the thing that *we* have been hearing about for the last several months – the educational leave and sabbatical of our Senior Pastor. The word has been proclaimed that it would happen, and we have been attempting to prepare the way for it. And now, as of last Sunday after church, it has happened. And yet....it also hasn’t *quite fully happened* yet, has it? Only one step has happened. It is happening, it is begun, and we are right smack dab in the middle of it.

I *love* the paradox of those three little words. “And it happened” is the past tense. In our scripture lesson those three words are the fulfillment of a story that has been thousands of years in the making. But *what if* the story stopped there? What if that was *all* that had happened?

It turns out that “And it happened” is *not* the end of a story, past tense. “And it happened” is *not* the complete fulfillment that the words seem to suggest – it is the *beginning* of all that is yet to come!

What would you think if someone were writing the story of our congregation in this particular time of its life, and described in detail all the preparations that we have made for Pastor Chuck to be away, all the preparations that he himself put into place, and then simply ended the story saying “And it happened – in those days, Pastor Chuck went on educational leave, and the congregation carried out all the preparations that had been made. The End.” You would think it was a terrible story! I’d guess you’d say something like “What?? *What* happened? How did it go?? What happened when he got back? Did everything go like it was supposed to?” (I hope so!)

The paradox of “And it happened” is that it holds in three small words both fulfillment *and* expectation.

Church, we’re in the middle of those three words, and not only in the context of Pastor Chuck’s leave time. We are still living out the **same three words that were written 2000 years ago**. We are in the middle of the story that started with the birth of Jesus Christ in a manger in Bethlehem, a story that continued when that child grew into a man who decided to respond to God’s call and be baptized.

Christ is come, Christmas *happened*. And yet. There is more story to be told.

In the cyclical life of the church year that Pastor Chuck spoke about last week, that baby that was born in a manger in Bethlehem still has his life to live. The man who came to the river Jordan to be baptized still has ministry to go out and perform.

And in linear time, in the life of the Church Universal 2000 years after that man did that ministry, we, his Church, are still doing his work, living out what he started, *servicing* and *planting* and *witnessing* God’s love to everyone until “it” is complete, and Christ is come again.

And even in that linear storyline of preparing for Christ to come again, there is a cyclical pattern to God's work. Preparation has been done before. John prepares the way for Jesus to come, and it happens. Jesus prepares his disciples for his death and resurrection, and it happens. Then, after the resurrection, the disciples take up preparations that Jesus had already begun – preparation for the coming of the reign of God, and the second coming of Christ.

Where do we fall in today's story? Which character do we most identify with? Part of the beauty of a great story is that you can see yourself in it. If you're on Facebook, you've probably seen or done short little "personality quizzes" that help you identify just which character of a popular movie you're most like. Which *Frozen* character are you? Or Harry Potter? Or which Disney Princess?

Well, who are we in this particular story in the life of Jesus? Thank goodness, we don't have to take a Facebook quiz to find out.

WE are disciples, telling the good news, preparing the way for Christ to come again in glory. In this story, right at the beginning of "and it happened," we are John, the messenger, proclaiming one who is far greater than us.

John, the messenger, who people flock to from all around the Judean countryside *and* Jerusalem. It is not just because of his desert dress. As intriguing as camel hair sounds, I don't think that by itself would be worth the trip. Something else was going on. The people hadn't heard a message like John's – a baptism of turning around for the pardon of sins – a message that elicited public confession of sin. *That* had to be *powerful*.

John re-shaped expectations. He re-shaped *people*, helping them turn from the ingrained expectations of their lives and creating new possibilities. With confession, baptism and pardon,

and the proclamation of something *even greater*, people found new possibilities for their daily existence *because of* new possibilities for the whole world.

Each one of us has ingrained expectations, ingrained assumptions for our own lives. Maybe some of you have already found a way to shake off old assumptions – assumptions that kept you from trying something new, taking a risk, or believing in yourself. Maybe you’ve already tried something that scared you, or that seemed impossible. Maybe some of you have found a way to shake off assumptions about *other people*, and have been able to build a friendship with someone who you had been *certain* you wouldn’t get along with.

When John baptized the people who came to him, he was meeting the needs of those who came to him because they wanted something different for their lives. They wanted to cast off the sins and assumptions about themselves that kept them from being who they wanted to be. And John, by proclaiming forgiveness just for that *desire to be better*, prepared them for the ministry of Christ Jesus, prepared them for the new world that Jesus started when he, too, came to be baptized, to live the life to which God called him and the world.

We are John. We are a congregation of radical hospitality, or welcome for all, where you won’t be judged and you won’t be told what you “have” to believe. When we proclaim God’s forgiveness for all just because of a desire to be better, just for the desire to have something more, something greater, in your life, we are proclaiming God’s good news.

We are at the beginning of “and it happened,” both in our Christian storyline and in the life of our congregation at the beginning of our Senior Pastor’s sabbatical. It is for us to shape the details of the story. What is the ministry that *we* will do in this time period? What are the preparations that we will make? What will we be *ready for* when our Senior Pastor returns?

We are not stagnant, waiting. We are actively preparing. We are not satisfied with the very beginning of the story as an ending. We are shaping it as we go. We are not satisfied leaving the ministry to which we have been called to others. We are claiming the identity we have been

given – messengers, disciples, storytellers, re-shaping the expectations of ourselves and re-shaping the assumptions of any who thinks they already know what “church” means, what “Christian” means – those who think church is equivalent to judgment, to shallow-thinking, or to oppression of thought. And we are re-shaping the assumptions of those who think that they are not worthy of God’s love, that they are not worthy of friendship and welcome.

We know that there is one better than us. We know that we are hardly fit to bear his name. And yet we follow, and we proclaim his excellence, *his* ever-redeeming love for us all.

We are John, proclaiming just the beginning of the story, “And it happened.” Christ is come, and the ministry and kingdom of Christ is yet to be fulfilled. New possibilities await. What will happen next? 😊

Amen.