

## “Christmas: Not Your Typical Road to Grandma’s House”

Mark 1:1-8

12/6/09

“Over the river and through the woods to Grandmother’s house we go!”

You probably know the tune. How often we hear that this time of year as we prepare for Christmas and all the good things we imagine which accompany this great celebration of Christ’s birth. Perhaps you might even make that trek to Grandma’s house. Although nowadays it’s usually more like “Down I-75 at 90mph in our SUV to Grandmother’s posh retirement community we go!”

Okay, but seriously, there is a different road—not your typical road to Grandma’s house. It is the road that, if we really want to get to the heart of Christmas, we must take.

### **READ Mark 1:1-8**

*“Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.”*

Why don’t we ever see any John the Baptist decorations for Christmas?

Picture a man, spending a lot of time in the desert wilderness—no shower or soap. No razors or barber shop. No doubt his clothing of camel’s hair was pretty rustic—nothing fancy there, just a very basic belt. He was thin—you would be too eating what is basically desert grasshoppers

### **[locust-in-air photo]**

and washing them down with honey. He was a man of God, a prophet. So he was filled with God’s Spirit and no doubt loved the people around him. But I can imagine his eyes had that intense spirit that pierced through your eyes and into your soul.

Why not hang this hairy, camel-hair-wearing, locust-eating guy up in your window? Maybe put him on top of your Christmas tree or a big plastic version of him in the lawn. We hear from him every year as we prepare for Christmas. He is a part of the story.

Why not? Well, besides probably sending the little children off wide-eyed in fear, somehow John the Baptist and his message in the wilderness just doesn’t seem to fit with all our usual Christmas celebrations. Oh, there are plenty of angels, wise men, little drummer boys. Plenty of sales, lights, parties.

### **[Christmas lights photo]**

But in this “bubble bath of Christmas schmooze”, as someone coined the phrase, (Craig Kocher, “Wilderness Survival”) John is nowhere to be found.

He is just not a marketable guy.

“Prepare the way of the Lord” sounds a little more like something we preachers preach during Lent, as we prepare for Jesus’ crucifixion, not really the cuddly Baby Jesus.

But it’s the way we are called to journey—the road that takes us to the life-changing encounter with God. It’s not the road we have on our favorites on our GPS’s. It’s a road less traveled, but as Robert Frost says, it’s the one that makes all the difference.

### **We must take the road that leads out into the wilderness.**

### **[a5[1] photo—Jordan River]**

What is the wilderness?

It’s the wild. A place of exile. It is that place of testing as the Israelites experienced. Or as Jesus Himself experienced in confronting His temptations.

The wilderness is that place deep within us, away from all the holiday hype, away from what everyone around you is telling you is real, away from the nice and neat outer layer of yourself, to where it's just you and God and His soul-cleansing fire.

**God has already drawn near to us. How do we respond?**

Author Doug Mendenhall shares a brief parable that should cause all of us to pause and reflect:

Jesus called the other day to say he was passing through and [wondered if] he could spend a day or two with us.

I said, "Sure. Love to see you. When will you hit town?"

I mean, it's Jesus, you know, and it's not every day you get the chance to visit with him. It's not like it's your in-laws and you have to stop and decide whether the advantages outweigh your having to move to the sleeper sofa.

That's when Jesus told me he was actually at a convenience store out by the interstate. I must have gotten that Bambi-in-headlights look, because my wife hissed, "What is it? What's wrong? Who is that?"

So I covered the receiver and told her Jesus was going to arrive in eight minutes, and she ran out of the room and started giving guidance to the kids—in that effective way that Marine drill instructors give guidance to recruits. ...

My mind was already racing with what needed to be done in the next eight—no seven—minutes so Jesus wouldn't think we were reprobate loser slobs.

I turned off the TV in the den, which was blaring some weird scary movie I'd been half watching. But I could still hear screams from our bedroom, so I turned off the reality show it was tuned to. Plus, I turned off the kids' set out on the sun porch, because I didn't want to have to explain *Jon & Kate Plus Eight* to Jesus, either, six minutes from now.

My wife had already thinned out the magazines that had been accumulating on the coffee table. She put *Christianity Today* on top for a good first impression. Five minutes to go. I looked out the front window, but the yard actually looked great thanks to my long, hard work, so I let it go. What could I improve in four minutes anyway?

I did notice the mail had come, so I ran out to grab it. Mostly it was Netflix envelopes and a bunch of catalogs tied into recent purchases, so I stuffed it back in the box. Jesus doesn't need to get the wrong idea—three minutes from now—about how much on-line shopping we do. I plumped up sofa pillows, my wife tossed dishes into the sink, I scolded the kids, and she shooed the dog. With one minute left I realized something important: Getting ready for a visit from Jesus is not an eight-minute job.

Then the doorbell rang.

*Doug Mendenhall, "Getting Prepared for the Arrival of Jesus," www.reporternews.com (9-24-09); submitted by Kevin Miller, executive vice president, Christianity Today International*

No, it's not an eight minute job. Jesus has stopped by and is here right now. Just open the door. Just let Him in. He's not coming to point His finger at all the stuff lying around. He's not here to make you feel guilty. He really is not going to think you are a reprobate slob.

**Jesus is here, and He wants to get real.**

Don't worry so much about how everything looks and miss the quality time with the guest. If His presence causes you to realize the places in your life that need work, then rejoice in that. Rejoice and do something about it.

But don't "clean house" real quick for Christmas when it's really only a surface cleaning. Get real before God. Take the road less traveled.

Think about our idea of "Christian Perfection"

The Apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 3:12, “*Not that I have already attained, or am already perfect ...*”

Oswald Chambers writes these thoughts on it:

**“God’s purpose is to make us one with Himself, not necessarily live the ‘perfect life’ that is unattainable in this world as human beings.**

“What shines forth and reveals God in your life is...your genuine, living relationship with Jesus Christ, and your unrestrained devotion to Him no matter what.

“We can sometimes live as if God is unnecessary—that through your own human effort and devotion you can attain God’s standard for your life. In a fallen world this can never be done.”

But we can get caught up in that. This past Wednesday was for me “one of those days.” You know, when you just don’t feel right—a little off. Nothing major, just not feeling very good. No big deal, but you see, it can then get magnified as I look around at all our Christmas lights and decorations because we’re not supposed to feel that way 19 days from Christmas.

Now please hear me, I love the lights and trees and all the decorations. We have plenty inside and out at our home. I love the music, the smells, the food, the presents—I love it all. But this message this morning is simply to acknowledge our attempts sometimes to try and create the Christmas “magic” on our own and thereby make God unnecessary—a secondary thought to all this.

But then God nudged me closer to these words this morning: “*The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.*”

It’s acknowledging that all is not perfect. It’s dealing with those days that take us into our soul, perhaps into the wilderness of our lives where it’s just me and God and the wild things. That place of exile, where God doesn’t seem to be close, yet is exactly where we come before God face to face.

God’s purpose is not to perfect me to make me a trophy in His showcase.

**God is getting me to the place where He can use me. Let Him do what He wants.**

Stanley Grenz is a theologian who wrote “Drive-Through Christmas”. In it he says:

“Tony Bennett’s voice wove its subtle magic throughout the shopping mall: ‘On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me.’ *How appropriate*, I thought, as I watched the shoppers scurry from store to store. The advertisements promised ‘just the right gifts at just the right price,’ allowing us to ‘give like Santa and save like Scrooge.’

“As I listened, I was struck with how we have turned Christmas around—not so much by commercializing the season, but through something deeper. Our McWorld of drive-through expectations has replaced patient waiting [for Christmas] with the idolatry of instant gratification...

“The ancient Western church devised a rhythmic cycle for the celebration of Christ’s incarnation. At the center was Advent, the 20-plus days beginning on the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day. By fasting and abstaining from public festivities, Christians were to prepare for the holy day by being drawn into the sense of longing for Messiah’s coming felt by generations of God’s faithful people.

“This heightened sense of anticipation would, in turn, give way to overwhelming joy and festive celebration when Christmas Day finally came.

“As members of the fast-food generation, we have become so eager to get to Christmas that we bypass Advent...Knowing the end of the story so well, we want to rush through the long and tortuous details of how God prepared a people.

“This may allow us to avoid the stressful waiting and longing expectation. But it also hinders us from sharing the exuberant joy of that first Christmas, for we cannot truly sing ‘Joy to the World’ unless we have thoroughly rehearsed ‘O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.’”

*Stanley Grenz, "Drive-Through Christmas," www.christianitytoday.com (12-06-99)*

Yes, as I sat in my living room Wednesday night, I began to long for the Messiah. My soul just opened up to God as I prayed for the path to my heart to be made straight and clear. Not so I can appear “perfect” and stand up here as if on display. But that my relationship with God be made perfect, whole, complete.

So that, as the lights shine forth from our home, so even deeper, the light of Christ shines forth from my heart for all to see the glory of God.

And so I say to you:

**Get alone with God.**

James 4:7, *“Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.”*

Take a break from it all. Turn off the TV. Turn off the computer. If you know you’re surrounded by people who influence you away from God, take a break from them too. Clear your schedule. Take a break from the stores.

Get in the silence with God, take His Word along with you, and be in His presence. Make a straight path to your heart that God may enter in. He will, but it is a choice. And we need not fear that, but embrace it.

Be alive to His presence. Get out of your comfort zone. It may make you feel a little squirmy at first, a little uneasy, but how freeing it really is!

Pray, “Give me courage, God, to take the road less traveled.” Amen.