

Augustana College  
Chapel of Reconciliation

**Jesus Without the Christmas Story: John the Baptist  
Mark 1:1-13**

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**3 December 2007**

As we begin this advent season, this time of expectation as we wait for Christmas, let's begin with a variation of my theme this fall. There are Christmas stories, and then there are Christmas stories. There are dominant Christmas stories, and there are subversive Christmas stories; there are normative Christmas stories, and there are Christmas stories with No Entry signs on them; there are authorized Christmas stories, and there are impossible Christmas stories; there are Christmas stories, and there are counter-story Christmas stories.

Even though I identified the counter-story I just read from the Gospel According to Mark as a Christmas story, I realize that this story does not sound anything like the traditional Christmas story. There are, if not counter stories, at least, different ways of telling the Christmas story. There are alternative Christmas stories that involve characters other than just angels and shepherds and magi from the East. For example, one of my favorite "Family Circus" cartoons shows the children

getting the family's manger scene together. After they had arranged it just so, they called Dad in to look at it. Dad proudly surveys the children's careful work and says: "Good job everybody! The stable looks great." But then he notices an unlikely additional figure lurking in the corner of the stable, and he comments: "But, I don't remember reading that Spiderman was in Bethlehem that Christmas." Apparently in the children's imagination, baby Jesus was going to need help from super heroes when he grew up.

Another example of a counter-story Christmas story is the story in Mark's gospel. It may not be as amusing as the one in "Family Circus," but it is just as creative; for it is the story of Jesus' baptism by John, not his birth. In fact, there is no story about Jesus' birth in Mark. Neither is there one in John's Gospel. Only Matthew and Luke have traditional Christmas stories, that is, stories about Jesus' birth. Instead of a story about Jesus' birth, Mark begins with a story about Jesus' baptism. However, if we think of baptism as rebirth, then the story of Jesus' baptism is an alternative story about Jesus' birth. The story of Jesus' baptism, his rebirth, is a Christmas story after all, albeit counter-story Christmas story.

Like all of Mark's stories this one is a little different. The language and the imagery of the story can be unsettling. Sometimes I think the early church tried to hide the Gospel

According to Mark between the more traditional gospels of Matthew and Luke and hoped no one would notice the strange stories in this curious gospel. Yet on the Monday after the first Sunday in Advent 2007, we found it.

The story of Jesus' rebirth, his baptism, begins not with the baby Jesus but with the appearance of the adult John the Baptist. It begins not with the tranquil and celebratory images of the hymns we just sang, but with contrary indications that all is not peaceful and harmonious. After all, John comes proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Clothed in camel's hair and eating locusts, this wild man's task is to prepare the way for Jesus and then to baptize him.

Let's listen carefully to the language of the story and ponder its imagery. When Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan, he saw "the heavens 'torn apart'" or more literally the Greek states "ripped open." He also saw "the Spirit descending like a dove" not "on him" but again the Greek says "into him." Sometimes Bible translators try to polish up these counter-stories in Mark. Yet the more literal language of the heavens being "ripped open" and the Spirit "descending into him" is language that offers up pictures of an invasion and images of possession.

This curious counter-story of Jesus' rebirth, this alternative Christmas story, suggests that when Jesus was

baptized, the Spirit of God invaded the earth; and entering into Jesus, took possession of him. Invaded by the Spirit of God. This, I suppose, is preferable to being watched over by Spiderman. At any rate, having so invaded Jesus, the divine voice from heaven then announces: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Whatever else this invasion might mean, God is pleased with Jesus.

But wait this strange story continues with more bizarre features. No sooner does God declare this invasion a success and express satisfaction with Jesus than the spirit "throws Jesus out" into the wilderness. The imagery of invasion and possession continues as Jesus is not led, directed, or even ordered into the wilderness. Rather he is--again I translate the Greek more literally--he is thrown into the wilderness where he is tempted. The story does not tell us the nature of the temptations or even how Jesus responded to them. We only know that angels, not Spiderman, took care of him.

Although we don't learn much about the temptation in the wilderness from Mark, we do see its effects. Guess what Jesus does right after he has been "thrown" into the wilderness to be tempted: He goes out and helps people, and he then gets into trouble. To be invaded by the divine spirit is to be possessed by an agent of change. Having been possessed by the Spirit of God and thrown into the wilderness by this same Spirit, Jesus

then immediately goes out and begins to "throw out" (the same verb is used in the Greek) the evil spirits and demons which possessed the people of his day. Jesus goes about helping people. He heals people with a variety of illnesses: people with lepersy, people who are paralyzed, people who are blind. It is as though Jesus, invaded by the Spirit of God, is empowered to fight against the forces which that ancient culture believed caused illnesses in human beings.

Jesus not only opposes supernatural powers but also human powers. And that is why he gets into trouble. According to the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders, according to the Pharisees and Sadducees, according to these religious and political leaders of his day, Jesus helps the wrong people, the people with whom nice people did not associate, the tax collectors and sinners. Jesus not only helps the wrong people, he does things the wrong way: he does not require his disciple to fast; he allows them to pick grain on the day of rest; and what's worse he himself heals the sick on the day of worship. Jesus just does not follow the rigid customs and dominating traditions of his day; nor does he adhere to its arbitrary laws and oppressive requirements. As a result his opponents "went out and immediately conspired on how to destroy him." But that's another part of the story, not the Christmas story.

Mark's counter-story Christmas story is about what happens at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, about Jesus' baptism by John, about Jesus' rebirth. When Jesus was baptized, he was invaded by the spirit of God and thrown out into the world to help people and in the process to get into trouble with the establishment. He was empowered to oppose the powers that oppress human beings, whether those powers are natural or supernatural, whether human or nonhuman.

This is truly a counter-story Christmas story. But wait-- now the story gets really interesting. Are you ready for this? Let's think about our own baptism in light of this story. For like Jesus, we too have been baptized. This suggests that we also have been invaded by the Spirit of God, that we also have been thrown into what may seem like a wilderness to us. But this invasion by the Spirit of God also empowers us to oppose the powers which oppress. We also are baptized to help people. The task will not be any easier for us than it was for Jesus. Though it will be different.

We understand the world differently today than people did two thousand years ago. The powers that dominate us and threaten to control our lives are not necessarily supernatural. Instead they are all too human. A glance at a newspaper or internet news site quickly confirms that our world contains numerous injustices, some of which were present in Jesus' world

and some of which were not. As we identify and engage the powers which oppress us and our world, we need to remember that Jesus fought the powers of his day with words not weapons, with encounters that healed not conflicts that continued to wound. And so must we.

In Mark's counter-story Christmas story Jesus does not need help from super heroes like Spiderman as he opposes powers which enslave humans. Baptism alone, this divine invasion by the Spirit of God, this invasion by an agent of change, empowers Jesus and gives Jesus all the help he needs, the words that dismantle the structures which oppress and the actions that disarm those who tend those structures. But Mark's counter-story Christmas story suggests that though the story begins with John's baptism of Jesus it does not end there. This after all, as the first statement in Mark phrases it, this is only the beginning of the good news of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. The story continues through us and our own baptism. For when we were baptized, we too were invaded by the Spirit of God; we too were possessed by an agent of change, we too were empowered to oppose the powers. So teaches the counter-story Christmas Story according to Mark.

Amen, for now. I say Amen, for now, because once again I would like to continue the discussion of confessing, counter-

stories by inviting you to a community discussion on Thursday at 10 o'clock in the 3 in 1 room in the Commons Building. I would like to hear your ideas about Mark's counter-story Christmas story. You and anyone else you know is welcome. Again treats will be available. Please come and partake of both the treats and the conversation which will follow. So until then: Amen, for now.

# MORNING WORSHIP

Monday, December 3, 2007

**Prelude**                    *“Greensleeves Fantasia”*                    Arr. Anne McGinty  
Flute choir, Emily Anderson, director

**Welcome/announcements**

**Invocation**

**Opening Prayer**

**Christmas Carols**

ELW #277 v. 1

ELW #275 v. 1

ELW #267 v. 1

*“Away in a Manger”*

*“Angels from the Realms of Glory”*

*“Joy to the World”*

**Gospel**

Mark 1: 1-13

**Sermon**    *“Jesus without the Christmas Story: John the Baptist”*

Dr. Richard Bowman

**Hymn**                    *“On Jordan’s Bank the Baptist’s Cry”*                    ELW#249

**Prayer**

**Lord’s Prayer**

**Benediction**

**Postlude**                    *“Hark the Herald Angels Sing and Joy to the World”*

Arr. James Christensen

Flute Choir

## CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS

**CATHOLICS MINISTRIES CAROLING PARTY** - Please join us for a caroling party on Saturday, December 8<sup>th</sup>. We will meet at the chapel at 11:00 am to rehearse, and then go the Good Samaritan Luther Manor nursing home at 12:00. Everyone is welcome!

**FAITH FEST 2008 - WANTED:** Fun-loving Augustana students to be group leaders for a high school retreat that will happen on campus February 16-17!

Faith Fest is a gathering of high school youth sponsored by Augustana Outreach Ministries which gives students an opportunity to grow in their faith by listening to various speakers and musicians, participating in activities, and being inspired to continue in faith as they are led by Augie college students who provide an amazing witness.

Faith Fest 2008 with the theme “Ridin’ the J-Train” will focus around the verse Mark 8:34 – He called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

If you are interested in volunteering for the weekend or want more information, please contact [kllenander@ole.augie.edu](mailto:kllenander@ole.augie.edu). Also indicate (1) if you are CPR and/or First Aid Certified, (2) your T-Shirt Size, and (3) your Meal Plan Number.

### CHAPEL SCHEDULE

Tuesday (4 <sup>th</sup> )	Catholic Mass, 10 am - Fr. Tschakert
Wednesday (5 <sup>th</sup> )	Holy Communion, 10 am - Taize Prayer; Collegiate Chorale
Friday (7 <sup>th</sup> )	Worship, Mairead Kelly, Sr. Spkr.
Sunday (9 <sup>th</sup> )	Worship, 11 am - Pr. Paul
Monday (10 <sup>th</sup> )	Worship, 10 am - Mike Mullin, Hist.
Tuesday (11 <sup>th</sup> )	Koinonia, 10 am
Wednesday (12 <sup>th</sup> )	Holy Communion, 10 am - Taize Prayer; Women’s Choir