

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
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*Lost in the Cantatas*¹
Jeremiah 33.14-16; Mark 1.1-20
Russ Dean, November 29, 2009



The cantata as a musical art form developed in the 17th century, when instrumental music began to be used more frequently to accompany a vocalist. Prior to this time “cultured” music was vocal, alone. (Those rowdy instruments were for the bars.) From the Italian, *cantare*, which means to sing, the word first appeared in the work of Alessandro Grandi, in the 1620s.² Cantata has a long musical history, and has been used extensively in sacred literature, Johann Sebastian Bach having written more than 250 secular and sacred cantatas.³ But if you were raised Baptist, it was not Bach, but Broadman who taught you to love the cantata! Broadman Music, the musical publishing arm of the Southern Baptist Convention produced a cantata for every season, and being the Southern Baptist son of a Southern Baptist preacher who loved to sing, I must have heard every one of them! Broadman’s cantatas were affordable for church musicians, working on limited budgets, and accessible to church choirs, sometimes working on limited musical education and talent.⁴

When the choir was working on the cantata, the world could have stopped turning, and no one would have noticed. You stayed late to practice, and came early. The “music director,” as many were called, scheduled extra practices, or weekend retreats. You left singing and kept the

¹ The sermon title comes from this insightful quotation from Andrew Rudd: “What is sometimes lost in the glory of church cantatas and angel proclamations is the profound discontinuity that framed the original... story. Palestinians... felt the pressure of occupying troops. The excesses of a religious ruling class had gutted the relevance and hope of the synagogues. Divine promise of liberation seemed a world away. It is in this framework of disruption the Messiah arrived... Perhaps the experience of Christmas might best be met with a renewed attention to the brokenness required for hope to be born.”

² “Cantatas and Arias for Solo Voice.” See the online *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “cantata.”

³ See Wikipedia, “List of cantatas by Johann Sebastian Bach.”

⁴ And though John Peterson was not a southern Baptist, he wrote more than 1100 songs and every Southern Baptist musician in the country also new of his 35 cantatas, which have been sung for almost 40 years.

cantata's best bass line, or its signature solo within humming range for a month. As the season wore on, it was easy to get Lost in the Cantata, swept up in the joy of soaring refrains, carried away in the emotion of a haunting melody or a resonant harmony, preoccupied by the sweet sentimentality of it all: the babe... the manger... the sweet little shepherds on that bucolic hillside beneath twinkling stars... the white-winged angels, with little gold halos, singing "Glory to God" from Handel's Messiah... Lost in the Cantatas!

Mark will have none of it.

Jesus bursts onto the scene for Mark, as apparently he did for those first followers, sans cantata – no shepherds, dressed in bathrobes, or otherwise, no beautiful, fleece-covered sheep, looking contentedly on, no wise men from the East, following their star to the birthplace of a king, no angelic annunciation, no heavenly host singing praise, no teenage virgin mother, wrapping a cooing infant in swaddling clothes, no resigned father, accepting the miraculous tale and assuming his supporting role. Absent from Mark's Good News is the sensationalism of a miraculous birth. Absent, also, the sentimentality of our Child of Bethlehem.

The beginning of the good news for Mark is as abrupt as is the tone of his entire message. His gospel is a Good News that travels fast; it is a whirlwind of action, a fury of disrupting events, one (*immediately*) after the other. It is a Good News that needs no angelic announcement to authenticate the transforming power of its main character – Jesus was his own authentication. Bursting into a world laden with religious expectation, and speaking to that crowd, Mark announces the messiah as would be expected, "*As it is written in the prophet Isaiah...*" A full-grown Jesus, from Nazareth, enters [stage left], is baptized by the one who appeared *in the wilderness*, is *immediately* (Mark uses the word more than 40 times) driven into his own

wilderness of tempting and trying and truing... and having been prepared, is off, *immediately* calling an odd assortment of support cast, on the fishing mission of a lifetime... that ends in death. Mark had no need for a Christmas story.

Maybe we don't either.

The history of Christmas is somewhat sketchy. Though Clement of Alexandria, one of the early church fathers, tells of a group of Egyptian Christians, around the year 200 CE, celebrating the nativity on March 25, in the year 245 CE, Origen of Alexandria, another of the church fathers, said "only sinners (like Pharaoh and Herod) celebrated their birthdays." In 303 CE the Christian writer, Arnobius, "ridiculed the idea of celebrating the birth of the gods." Why Christmas is now celebrated on December 25th is also unclear (no one claims this to be the actual birthday of Jesus). It was first attested as such only in the middle of the 4th century, in Rome. Perhaps it actually corresponds to the winter solstice, or has its origins in one of several pagan feasts, such as "Sol Invictus" (the birthday of the unconquered sun).

The modern, American celebration has been molded along the years, adopting its features from various pagan and secular celebrations around the world, such as the Roman festival, Saturnalia and the Yule of Scandinavia. And it has never been without its controversy. Christians in the East still celebrate Christmas on January 6, which is regarded by the West as Epiphany, the celebration of the coming of the Magi. Throughout the Middle Ages, and even into the 19th century, the Christmas celebration had its detractors, such as the Puritans who saw it as too Catholic a holiday. Christmas was outlawed in colonial Boston for more than twenty years,

because it invited too much excesses, and detracted from the call of Christ – to simplicity and radical living.⁵

It is hardly without its criticism today. Though it has become central to our cultural and economic experience, it is still a lightning-rod. Defenders on the right decry the secularization of Christmas, and call for vigilance in the so-called “War on Christmas,” which they claim has been initiated by a liberal elite who just wants to take Christ out of Christmas. Critics on the left remind us of the over-indulgences that do exist, and make regular calls to simplify Christmas, returning the holy to the holiday.

Perhaps now, this first day of Advent, as the stores have already begun their barrage of advertisements, and as we seek to make the commercialization which Christmas has become the salvation of a wrecked economy, perhaps now is the very best time to be reminded that such celebration is not necessary for the followers of Jesus (While it may be necessary for the culture or the economy, it is not necessary religiously.) – because it may, in fact, detract us from the service to which Jesus calls us. And Mark will be the perfect gospel to remind us.

Perhaps we need, also, to be reminded, somewhat soberly, as we begin ramping up for a 58th telling of the story in our cantata, which we call, “Tableau,”⁶ that the Christmas story as we have received it, is hardly an account rendered by eye-witnesses. Matthew and Luke, who do tell the story, were hardly newspaper reporters witnessing the spectacle, just from different angles. There are conflicts in the telling of their stories that are hard to harmonize, historically. Matthew places Jesus’ birth in the time of King Herod (who died in 4 BCE), where Luke locates his narrative with the census taken by Quirinius (a decade after Herod’s death). This and other irregularities in these stories of Christmas lead scholars to say,

⁵ See Wikipedia, “Christmas.”

⁶ Since 1951 Park Road Baptist Church has hosted a living nativity pageant called “The Judean Hills: A Living Tableau.” It represents the best and the worst of what “tradition” can mean!

“A growing consensus has held that the writer of Mark, like all the evangelists, was a theologian of the Christian community. His purpose is not primarily to write history, but to announce a message.”⁷

Such commentary is not from the far left fringe, some liberal academic type who is out to destroy faith. These words come from Lamar Williamson, writing for Interpretation commentary, which is published by John Knox Press, of the Presbyterian Church, USA.

So, why does Mark not tell the tale of Christmas? Perhaps (... are you ready?)..., there was just no story to tell when Mark wrote.⁸ It may be as simple as that. The historian, Josephus, who is regarded as the most important non-biblical source for Jewish history in the decades surrounding the life of Jesus, makes no mention of a birth, miraculous or otherwise. Like Mark, Josephus only knows of the grown Jesus, whose life, death, and resurrection left an undeniable imprint in his writing, and on the world.⁹ The Church, even as we walk into the season of angels and shepherds, needs to walk in with eyes wide open – acknowledging, affirming, even celebrating, that perhaps the story we love to tell is a story that came to Matthew and Luke out of a theological need in their respective communities – that some purpose drove the creation of, or at least the extensive embellishing of, a narrative with such sensational and sentimental elements.

⁷ Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Interpretation*, “Mark,” p.17.

⁸ Though some will obviously disagree, I have no specific agenda here – I am not out to “destroy” the Christmas story (which is very important to me). I simply think Christians must be aware that the gospels are “theological” and not “historical.” The differences in the stories from gospel to gospel indicate a theological focus of a given writer – whether the recorded stories refer to any actual historical event should not hinder Christians from celebrating the writer’s meaning. Former Episcopal priest, Bill Dols, once wrote a book entitled, *Just Because it Didn’t Happen Doesn’t Mean it isn’t True* – and he is right. I have no agenda to take away the story – it just seems clear that at the time Mark wrote (around 65 CE), if any birth narrative was known, it held little, if any, importance to the Christian community to whom Mark wrote.

⁹ My father gave me a copy of the complete works of Josephus, over Thanksgiving, and I enjoyed skimming through it. The only mention of Jesus contains these interesting words: “Now, there was about this time Jesus, a wise man... He was [the]Christ; and when Pilate... had condemned him to the cross... he appeared to them alive again the third day...” I find it intriguing that this historian uses the word “Christ” (a theological word which would have required an interpretive opinion – even Jesus’ followers struggled with his identity), and refers to a resurrection type event (again, even Jesus’ disciples disagreed over this: “*And when they saw him [resurrected] they worshipped him, but some doubted.*” (Matthew 28.17)). The Christ... resurrected... but no mention of the birth at all.

I think the question we must ask ourselves as we begin this season, the difficult question – if we truly want to prepare for the coming of a radical messiah, to us – is if we love the sensationalism, the sentimentalism of the story too much. Do we choose in this season, even intentionally, to get Lost in the Cantatas?

Now, I cannot believe I am about to use such an illustration in a sermon, because I cannot believe there is any redeeming quality to any film Will Ferrell has ever made. But Amy reminded me last night of a scene from his irreverent comedy, “Talladega Nights: the Ballad of Ricky Bobby,” in which his character, the wildly famous and equally vacuous Ricky Bobby, NASCAR celebrity, offers grace at the family table.¹⁰ The ridiculous dialogue that ensues as he prays, ironically, seems to me to speak to us today:

Dear tiny, infant Jesus... (Ricky Bobby prays.) Look, Sweetie (his wife interrupts) Jesus did grow up. You don't always have to call him baby. It's a bit odd and off—puttin' to pray to a baby.) Look. (says Ricky Bobby) I like the Christmas Jesus best... Dear tiny Jesus, with your golden fleece diapers... (He was a man. His father-in-law says, exasperatedly. He had a beard!) Look. I like the baby version the best. Do you hear me?... And I'm saying grace...”

I wonder if we, too, don't just like the baby version best. The Child of Bethlehem. The gentle Jesus, meek and mild, who simply lies there, pointing to a God of unspeakable miracles (even the miracles that never come to us), and to a story that sentimentalizes faith for so many that they never really get to the radical Jesus. The grown up one, with the beard. The one who was killed by the authorities because he challenged the powers that be, on behalf of the powerless. The grown up Jesus called us to *take up our own Cross* (Mark 8.34-35)... to *go and do likewise* (Luke 10.37). Oh, there is some attraction to the Cantata, isn't there!?

¹⁰ No, we do not own a copy of “Talladega Nights” – you can find just about anything on YouTube!

If we need the baby version too much... if we permit ourselves to become lost in the cantatas... to allow the literal telling of a story of sensation and sentiment to become the center-piece of our faith... then we can hardly say we have met the Christ at all.¹¹ For Mark, nothing would be lost to the call of Jesus, to what it meant to follow the Christ, if we did not have a birth narrative.

For Mark, it is a story that simply didn't need telling.

As we prepare our hearts and minds in this season, will we just get lost, again, in the cantatas... or will we drop our nets, *immediately*, and *follow*? And which will really lead the world to Christmas?

May it be so!

¹¹ The Prayer of Confession in today's service was as follows: "Forgive us, O God, that we are so star struck – enthralled by sentimentality and sensationalism. Quench our quenchless tabloid appetites, that make us so eager to cling to the stories that really are too good (or too bad), to be true. Open our minds to the reality our eyes must know, that whatever "miracle" may be, it is too strange and too unreliable to base our lives on, let alone our faith. And open our eyes to the see the miracles our mind cannot grasp: God with us. Everywhere. Not in the sensational, but in the mundane of everyday life. God with us. Here. Today. Amen." I am afraid that for far too many people, "faith" is emotionally, if not intellectually, tied to the sensationalism of "miracles," and the sentimentality of stories, literalized into a kind of concrete truth. Both sensationalism and sentimentalism miss the power of real faith, which is not found in sitting around waiting on the "miracle," but in finding God among us – even when the miracle will not come, not in a story, literalized, but a story told to convey the deepest truths available to us – truth which is far more important, far more "true" than any "fact" ever could be!