

A Minimal Christmas

Mark 1:1-8

Sunday, December 6, 2020, Aledo UMC

Pastor Dave Schultz

How was your Thanksgiving? That's an important question for me, because Thanksgiving may be my favorite holiday of all. I love the food and the colors and the food and the stories and the food and my childhood memories of Thanksgiving at my grandmother's house.

And did I mention the food?

After being a parent for well over thirty years, this year I got something I've always wanted. As you know, Candice and I have three boys. And they are quite capable of chowing down a pretty sizeable plate of turkey and stuffing and mashed potatoes and green bean casserole and glazed carrots and cranberry sauce and pumpkin pie—

And did I mention the food?

Over the years, I've watched my sons as they've piled food onto their plates, and I've been known to say, "Save some for the rest of us." And sometimes they listen to me.

Other times, I've been the first one to pass an enormous bowl of sweet potatoes and I'd jokingly say, "So what are the rest of you eating?" I wasn't really joking.

This year, I nearly got my wish. Candice and I didn't buy a whole turkey; we just got a turkey breast and my wife seasoned it to perfection. Then she served it with all the trimmings. And when I sat down at the table, she was my only competition for food.

I'd rather have the competition. But thanks to Covid, it was just the two of us. And I love having my wife all to myself, but it would've been nice to have some of our family join us. Instead, we had to settle for a minimalist Thanksgiving.

I'm told that even before Covid minimalism had become quite the thing. So earlier this week, I Googled *minimalism*, hoping to learn more about this latest subcultural trend. My search took me to theminimalists.com, which seems to be the epicenter of this craze. The site is managed by Ryan Nicodemus and Joshua Fields Millburn, and I was immediately struck by the fact that Joshua Fields Millburn has three names. And he's a minimalist.

I learned that "minimalism is a tool that can assist you in finding freedom." And that resonated with me. I like freedom. According to Ryan Nicodemus and Joshua (Fields) Millburn, adopting a minimalist lifestyle has the potential of freeing a person from the trappings of the consumer culture we've built our lives around. It will free us from guilt and depression and the need to fill your life with stuff.

Speaking of stuff, some minimalists say you must live with fewer than one hundred things. One hundred things. I got to thinking about that: I've got 98 ties. I'd like more than one shirt and one pair of jeans to go with those 98 ties.

I confess. I'd be a lousy minimalist. And yet, I've just survived a minimalist Thanksgiving. I didn't like it, but I made do with it. Now, looking ahead, our church and society are facing the prospect of a minimalist Christmas. Those of you who receive our Sunday bulletin by email saw that the cover features Charlie Brown and his Christmas tree. I love Charlie Brown, and that tree anticipates a possible minimal Christmas.

A few Decembers back, someone said to me, “Christmas is coming. You must be busy.” I said, “Not really. I’m only preaching a short sermon because the Bell Choir is performing their Christmas program. And then next week, I don’t have to prepare a sermon at all because the entire service will be taken up with the children’s Christmas program. And the week after the choir is performing their Christmas cantata.”

This year? No children in church. No cantata. We can’t even sing Christmas carols in church because we’re all having a Covid Christmas.

Even if we can have in-person worship on Christmas Eve, we won’t be able to pull together all of the traditions that we look forward to every year. At least Mike was able to tell us the story behind “O Come, All Ye Faithful.” We may not have our songs, but we still have our stories.

But there’s a gift in the midst of this Covid Christmas. It’s a gift that comes around every three years, but it couldn’t be more timely than it is this year. According to the Revised Common Lectionary, this is Year B. That means it’s the year of the Gospel of Mark. And when it comes to Christmas, nobody is more of a minimalist than Mark. In fact, I’d go so far as to say that when it comes to the Christmas story, Mark is flat-out disappointing.

- There’s no mention of a virgin birth.
- There’s no Magnificat with Mary singing, “My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”
- There’s no donkey; there’s no pilgrimage to Bethlehem.
- There’s no manger scene.
- There’s no angel chorus in the sky singing, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace, good will to all.”
- There’s no shepherds saying to one another, “Let us go now even unto Bethlehem and see this thing which is come to pass.”

Luke’s Gospel gives us all of those things. But Mark can’t be bothered with Christmas.

- There’s no angel appearing to Joseph in a dream in Mark’s Gospel.
- There’s no visit by wise men from the East.
- There’s no gold, frankincense or myrrh.

Matthew’s Gospel gives us those things. Mark can’t be bothered with Christmas.

There’s no word of Christ’s place in the Creation signaling the importance of all which is to follow. John’s Gospel gives us that beautiful prose:

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life and the life was the light of humanity. And the light shineth in darkness and the darkness comprehended it not” (John 1:1-5).

Mark can’t be bothered with such things. Instead, look at what Mark does give us: John the Baptist.

John the Baptist? What kind of a Christmas present is John the Baptist? He’s like the weird uncle you hope doesn’t show up for Christmas dinner because you just know

he's going to show up in smelly old clothes and a hostess gift of dried grasshoppers dunked in chocolate.

And how can you possibly fit John the Baptist into a nativity scene? He's just going to shame the shepherds into repenting and shame the wise men for their wealth. Go back to your wilderness, John!

But maybe—just maybe—that's exactly Mark's intent. Maybe—just maybe—that's the intent of the Holy Spirit. I suspect that God in his infinite wisdom and knowledge knew that the time would come when the Christmas story would become just another Hallmark movie, so that all we would see would be shepherds and wise men, Joseph and Mary and a newborn baby. And we would forget that Jesus grew up into adulthood; we would forget what the Incarnation is all about.

That may be why Mark begins at this point in the life and ministry of Jesus: Mark may not have wanted the **birth** of Christ to overshadow the **work** of Christ. And he leaves it to John the Baptist to remind us of that work: "*He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*" That may be why Mark identifies "the beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah" with the ministry of John the Baptist. John does four things for us:

Number One: John is a living sign of the fulfillment of scripture. Mark quotes from Isaiah 40 and applies it to the Baptist. John is the one who appears on the world scene to prepare the way for the arrival of the Messiah, the One who would indeed baptize us with the Holy Spirit.

Number Two: John calls us to prepare for the arrival of the Messiah by repenting of our sin. These days, that's so easy to forget. There is so much work that goes into Christmas that we don't take the time or spare the energy to do the spiritual work of preparing for Christmas which is to examine our own hearts and lives and repent of our sin and get our hearts right with God. That is, after all, why Jesus came to earth. And this year, we have the gift of time to do the spiritual work the Spirit is asking of us.

Number Three: John is a radical example of what it means to follow Jesus. His very life challenges us to do the same and follow Jesus in a radical way. I think that's why Mark begins with Jesus as an adult. Mark seems to realize that people don't follow a baby; babies don't walk. Babies don't even crawl. You cannot follow a baby. But from the get-go, Mark wants us to follow Jesus, so Mark begins his story with a call for us to radically follow Jesus just as John radically followed Jesus.

Then, just a few verses later—in verse 14—Mark tells us that John's radical obedience to Christ led him to be arrested and thrown into prison, foreshadowing John's execution. In the process, Mark reminds us at the very beginning of the good news that Jesus would likewise be arrested, tried, and crucified.

Mark—who wrote to a church undergoing persecution—wanted his readers to follow Jesus even if it meant martyrdom. But Mark also wants his readers to know that if we would follow Jesus to the grave, Jesus would in turn grant us the grace and the power to follow him into eternal life.

From the very beginning of his Gospel, Mark has his eye on the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus and he's willing to forego the baby in Bethlehem's manger in order to drive that point home. Mark the Minimalist is even willing to disappoint us a little at the beginning of the story in order to elate us at the end of the story. Because in the end, Jesus conquers more than Covid. Jesus conquers sin, death, and the grave.