

-There is this wonderful little documentary which used to be on Netflix (not sure if it is there anymore) titled "Happy". It's about 90 minutes of sharing stories from people who are all talking about a simple question: what makes them happy? One of the people interviewed is a former Vice President of a bank centered in Amsterdam. This man explains how for 25 years he had worked his "buns" off and finally was promoted to the upper levels of bank management with a terrific salary. He explains in the film how much he loved blowing his income on fashion and fancy sports cars but felt incredibly empty inside almost all the time. This emptiness festered to the point when he all of sudden decided to book a trip to visit a friend in India who had connections there with Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying and Destitute. While serving food there, he met a young boy who couldn't talk but who stared into this man's eyes. This man was the last person the boy looked at before dying a few hours later. This man states in the documentary: "that was it." He quit his job, sold his lavish amsterdam lifestyle, and moved to Calcutta where he has been volunteering with the Home for the Dying ever since. I am sure this story isn't the only one you have heard of describing some person radically changing it up, going somewhere new, shifting life perspective.

-For many of these type of stories, I am continually fascinated by the "hunger" or "emptiness" that leads someone to randomly get on a plane and fly to Calcutta. What is that hunger?

-The gospel of Mark is one of my favorite gospels. In many ways because it is about 30% shorter than the other gospels texts. Mark has a nack in his writing style of, as one of my seminary professors said, cutting out the BS. There is no recitation of Jewish law and custom that seems to never end in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus doesn't speak like some privileged Roman mucky-muck like sometimes he does in Luke. Nor does Christ seem like a levitating, non-human like figure like he appears sometimes in the fascinating but frustratingly poetic language of John. The gospel of Mark is refreshingly short and to the point. No messing around.

-Maybe this is why when Mark makes an embellishment happen, one tends to notice a little more. Maybe it's just me, but Mark's recollection of this story in verse 5 is fascinating if not a little confounding: "And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." ALL the people of Jerusalem and then ENTIRE Judean countryside were going out to see John the Baptist? Really? That's ridiculous! The population of Jerusalem during this time period, most biblical scholars think was between 40,000 and 70,000 (about the size of Missoula). So, you mean to tell me that all of Missoula packed their bags and picnic baskets and hiked a day's journey into the wilderness to be baptised by a guy who wears animal pelts and eats bugs?

-Now I am not going to get into an argument on whether Mark's account of this event is literally and factually true. I have no idea. But, in my mind that seems to be irrelevant.

Mark here is making a point. Something is moving these people. Something is filling these people, so what is it?

-On the outside, the people of Jerusalem seem to have it nice. The second temple, God's house, was lavishly rebuilt with the help of Rome. People were safe traveling to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices. The priests and scribes had plenty of resources to teach and pass on the faith. Yet something was missing.

-Laurie Franklin, the rabbinic leader at Har Shalom synagogue in Missoula, a good friend whom I deeply respect, dropped into our text study this last week and gave a fascinating take on why Rome eventually destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple after Christ was around. Christians have this idea that Rome destroyed Jerusalem out of a political calculation. There were too many zealots and revolutionaries who threatened Rome's grip on power. Laurie described a Jewish understanding that goes much deeper than that. "A Jewish understanding of why the second Temple was destroyed," Laurie said, "has much more to do with the Tower of Babel story and much less to do with politics of the day. Judaism had become so lost in its rituals that it became just an empty act that didn't ground anyone. It was this emptiness that caused the Jewish people to not care anymore and begin to in-fight, talking "different languages", and not trusting one another (similar to the Tower of Babel story) which eventually led to their demise." In other words, despite the fact that the Jewish people had this huge, beautiful Temple to offer sacrifices in, everything about their faith seemed empty.

-The biggest thing Judaism can still learn, says Laurie, from the destruction of the second Temple is not historical political motivations of ancient Rome, but how to link your faith with your heart and your neighbor. If faith doesn't mean anything in one's life, then it's just an empty, gilded Temple.

-Maybe this is what made John the Baptist so (forgive the pun) revolutionary. He wasn't about a lavish Temple, large sacrifices, or keeping the priests paid. He was calling Judaism back into the wilderness to discover once again their roots; their identity. I think this is the Gospel of Mark's point: ALL of Jerusalem and the ENTIRE countryside were drawn to John the Baptist because he was reminding them of what matters. There has to be something more to faith than just the empty motions. He filled them with a way of seeing God that brought them life and hope again. "Prepare the way of the Lord! Make his paths straight." He brought ancient Israel to seeing the boy in Calcutta and "that was it." Things changed.

-So what moves us to take the journey out into the wilderness? What matters and fills you in your faith?

-It may come as no surprise to you that yes, I have been having a few baby dreams. Most I can't really remember. But on Thursday night, that changed. It seemed like the entire night I was dreaming of taking care of this baby. I woke up and fed it, I played with it, I even remember I brought it here to church. I remember it felt so real that I woke

up and I could almost smell that fragrance of new baby. It was really crazy to be witness to this bridge of dream/spirit world with reality. I remember it just influenced my whole day, I just couldn't stop smiling. I was in a different place. It's so funny because I can't tell you how many times before this dream I have been thinking of the baby. I can't tell you how many baby Christmas ads Abby and I have been subject to. I can't tell you enough of the incredible generosity of folks who are already giving us things for future Baby Huseh. All of this is amazing. But, it was this dream that filled something in me, that brought me into a new state of awareness, that the other things couldn't.

-The gospel of Jesus Christ at its best, I believe, is that dream that beautifully connects our reality with something greater. It is in this connection that can move us in ways never thought possible. For when the gospel becomes that bridge, or that hook, moving to Calcutta to serve the dying doesn't really seem all that crazy. Going out into the desert and having your head dunked in a river by some guy wearing animal pelts and eating bugs in light of the gospel, doesn't seem all that crazy anymore.

-May the Gospel of Jesus Christ be alive in your life: may it bridge your reality with something deeper. May it fill you with a new life you never thought to be possible, and may it ground you and your actions this Advent and Christmas seasons in some radical ways. Amen.