

27 November 2016

**The Christmas Story According to Mark**  
Malachi 3:1-4, 4:5-6; Mark 1:1-15

The final prophet in the Old Testament may or may not have been named Malachi – the Hebrew word *malachi* simply means “my messenger” – but whoever this prophet was, it is appropriate to close the Old Testament with his words, for they look ahead to a promised salvation. We read chapter 3, verses 1-4, and chapter 4, verses 5-6:

*See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight – indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. <sup>2</sup>But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?*

*For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; <sup>3</sup>he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. <sup>4</sup>Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.*

*Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. <sup>6</sup>He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.*

Not every gospel tells the Christmas story, but all of them tell where the gospel begins. We read Mark 1, verses 1-15:

*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

*2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,  
‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;*

*<sup>3</sup> the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
“Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.” ’*

*<sup>4</sup>John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>He proclaimed, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup>I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’*

*9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup>And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’*

*12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. <sup>13</sup>He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*

*14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,<sup>15</sup> and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'*

[Knock] Peter? Hey, Peter, it's Mark! Open up! Were you asleep? Well, I didn't know. You're not as young as you used to be. May I come in?

Yeah, I had something I wanted to talk to you about, something I've been thinking for a long time, actually: I want to write it down. The gospel. The good news. What did you think? No, I mean the whole thing, from the start to the finish. I want to write down the story of how Jesus changed everything forever.

Well, because you original apostles are dying. I know, I know. Jesus is going to return, and it may be any day, but what if it's not tomorrow? Or the next day? What happens when all the people who knew him in person are gone? I mean, if you think about it, why would God be bound by our measure of time? God's the "Ancient of Days," right? So why wouldn't a thousand years of our time be like a day to him? . . . Yeah, that *was* pretty good, wasn't it? Sure, you can use it. *A thousand years are like a day to God.* You want me to write it down for you?

But see? That's what I'm talking about. It needs to be written down, because memory changes. I mean, how long have I been your secretary? Ten years? Well, you know, some of your stories have changed a little in that time. Like, that man Jesus healed who was possessed by the Legion of demons. Where did that take place? You used to say it was at Geresa and now you're saying Gadara. Well, it kind of does make a difference, because Gadara's about six or seven miles from the sea, and at the end of the story you've got these pigs possessed by demons rushing off to drown themselves in the sea. Six miles is a long trot. I know: the people here in Rome don't know that, so the story works fine for them, but you do see that we ought to put things down on paper before we have too many more lapses like that, don't you?

All right, so here's how I want to do it. In Jesus' life, death, and resurrection everything changed. Sin turned into forgiveness, death turned into life, time turned into eternity, and the kingdom of this world began to die. A new kingdom began, the Kingdom of God. I want to write the story of Jesus, so people can see that. I want to describe how he cast out demons, healed people that no one else could have healed, did things – like forgive sins – that humans had never done before. I want to write the story of a new day breaking on earth, shattering all the old patterns, all the tired expectations. I want to write about the savior that is bigger than the temple, bigger than the priests, bigger than the Law of Moses, bigger than the Jewish people, bigger than religion itself. Everything I put down will be about how Jesus changed the heavens and the earth for all time and started something new.

No, Peter, I don't want to write down all of Jesus' teachings. I know that there are people who are doing that already, and that's great. Thomas showed me the one he's been putting together. That's fine and all that – a good reference – but I don't want to write a new book of instructions for everyone to follow. Jesus put an end to that kind of faith. Haven't you ever heard what Paul says about that? Yeah, sorry. I know. There's some tension between the two of you. And I know he can be a jerk. Remember, he's been a jerk to me, too. But whatever failings he

has, he's brilliant. And when he talks about how Jesus supercedes the law, he nails it. So I don't want to write a new law. If I include any of his teachings at all, it'll be the weird ones, the ones that show how different Jesus was from everyone who came before him. Like those Kingdom of God parables – the Kingdom's like a mustard seed, or like yeast. That sort of stuff.

What? Yeah, the Gentile stuff. *That's* important. That's a huge part of the revolution that Jesus brought. I *definitely* want to show that. That's one question I have, in fact. I've got all these notes I've taken from stories you told, and I've put them together, and I noticed something. It looks as if Jesus intentionally did nearly everything twice – once for the Jews, and once for the Gentiles. Is that right? You know, casting out demons both places. Feeding crowds. Didn't he feed five-thousand people in both places? Oh, it was just four-thousand Gentiles. Got it. [Pause] Seriously? Like, you counted? What? You only counted the . . . men? Why would you do that? As if women and children don't eat? What were you thinking? [Listens]

“That was just the way we thought back then.” Peter, listen to yourself. That's so weird. Look at the church that's grown up around Jesus' memory. Look at the women leaders we have. *Skubalan*, Peter, look at how Jesus himself treated women – absolutely as equals! Think how he treated my mother in Jerusalem! How long had you been with him by then, and you hadn't noticed that yet? Were you not, you know, very smart?

Sorry. Out of line. You know how I am. But that's just another example. Jesus changed *everything*. He tore down the walls between Jews and Gentiles. He saw no difference between men and women. You know my mother was at the cross, right? You know what she told me? You know who it was who first said the words, “This one is the Son of God”? It was the Roman centurion who crucified him. And you know who first saw him risen from the dead? Mary Magdalene and his mother, and mine. Yeah, I'll make sure that's in there.

So I guess I already know what I want to do, but here's my main question for you. How do I start the story? [Listens]

I don't know, Peter. Yeah, it's a great story – perfect in some ways. I mean, for the Son of God to be born in a stable, an outcast. And I've heard the stuff about the angels and shepherds and my mom and Mary are friends, so I've heard the whole virgin birth thing. And it's all great, but it's just . . . I don't know, *conventional*. You know they're already telling how when Caesar Augustus was born, there were signs in the heavens and a bunch of rot like that? I don't want this book to sound like any other story that's ever been told. I don't want to write a biography of a great man. I want to write about the beginning of an eternal kingdom, the start of a new forever. This is not the story of Jesus of Nazareth, it's the story that Jesus of Nazareth wrote with his life. It's the story of the beginning of the good news. Yeah, hang on. Let me write that down. I want to use that.

So where do I . . . yeah? Of course. I'll start with the Baptizer. No, even before the Baptizer, I'll start with Malachi and Isaiah, who foretold his coming. It's not that Jesus was the start of the gospel. The gospel had always been there, waiting for the right moment. Jesus just broke open the gate and let it out. I'll start there, with the prophets and then with John.

Thanks, Peter. This has helped. I'll let you see what I've written once I'm done. I may run it by Matthew, too. You get some rest now. Bye.

[Standing alone] *The beginning of the good news of Jesus the Christ, Son of God.* The day that everything changed forever. I like that.