

## “Expecting Holy”

Mark 1:1-8

<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=190099366>

The song that you heard Susy sing earlier is an odd kind of Christmas Song. And yet it appeared on the Carpenters’ Christmas album back in 1984.

“Little Altar Boy.” Many of you remember seeing them when you were a child. Dressed in white. Solemn. Some of you actually served as altar boys.

That altar boy was the personification of purity and innocence. You can picture that altar boy coming down the center aisle.

But the altar boy doesn’t remind the writer of good times. It reminds the writer of the sins this person has committed in their life. And the person longs for that innocence and purity. The person longs to be restored.

An odd Christmas song don’t you think?

Christmas songs are supposed to be jubilant, inspiring, hopeful and happy. Guilt and remorse isn’t supposed to be in the picture is it? What does sin have to do with Christmas?

Sin, the Scriptures tell us, is where Christmas begins. It’s where Advent begins.

It doesn’t begin with the stable, the fields where the shepherds encounter the angels, or the far-off country where the magi begin their journey to pay homage to the child?

It doesn’t start with Mary and the announcement from the angel, Joseph’s confusion and proposed divorce.

According to the Gospel of Mark, the story of Christ’s birth goes back to the desert where a rough and rugged preacher with a leather belt around his waist, animal skins on his shoulders and honey-coated locusts on his breath shouted out the message preached by the prophets. It was a message of confession, forgiveness and repentance. This is where Advent begins.

Ndamukong Suh, the star defensive tackle of the Detroit Lions, began Advent the way everyone should begin the season. He began it with a confession and a commitment to repent.

After saying that he had lost his balance and had accidentally stomped on the arm of a lineman from The Green Bay Packers, he changed his tune and said, “My reaction on Thursday was unacceptable. I made a mistake and have learned from it. I hope to direct the focus to the task at hand – by winning.”

Nice words. He confessed that his reaction was unacceptable and that he made a mistake. He acknowledged that he learned from his mistake and pledged to direct his energy towards winning instead of tantrums. Well stated. But – and I don’t mean to stomp on a man when he’s down – that’s not a very good confession.

A mistake is what happens when you spill a glass of milk, dial the wrong phone number, or miss a turn on a roundabout. “Oops,” is what you say when you make a mistake. Mistakes have more to do with the universe than it has to do with your choices.

But confession means you did something wrong – morally wrong. A confession means it was your fault. You did it, you chose to do it, and what you did was wrong.

But a confession also means releasing a burden. It’s like removing a heavy burden that you have been carrying on your shoulders for a long time. It’s like uncovering something you spent your life hiding.

Confession is like spring cleaning. It’s like a garage sale, dumping unwanted things off at The Salvation Army Thrift Store (or at Chilson Hills Church ☺).

Confessions give us space, room to breathe, room to live. This is why we begin the story of Christ’s birth with John the Baptist wading in the Jordan River calling out to people to confess of their sins, be baptized, be forgiven of their sins and repent.

Christ was coming, but the people's lives were too crowded, cramped with sin and jam-packed with selfish living. Jesus would eventually do the *cleaning* of people's lives, but John would focus on *clearing*.

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

Get ready for the Holy One of Israel.

The house we just moved into is one of those houses that - in Sammy Lovin's words - is a good house, but is going to need a lot of work. Among the many things that required attention were the bushes in the front of the house that were easily eight or nine feet high. They were as tall as the gutters.

Well, on the first day that we owned our house, Heather pulled out her hedge clippers and went to town, lopping off massive branches, and stacking bundles of red-leafed limbs off to the side. When she was done, seven stumps no taller than my shin remained. The guy who came to take care of our lawn looked at them and said, “Aw man, you killed them.”

It looked that way. It sure looks as if the bushes are dead. It looks that way when you prune back and pare down most things. But really, you have simply made space for more vitality, greater life and more growth to occur.

That's confession. It is cutting back the overgrown and unattended places of our lives to make room for life - the kind of life that Christ gives to us.

And baptism depicts that reality. We'll be talking more about this in January; baptism (at least how we do it in the Baptist church) shows us what happens when we confess our sins and Christ is “faithful and just to forgive our sins.”

We are leaned backwards into the water and are “buried with Christ in baptism,” in other words we die to the old way of life. We put behind us the old selfish way of living, the habits, the behavior, the priorities we used have before and we “stick a fork in them,” we “put them to death.”

But...

We are raised up out of the water to walk in the newness of life. We are expected to begin living a new life. This is repentance. It's a “do-over,” “pressing the reset button,” “getting a fresh start.” It's a new life.

It's funny because I think that when it comes to getting a fresh start in life, we usually say, “Well, I'll just get through the holidays and then I'll begin that ‘new living.’” Because we all know it's tough to establish a discipline with the crazy Christmas festivities and demands - parties, concerts, shopping, goodies, feasts, etc.

I was talking to a friend of mine this past week who told me about someone they knew who was beginning a pretty radical and comprehensive diet this past week. It was one of those no gluten, no sugar, eat-nothing-but-tree-bark kind of diets. You know what I mean.

And I said to him, “Wow, that person picked a doozy of a time to begin a diet like that.” Don't you think that's true? I mean, Geesh! Wait until the New Year when all the temptations have passed. Wait until after Jesus' birth to get your life in order.

But that's not what John the Baptist teaches and that's not the message of Advent either. We don't wait for Jesus to come and then make space for him. We make room for him so that we can receive him. Don't wait, John says, “Repent!” Begin a new life today. Come and be forgiven.

But when you come, come with a joyful heart, believing Christ is waiting to receive you. Come with the hope of the promise that Christ will forgive, he won't condemn you, he will forgive you, relieve your burden and send you on your way.

In the Gospel of John we read about a woman with a really bad reputation who was accused of being with men who were not her husband. The religious leaders and self-righteous men of the city raised stones to kill her right there, wanting to execute her for these unforgivable sins she had committed.

Jesus, however, says, “if you’ve somehow, somehow committed no sins, feel free to throw a stone at her.” One by one, the stones drop, and the ones who felt so righteous walk away.

After everyone has departed, Jesus looks at the woman and asks her, “Where are the ones who have been accusing you.” “They’re not here,” she says. “I don’t accuse you either. Go and sin no more.”

There are no guilt trips in Advent. No accusations, no condemnation and no public shaming – just public confessions, and public demonstrations of God’s forgiveness and the new life we can leave. Advent is a time when we can celebrate the free space made possible when we confessed our sins, and Jesus made us clean again. That’s Advent – a fresh clean slate and ready for new life.

Every year at Reed College in Portland, Oregon, the campus is shut down so that students can party during a weekend event called Ren Fayre. Friday night is mostly about getting drunk, and Saturday night is about getting high. A medical unit is brought in to help students going through a bad drug trip and a special lounge is created with television sets and black lights to help enhance mushroom trips.

Well, Donald Miller, along with his friends Penny, Nadine, Mitch, Iven and Tony decided to do something different. They decided to create a confession booth.

Now, I know what you all are thinking. You remember those infamous confession booths that began with “Forgive me father for I have sinned,” and ended with a brow beating and a mandate to say X amount of Hail Mary’s and Our Fathers.

This confession booth wasn’t like that confession booth you’re thinking about.

It was huge first of all, more like a tent, and less like a booth in a church.

And second of all, instead of inviting drunken, stoned students into the booth to confess *their* sins, Donald Miller and his Christian friends would confess *their* sins to the drunken, stoned students. It was a confession booth in reverse.

Donald Miller sat in the booth feeling awkward and silly about this crazy venture when Jake stepped in.

“What’s up, man?” Jake said. “So, what is this? I’m supposed to tell you all of the juicy gossip I did at Ren Fayre, right?”

“No.”

“Okay, then what? What’s the game?”

“Not really a game. More of a confession thing,” Donald said.

“You want me to confess my sins, right?”

“No. There is this group of us,” Donald said slowly, “just a few of us who were thinking about the way Christians have sort of wronged people over time... We are followers of Jesus. We believe that He is God and all, and He represented certain ideas that we have sort of not done a good job at representing. He has asked us to represent Him well, but it can be very hard.”

“I see,” said Jake.

“So there is this group of us on campus who wanted to confess to you.”

“You are confessing to me!” Jake said with a laugh.

“Yeah. We are confessing to you. I am confessing to you.”

“You’re serious,” said Jake.

Donald said that he was. Jake said he didn’t have to confess his sins, but Donald said that he felt strongly that he did.

So, Donald sat there and confessed that he had not done very much to help the sick and poor. He confessed that he lashed out at others and that he mixed religion with politics frequently.

He confessed that his actions got in the way of the central message of Christ and that because of what

he had done, some people would never want to even hear about Christ.

experience the holiness of Christ and the peace that he brings to our lives.

“There’s a lot more, you know,” said Donald.

“It’s all right man,” said Jake tenderly. “I forgive you.” And he meant it.

“Thanks,” said Don.

“It’s really cool what you guys are doing,” said Don. “A lot of people need to hear this.”

The conversation continued, and Donald was able to talk more about Jesus and God. Jake went out and told his friends and people from all over the campus started coming to the confession booth.

After an hour, Donald had confessed to 30 people or so. New confession groups began outside of the booth. Hugs were exchanged often and everyone, whether they were stoned or sober, were gracious and grateful.

And Donald Miller writes this: “I was being changed through the process. I went in with doubts and came out believing so strongly in Jesus I was ready to die and be with Him. I think that night was the beginning of change for a lot of us.”

Confession is the start. It’s the start of Advent; it’s the start of our friendship with Jesus. And it’s the starts the restoration process in our relationship with others. We confess to Christ, we confess to others. That is the beginning of true transformation.

Advent, the time leading up to Christmas, is not supposed to be the time of greater clutter that it has become; rather it is supposed to be a time of greater simplicity, of clearing away.

It’s a time of ridding ourselves of the burdens of our lives. It’s a time to make relationships right so that peace can breathe. It’s a time of receiving the forgiveness, and it’s a time when we heed the words of the crazy prophets who told us to turn around and live life differently.

It’s a time of expectation where we have been freed from everything that holds us down so that we can

## LIFE APPLICATION QUESTIONS

For Sunday, December 4, 2011's Sermon

Foundational Scripture: Mark 1:1-8

<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=190099366>

**Featured Scripture Reflection:** "The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River." – **Mark 1:5**  
<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=190099430>

**Opening Questions:** Share about an experience which humbled you and helped you grow as a person (It could be a confrontation, a tragedy, a catastrophe, an illness etc.). What does confession mean to you? What images come to mind? What does confession mean to you?

### Scripture Questions

#### What is the scripture saying?

- Read **Isaiah 40:1-11**. <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=190099454> What stands out to you about this passage? What questions do you have? What do you like about this passage? What don't you like about this passage?
- Read **Mark 1:1-8**. <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=190099366> What words or phrases stand out to you when you read this passage? How does this passage compliment the previous passage?
- Read **1 John 1:8,9**. <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=190099495> Think about what you've just read. How does it relate to the previous passages?

#### How is God speaking through Scripture?

- What is the "Good News" in these passages of Scripture?
- After discussing and pondering these passages, how do they encourage me to live my life differently?

#### God's word

- What is God's invitation to you?

#### A prayer

God, we carry the burdens of our sins far too long. We don't want to carry them any longer. So we confess our sins to you, knowing you have forgiven us and can make us clean.