

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
January 3 & 4, 2015
John Crosby
Looking Behind, Looking Ahead
Mark 1: 16-28**

Do you ever get the idea that sometimes you can get to know somebody better by talking to the people who know that person than by spending a little time with them? I'm the second senior pastor here. The first one was here for over thirty years. His name is Roger Anderson. Some friends and I were just talking about him. He's getting pretty frail these days. Pray for him and his wife. But 25 years later, people still tell Roger Anderson stories. Roger was the founding pastor here and he knew everybody and he knew a story about everybody. If you were a visitor here in that sanctuary, the first sanctuary, often you would go out to the parking lot afterwards and Roger would come running after you. "Hey, you're new here, aren't you?" and you would be half-scared that this man in a robe was following you. He wanted to get to know you and then when you saw him at Lunds or Byerly's or at the school, the other thing you'd notice about Roger was that he would remember your name. He would remember what you had told him and right in the middle of Byerly's, he'd say, "Let's pray. Let's have a little prayer right here." And you'd be going, "Okaaaay. Please don't let anybody here know me." That was a Roger story. I feel like I know Roger through other people.

I feel like I learn a little about what people think of Christians from folks who are not Christians. One of these people is a guy who was raised in a secular Jewish home. His name is David Brooks. Many of you know him. He is a columnist for the New York Times and he is on his own spiritual journey. Over the years, because he is a conservative, Brooks has gotten to know a lot of Christians and often reflects on faith. This is what he wrote at the end of the year.

With Hanukkah coming to an end, Christmas days away, and people taking time off work, we are in a season of quickened faith. When you watch people exercise that faith, whether lighting candles or attending Midnight Mass, the first thing you see is how surprising it [faith] is. You'd think faith would be a simple holding of belief, or a confidence in things unseen, but, in real life, faith is unpredictable and ever-changing. . . . It begins, for many people, with an elusive experience of wonder and mystery.

One of his Yale professor friends says,

When I hear people say they have no religious impulse whatsoever . . . I always want to respond: Really? You have never felt overwhelmed by, and in some way inadequate to, an experience in your life, have never felt something in yourself staking a claim beyond yourself, some wordless mystery straining through word to reach you? *Never?*

Brooks says that these moments that we can't explain arouse a longing within us to integrate that glimpse into our practical lives. He says that's what faith is. He says,

It's a hard process. After the transcendent glimpses, people forget. Their spirits go dry and they doubt anything ever happened. But believers try, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel put it, to stay faithful to those events. They assent to some spiritual element they still sense planted in themselves.

To stay faithful to those memories leads to the main business of faith. The main business of faith is to listen every day for one of those moments. The faithful are trying to live in ways that their Creator loves because they know there is something out there that is trying to come in here. I thought of that in this new year, that that's really why you're here. You're here no matter what else happens, not because somebody forced you or because it looks good or it's a habit. You're here because you think there's something out there and you're trying to get it in here.

That's what we were talking about this last fall about the beginning of the new year. Let me recap the fall. We started with the idea that if God is going to show up to the church, it's not to the building. It's going to be because people are the church and we said, "Let the church be the people."

In the same way, we talked about prayer. We did a series on prayer. We said the Lord's Prayer is not for every day; it's for *this day here*. And after that we said, "We don't want to live religious lives. We want to live lives that are abundant, that are filled with generosity and hope." How do we do that? We said, "If God really comes to earth at Advent, it's going to be in an unexpected way." How could we look for God to show up? We're here because we believe God is interested in our lives. We hope! And we believe that by getting together, by gathering in this new year, we can change. That's what Sarah Norton [Director of Family Ministry] was talking about with the kids.

A new year: what's going to change in your life? And I've got to tell you, I have less faith in New Year's resolutions than I ever have had. It's January 4 and half of mine are gone already. I don't think it's because I try harder, but I think underneath, there is the possibility of change. I think that's what gives life hope, the possibility of changing, of transforming into something new. That's the story that God tells in the Gospel. One of the reasons I love the story of Jesus is because it is filled with people just like you and me. They don't get it. They don't do it very well. They keep messing up and they keep coming back, like you and me. That's the way it starts in the story that Mark tells. Instead of putting it up on the screen for you to read, listen to the story in chapter 1.

14 After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. **15** "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" **16** As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. **17** "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." **18** At once they left their nets and followed him. **19** When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. **20** Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him. **21** They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. **22** The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. **23** Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, **24** "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are--the Holy

One of God!" **25** "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" **26** The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. **27** The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching--and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him."

I've got to tell you, I'm sure that Simon and Andrew and James and John were going, "What's this? I didn't sign up for this. I thought I was going to Sunday School." But that's how their lives started to change.

My wife Laura and I have reflected that we think that over time, three things change people. People change because they develop new **relationships**. People change when they start to live their lives in a little different way, when they start to have new **practices**, and then people change when they have new **experiences** that show them that life can be different. What I would like to do with you is look at these three things in this past year and in the year ahead. To do that, we are going to do something a little different. There are baskets at the ends of the pews. Everybody take an envelope and a pen if you would, please. Whether you are going to use them or not, take them to be polite. Pass the basket down, and I guess I'd challenge you. The more you put into this, the more you will get out. Nobody else has to see this at all. Take a pen, take an envelope, and if you don't mind, just address the envelope. It will take just a second. I'll do it too so we can see how long it takes. Okay, you can open the envelope and inside is another envelope and a little brochure. Step 2, address the other envelope. Again, it will just take 30 seconds to address the other envelope.

For the last several years, we have done a little exercise together with the brochure. Then after we've gone through it together, we've asked you to put the brochure and the second envelope back in the first envelope. We won't look at the brochure, but we'll make a copy of it and send the original back to you so at the end of the month when you get it, you will be reminded of what we did together. Then at the end of the year, we'll send you the copy. How many of you received a copy of the brochure at the end of this year? Just raise your hand. See that? We have probably 1,500 people who did this last year and 1,000 of them handed in their envelopes so we could make copies. About 400 of you checked the little box that says, "I wouldn't mind if somebody looked at this and encouraged me," so you can do that if you want to, but for right now, this is just between you and God.

How do people change? We're going to talk about that. I think they change through **relationships**, through **practices**, and through **experiences** in their lives, but the first thing I think that changes people is they have new relationships. You see that in the story here. Jesus saw Simon, Andrew, James and John and He called them. He said, "Follow Me" and they followed Jesus together, because when people come together and follow Jesus, things start to change.

There is a group of ladies here in our church, not old but they are retired. They have been meeting once a week for 30 years. They go to OPH, the Original Pancake House, and sometimes they study, sometimes they pray, and sometimes they just talk and encourage each other. They have been meeting, as I said, for a couple of decades and they bumped into Rich Phenow recently. Some of them indicated they had been doing this for a long time and Rich said, "Well, what are you doing with it? What do you do with all you're learning?" "Well, we're friends." Then Rich said, "Well, why don't you do something together as friends?" and so once a

month this year, they are going to bring a meal to a homebound person in the congregation and spend a little time with them to encourage them.

RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships can change us, so let's look at our relationships in this last year. Can you recall a way in which you've seen God change you to be more loving this last year? Can you think of any place, any relationship, where God has helped you to be more loving? *Yes or no or I'd like help with that.*

The second one, have I asked God to reconcile my relationship with Him through Jesus Christ, the big relationship? At its essence, Christianity is God reconciling you to Himself so you would know Him and be loved by Him through Jesus Christ. Is that true for you or are you not sure or you haven't gotten it yet? Just check one of those.

Relationships cause problems. Is there anybody you need to ask forgiveness from? Is there anybody you need to forgive? Some of you could check several of these. Maybe write down the name. I'm putting somebody's name in the margin on that one.

Are there relationships in your family that need attention or improvement? The hardest relationships are with family, the people you love. Again, maybe write something in the margin.

Then, as we talked about in the video, are you part of a regular small group that encourages your spiritual growth? Maybe it's just a couple of friends. Maybe it's a choir. Maybe it's meeting to smoke cigars, but they encourage you to grow in your faith. *Yes or no or I guess I'd like information about that.*

Does your faith influence your work and your work or school relationships? If you're at school or if you're retired, does your faith influence those relationships outside?

Then, I'm just going to stop for a second, literally a second, and say, "Look over those answers and if there's a relationship you should work on right now, just write that down in the Notes at the bottom."

PRACTICES

Jesus turned to a bunch of people and said, "Come and follow Me and life will not be the same." That's how change happens. But another way that change happens, according to the story here, is when we change the way that we live, so open the brochure and look at the third panel here that says Practices. There are some practices that freshen our sense of God's grace or love or His presence, or we hear God's voice when we do this thing more often. It says in the story, "When the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and started to teach." So, one of those practices would be going to worship. Listening to teaching. Not every time, but sometimes we are changed when we go to worship. But, we are also changed by other practices. Some of you would be changed most this year if just once a day, you took a five-minute walk by yourself. It would change your life. Some of you should practice a spiritual discipline that you wouldn't ordinarily do. When you go to the checkout line at the grocery store, take the longest line. Learn patience.

Some of you would find your relationship with God changing if you would serve others in secret. In others words, do something nice for somebody and not tell them. This is something I've been

trying lately. You can't believe how hard it is. The other day somebody cleaned the bathroom for somebody else and I'm not going to say who cleaned the bathroom for whom, but he couldn't believe that she didn't notice. He left the soap bar unopened. She didn't even notice, but that made him think of all the service that God does and that others do. Then, today it was even worse. It was 48 degrees below zero and he was whining about going outside and he looks out and sees his car in the driveway, started and warm. Sometimes she just shows off.

What's the practice for you that will change your life? I spend time in prayer, talking and listening to God. *Yes or no or not as much as I'd like.*

I read the Bible as a way to learn more about God and His will and ways. Not "I read the Bible to check it off, I did it on Tuesday," but I want to learn about God. For me, it's a sometimes.

I spend time in silence and solitude. This is maybe the most life-shaping practice there is.

Are you committed to worshiping regularly in community at church whether you feel like it or not?

Here's one that was added this year by some of the folks who put this together. I regularly examine my life and confess my sin to God and others. That's a spiritual practice. You're either trapped by this sin or you acknowledge it to yourself. You say, this is wrong and I don't want to do this anymore. I'm sorry. And you confess it to someone else. Can you think of that in your life?

Jesus said,

²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also [Matthew 6:21].

Where a person's treasure is, that's where you'll find the heart. As you look at your life, do you honor God with your spending habits and your giving to the church? What other practices can you think of that might change your relationship with God? Maybe to write a note to someone? One year a friend of mine said, "Every day I'm going to encourage one person." He said, "That changed me a lot more than it changed the other people." Change happens when our practices change.

A man was possessed by spirits and confronted Jesus. The evil spirits came out at the command of Jesus and people were amazed and said, "Even the spirits obey Him." Change happens when we are at a place where we have an experience and then we connect that experience to what God may have done with us. It might be hard. It might be good. It might be big and dramatic or small and unnoticeable, but experiences can shape our view of who God is or where God calls us.

We had a great Christmas Eve offering this year for YoungLives for teen moms. We raised almost \$120,000, a great, great thing. One young man somewhere in his thirties, I don't even know his name, came up to me and said, "I just wrote my first check to charity." One step at a time. He said, "I realized in that service that God has been good to me and I need to share it." That's an experience of his that shaped him. He said, "I used to believe that I had to hold onto it all, but I'm going to start trusting God a little bit more." I'd like to meet that young man again and

see how it's going. What experiences have you had that shaped your life? Sometimes in bad ways; sometimes in good ways.

In this season of life, I try to put myself into new places where I have different experiences, so this year as a birthday gift, my wife finally, after 30 years, allowed me to jump out of an airplane. I was skydiving with a bunch of you. There were several of us that jumped out of the airplane together and that was my experience. My wife's experience was that she changed our insurance policy. We had very different experiences, but because of that experience, I looked down and saw the earth that God had made and just for a second, I was like, wow! Instead of going oh, oh, oh! just for a second I was like, wow! What experience have you had? Something you saw? Something you did? Something that happened to you? The loss of a job? The birth of a child or a grandchild? In what experiences have you seen God at work?

Remember David Brooks? "The main business of faith [is] living attentively every day." The faithful are trying to live their lives in ways that their Creator loves. Can you recall one experience that stretched your faith this past year whether you failed the test or passed it?

Have you served in any kinds of ministry with people who are not like you? Have you served in any kind of cross-cultural ministry this year, locally or internationally? *Yes or no or I never have time or I'd like to learn more about that.*

Have you felt an experience where you actively sought to help those in need? In need of justice? In need of mercy? In need of faith? Have you had one of those experiences this year? Write down what that was in the margin.

Can you see places where you are using your gifts to serve others? Not to give money, but using your gifts to serve others? Mike is retired and on a weekly basis, he comes in and serves others by sitting at the reception desk and making people's lives easier. It's a small thing that is changing him as much as them.

Then, there is the idea that when we are growing, our lives become fruitful with the fruits of the Spirit. Is any of that happening in your life? Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control? Maybe instead of going through all of them, underline one where you see some fruit coming in? Are you a little more patient this year or less? Circle one where you feel there is no fruit. Just circle it. It might be something to think about in the year that is ahead. The main business of life for the faithful is trying to live in ways that our Creator loves.

We'd like you to take this seriously. For some of you, just to sit here and listen to it, that's fine, but for some of you, this has been a time for you to reflect a little. If you can, we'd encourage you to put this inventory back inside the envelope and when you leave, just leave the envelope at the end of the aisle. We'll collect them and make copies. If you'd like me or one of the elders to look at it, to write you a little note of encouragement, check the box. About half of the people who hand them in, do that. We love that, but it's between you and God.

This first weekend of the year we have had the practice of sharing Communion together and renewing our vows of Baptism. We renew our baptismal vows, not to say we're going to try harder and get it right, because we are not going to get it right. We will not get it right this year. But we renew our baptismal vows to be reminded of the grace and the love and the mercy of Jesus Christ. Then, if you would like to and, really, only if you would like to, after you receive

Communion, there will be a person standing near you who would love to take a little water and trace the cross on your forehead to renew your vow of Baptism. To prepare for that, I would ask you to stand. Would you stand please? In the early church, Baptism was done intentionally. That is, when people joined the church or were baptized, they answered questions, so I'd like you at the beginning of this year to examine your faith and answer those same questions.

Brothers and sisters, do you renounce evil and its power in the world which defies God's righteousness and God's love, do you?

[All:] We do.

Do you renounce the ways of sin that separate you from the love of God, do you?

[All:] We do.

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and confirm Him as your Lord and Savior, do you?

[All:] We do.

Do you intend to be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying His Word and showing His love in your life, do you?

[All:] We do.

Lord God, we stand here and we want to do better. We want to change. We want to become that person that we just talked about, but we are feeble and frail. We need You to come to us again and again and offer us Your love and grace. And when we run out of gas, we would ask You to feed us the bread of life and help us drink from the cup of salvation, to not only remind us that You are here, but that when we come together, You change us from the heart on out. In Your Name. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.