

Glad Tidings? (Mark 1:1-8)

Every Advent and Christmas season, we get introduced to a person who, given the number of references to him in the Gospels, can't be viewed as anything more than a minor character. Indeed, he appears by name only once in the Bible, making him almost a throwaway character.

Crispus, the synagogue leader in Corinth, is mentioned more often. Barsabbas (also known as Justus), one of the possible replacements for Judas Iscariot among the apostles, makes more appearances. So does Tychichus, an Asian companion of Paul's.

But, though this character's name is mentioned only once, his looming presence throughout the Gospels acts as a character all its own. He's lurking behind every run-in with the Temple authorities, and his presence is felt from the very first moments of Jesus' narrative.

“In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the world should be registered” (Luke 2:1).

That’s it. One verse. That’s the only time he’s mentioned *by name* in the Gospels. So, you might be tempted to believe that he occupies only a minor place in the narrative—just happens to be the big wheel in charge for the first half of Jesus’ life. Augustus can’t be that important to Jesus’ story if the Gospel writers only think to name him once, right?

Now, I guess I can see how one might think that. But some characters in a narrative are so pervasive they don’t have to be named to know that almost **everything** in the narrative is shaped by a relationship to that barely named character. The “white whale” in *Moby Dick*, for instance, makes a physical appearance in the novel only a handful of times. The “white whale” speaks no lines in the novel. And yet, there would **be** no *Moby Dick* without having the “white whale” in Captain Ahab’s sites the whole novel. Every scene and every word is shaped by one almost invisible

character and the captain's obsession with it. Whispers of the white whale drive every move Captain Ahab makes.

Caesar Augustus occupies a similar role in the Gospels, even though Matthew, Mark, and John never even mention him by name. But his looming presence in the background shapes the narrative and helps us define Jesus' life and mission. If we did a crime scene analysis, Augustus's fingerprints are all over the story of Jesus' life, ministry, and death.

The question is, "How?"

When my grandfather died in 2003, my family asked my brother and I to do a eulogy. This was my grandfather, Theodore Roosevelt Murray, who, with my grandmother, started the children's home in Mexico. Needless to say, my grandparents were viewed by many people with a kind of awe usually reserved for heads of state, saints, and TikTok influencers.

But not everyone felt quite so reverential and admiring. For all the good he did in his life, my grandfather had a temper—which most people who admired him didn't really understand. My mom and her two siblings had grown up **before** my grandfather became a "saint." Consequently, they knew firsthand about his anger issues. And they were girding themselves to hear all the nice things about him without the kind of context that would help people **really** understand him.

My mom told me the night before that **some** people were concerned about painting my grandfather as a blameless paragon of virtue. It wasn't that anybody wanted me to be mean and vindictive; they just wanted me to be honest about who he **really** was.

That's a lot of power when you stop to think about it. Whoever tells the story gets to say what the story is. Maybe it's the person who tells it first. Maybe it's the person who tells it longest or most captivatingly. But there's no denying that the story that gets told

is the one that gives shape and meaning to an event or a person's life.

The whole episode got me thinking: Lives are complicated; there's no way to find the words that will perfectly portray the memory of a person. So, you can never be sure about the kind of legacy you leave behind. But, **some** story's going to get told by **someone**.

As lovely as it might seem to be Huck Finn and get to witness our own funerals, see who shows up, and, more importantly, what people are going to say about us, the truth is that we don't control what people think of us or what they'll say about us after we're gone. Somehow we know that, but it doesn't really seem fair, does it?

But, as I say, **someone's** going to tell the story of our lives. The question is: Who gets to tell it? And the next question is: Will it be true?

The answer to those two questions makes all the difference in the world, doesn't it?

Caesar Augustus understood the perils of having somebody **else** sum up your life. Too much uncertainty there. You can't control what people are going to say. You can commission a book like Virgil's *The Aeneid*, a thinly veiled literary attempt to connect the founder of Troy and the founder of Rome in a heroic fashion.

But, if you want to make sure it comes out the way you envision, it's probably best to just write it yourself. And that's what Caesar Augustus did. Unwilling to leave it to history or to chance, he wrote something like an autobiography entitled "*Res Gestae Divi Augusti*" or "The Deeds of the Divine Augustus."

This autobiography he'd had reproduced on bronze tablets and spread throughout the empire. It summarizes his impressive

military and political feats as Rome's first and, arguably, most successful emperor. Here is the opening sentence:

"...Below is a copy of the acts of the Deified Augustus by which he placed the whole world under the sovereignty of the Roman people, and of the amounts which he expended upon the state and the Roman people ... "

The *Res Gestae* is political propaganda that presents Augustus in a positive light. It was created to justify his power and the transition from the Roman Republic to the Empire. The document avoids discussing controversial aspects of his rise to power. These controversial aspects included his consolidation of power into a new office called the emperor. Augustus very carefully crafted the narrative of his reign this way because he wanted some control over what his life **meant**.

The *Res Gestae* is a perfect example of what the Romans called a *euangelion*. In the Roman Empire, a *Euangelion* [was](#) a

“public announcement celebrating victory, stability, and the arrival of a new hopeful era,” in this case “under Augustus' leadership.”

In Augustus's case, the *Res Gestae* was a “triumphal public declaration that victory and hope have arrived with the rise of this new transformative leader who would usher in a new era of blessings to come. It represented imperial propaganda at its finest in the ancient world.”

In the Greek of Jesus' day, the word *euangelion* was a way to ensure that Caesar's good news about military and political victories would be widely known. Like a town crier, you would have an *euangelisti* stand at the center of town and proclaim the *euangelion* to the public.

Early English translated this word as *good news* or *glad tidings*. That's exactly what we find when we look up the context surrounding Luke's mention of Augustus. A few verses after we're told of the census that Augustus has required everyone to enroll

in, Luke mentions an angel of the Lord saying, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you **good news** of great joy for all the people ... ”

But *euangelion* also gets translated as “gospel.” It’s where we get “evangelism,” “evangelize,” and “evangelist.” So, each of the four Christian Gospels is self-consciously comparing itself to the *euangelisti* (literally the “evangelists”) whose job was to announce the political and military victories of a different emperor.

Mark, in our passage for this morning, even opens his Gospel, like an official *euangelion* from Caesar. Listen to the opening of the *Res Gestae* again: “...Below is a copy of the acts of the Deified Augustus by which he placed the whole world under the sovereignty of the Roman people ... ”

Now listen to the way Mark begins our passage: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

Both Augustus and Jesus represent a new kind of emperor.

As Ched Meyers notes:

Mark is serving notice that he is challenging the apparatus of imperial propagation. His dramatic prologue heralds the advent of an "anointed" leader, who is confirmed by the Deity who proclaims a "kingdom." In other words, Mark is taking dead aim at Ceasar and his legitimating myths. From the very first line, Mark's literary strategy is revealed as subversive" (Binding the Strong Man, 123-4).

Meyers goes on to say that "gospel is not an inappropriate title for this story, for Mark will indeed narrate a battle. But the 'good news' of Mark does not herald yet another victory by Rome's armies; it is a declaration of war upon the political culture of the empire."

Unlike Matthew and Luke—who go into great detail about the circumstances of Jesus' birth, Mark doesn't mention Jesus' nativity

at all. Instead, he opens **his** gospel not with Angels and shepherds but with a declaration of war—which is pretty bold, given the circumstances Mark is writing in.

Remember, the Gospel of Mark was probably written just after the first Jewish-Roman war ended. Nero, who had just died in 68 C.E.—had been extra hard on this new religion called Christianity, an offshoot of Judaism. Indeed, according to Rome, the Jews had gotten so unruly that all of Palestine had to be taught a lesson. The Romans had gotten so fed up with Jewish stubbornness that the new Emperor, Vespasian, sent his son, Titus, to bring the Jewish nuisance to its knees. In the process, the Romans razed Jerusalem and flattened the Temple in 70 C.E.

Now, you might think that because the Christians weren't Jews, they'd be safe. But, the problem that Christianity encountered was that the big shots in Rome didn't know there **was** a difference between Jews and Christians. Christians, after all, had only a few years prior made a conscious decision to leave

Judaism behind and become a distinct religion. So, Mark is writing his Gospel in a world that has just recently seen Christianity—because of its relationship to Judaism—rocket to the top of Rome’s ten most wanted list.

But instead of trying to pour oil on the waters, Mark starts his Gospel by picking sides ... against Rome. So, just so we’re clear, Mark’s Gospel isn’t a nice story to tell the kiddies around the campfire. It’s a declaration of war against the strongest empire that the world—at least to that point—had ever known.

And who’s going to lead everyone into battle?

Apparently, the prophet Elijah.

As soon as Mark announces the rise of a new empire that will face down the threat Rome poses, he tells us about the one who will act as a herald, preparing the way for this new world. Of course, we’re told that ***this euangelisti***, ***this*** bringer of glad

tidings, is John the Baptist. But the description is of another herald, someone who, another unnamed character in this part of the narrative, is going to clear the path for a **new** Caesar ... Elijah.

It's a deft storytelling move Mark makes here. Can you think of anywhere else in any of the Gospels where a person's clothing acts as the primary identifying descriptor? Why all the attention on the camel hair and leather belt? Why does Mark assume the reader will care about John's disgusting menu choices?

Because this is a stock description of the prophet Elijah. Mark's first readers would immediately have caught the reference to one of Israel's most dynamic prophets. It's as if I were to describe the coming of our next president as having orange hair and gold toilets. Having lived in this culture over the past eight years, you'd know right away the reference I'm making, wouldn't you?

But so what? Who cares if Mark's making a not-so-subtle reference to Elijah?

Horsley and Hanson write that Elijah is portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures as a prophet who pronounced judgment on the king and his court. The king, in this case, Ahab, had oppressed God's people. Elijah, Elisha, and their followers "fomented a popular rebellion [against](#) the house of Ahab."

In other words, Mark opens his Gospel by proclaiming a *euangelion*, good news, glad tidings that Caesar and his mighty armies and all the subsequent Caesars who ruled over Rome, those who had oppressed God's people, were about to see that the world over which they thought they had total control belongs to God ... and God isn't happy with the way Caesar has cared only about enriching the rich and impoverishing the impoverished.

But the outcome of this confrontation between God and Caesar is never in doubt. Mark gives up the game in the very first

sentence: The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God ... ”

No. Remember, this is a *euangelion*, which is an announcement of victory **after** a battle has already been won.

That’s right. Mark gives away the game in the first sentence by preemptively declaring victory. Any drama in his Gospel won’t be about the eventual outcome; this bit of good news will center on **how** God will achieve victory over the mighty Roman Empire with nothing more intimidating than a bug-eating prophet and a wandering Galilean carpenter.

Do you get how audacious this is? It feels like a twelve-year-old picking a fight with Mike Tyson. No chance at all. And yet, here’s Mark declaring victory before we even get to the climactic battle. But Mark’s not playing. He already knows how the whole thing’s going to turn out.

And we who live under a ***different*** empire read Mark's good news with the same outlandish boldness. After all, that's what Advent's all about—our patient waiting for a victory that's already been won but isn't something we can possess just yet.

In a world that feels increasingly out of control every day, we've been given glad tidings that sound unrealistic at best and downright deranged at worst. We live in a world that has a way of grinding people down, making them beg for their bread, and judging them by the color of their skin, the country of their origin, the fullness of their bank account, and the people they love. In short, we live in a world content to force people to justify their very humanity before we'll even see them as neighbors.

Into such a world comes Mark's Gospel, carrying John the Baptist, Elijah, Jesus, Caesar, and the whole Roman Empire on its back—announcing that the world we know, the one that's taken so much from so many ... is coming to an end, and a new one is coming to take its place.

Only in this new world there will be no more need for good news of successful battles. Even though there are still battles to fight, Mark lets us know from the outset that the war has already been won.

And that's glad tidings for everyone.

—Amen.