

Read lesson: Mark 1:1-8

Let us pray: O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our rock and our risen redeemer. Amen.

One of the decisions every good storyteller has to make is when to tell the story's secret. Every story has a secret, and the storyteller has to decide whether to let people know about the secret early in the story or to surprise them with it at the end. Mystery writers often hold back the secret until the last chapter, keeping us turning the pages to discover who really poisoned the heiress or pushed the Colonel down the elevator shaft.

There are other stories, however, in which the storyteller reveals the secret at the beginning. We know the secret even before some of the characters do, and we watch them gradually discover the hidden truth we already possess. "Oh Grandma, what big eyes you have," trills the innocent Little Red Riding Hood. But we already know, don't we, the secret of what wolfly destruction lies under those covers.

In Princeton, New Jersey, there is a legendary tale about the scientist Albert Einstein walking in front of a local inn and being mistaken for a bell boy by an elderly woman who has just arrived in a luxury sedan. She orders him to carry her luggage into the hotel, and, according to the story, Einstein does so, receives a small tip, and then continues on to his office to ponder the mysteries of the universe. True or not, the story is delightful, precisely because we know from the beginning a secret that the woman does not know: the strange-looking, ruffled little man is the most celebrated intellect of our time. Some stories gain their power from our knowing the story's secret from the start.

The Gospel of Mark is just such a story. The secret of Mark's Gospel is the identity of Jesus Christ. In the very first sentence of the Gospel story, Mark lifts the veil and lets us know the secret when he tells us who Jesus is and says that this is "... the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

Jesus is the Son of God, that's Mark's secret, and lest we miss it, this hidden truth is confirmed in the story's opening episode, when Jesus, coming up out of the waters of baptism, sees the Holy Spirit descending upon him like a dove from the heavens, which have been torn open like a piece of cloth, and hears the very voice of God telling him the secret: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). Only Jesus sees the Spirit; only Jesus hears the voice. This is, in the words of one commentator, "a secret epiphany."

God knows the secret. Jesus knows the secret. And, because Mark has let us in on it, we know the secret, too. Jesus is the Son of God.

And now we watch with amazement as the story unfolds, because almost no one else seems to be able to discover the secret. The authorities mistake him for a troublemaker; the people confuse him with the prophet Elijah among others; even his disciples are blind to the full truth of who he is. Ironically, in the middle of the story only the demons he has come to destroy recognize the secret that Jesus is the Son of God. The thing is, he doesn't look like the Son of God. Like the genius Einstein dragging the heavy suitcases of a wealthy woman up the steps of a hotel, Jesus does not look like who he really is. That's part of the reason the secret remains hidden. Why doesn't Jesus look like the Son of God? Because he suffers, and that seems unlikely in God's own son. Jesus is the suffering Son of God, and that is a hard secret to learn.

Later, in Mark's story, the disciples come very near to discovering the secret. "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks them.

And Peter steps forward to answer, "You are the Christ." But, does Peter understand what he has said? No, because as Jesus begins to tell them the whole secret, that he faces suffering, rejection, and death, Peter rebukes him. Peter does not really understand the secret.

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That is why Mark tells us the secret in the beginning. He wants us to know that Jesus is the Son of God when all hell breaks loose on Golgotha.

No reasonable person who takes one look at this wounded man dragging the luggage of the world's brokenness up the steps of Calvary would say, "This is the Son of God," but Mark wants us to remember the secret.

When the most devout people of his day spit in Jesus' face and called him "blasphemer," Mark wants us to remember the secret. When the Roman soldiers turned his trial into a fraternity party, dressing him in a purple blanket and a crown of thorns, holding their sides with cruel laughter as they knelt before him in mock respect, Mark wants us to remember the secret. When they drove the spikes into his flesh and taunted him to come down from the cross, Mark wants us to remember the secret. There at the end, with the sky murderously dark, the air filled with Jesus' death cry, and the temple curtain torn in two, Mark wants us to remember that earlier baptismal day when the skies, like the temple curtain, were also torn in two and a voice spoke from heaven. Mark wants us to hear the centurion at the foot of the cross confessing the secret we have known from the beginning of the story, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

Appearance and reality - that's the meaning of Mark's secret. The one who appeared to be rejected is in reality the one in whom God is well-pleased. The one who appeared to be deserted by all is in reality the beloved Son. The one who appeared impotent in death is the one in whose power all shall live. That's the secret revealed in the baptism of Jesus, and it is the secret in that all Christians share through baptism.

In Flannery O'Connor's story "The River," a woman named Mrs. Connin, who has been employed for the day to take care of the son of some wealthy and uncaring parents, takes the boy to a riverside baptismal service being led by a preacher named Bevel Summers. Standing on the river bank, they hear Summers warning the crowd that if they have come for an easy miracle, to leave their pain in the river, they have come for the wrong reason. "There ain't but one river, and that's the River of Life, made out of Jesus' blood," he says. "It's a river of pain itself ... to be washed away, slow, you people, slow ..."

Suddenly Mrs. Connin lifts the boy up in the air and asks the preacher to pray for the boy's mother, who has been ill. Mrs. Connin tells Summers that she suspects that the boy has never been baptized, and Summers commands her to hand the boy to him. Summers asks the boy if he wants to be baptized. When the boy says yes, Summers responds, "You won't be the same again. You'll count."

In the baptism of Jesus the secret of his identity is revealed and nothing that appears thereafter, not even the spit and nails of Golgotha, can take that reality away. In our baptism the secret of our identity is revealed: "You are a child of God. You'll never be the same again. You'll count."

And nothing that appears afterward can ever take that reality away.

We all know the questions of life... we've all asked then ourselves: what am I worth? Have I worked enough... what has my life meant so far, and what can it mean in the time left to me? Have I loved enough? Why do I feel afraid sometimes?

"When I consider the briefness of my life," mused Pascal, "swallowed up before and behind it, the small space I fill, or even see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces which I know not, and which know not me, I am afraid ... Who has set me here? By whose order and arrangement have this place and time been allotted to me?" For many, the secret remains concealed. Who am I? Why am I here? What am I worth? I am afraid.

But in baptism the secret is out at the beginning, the truth is known at the inception, and there is no need to fear, come what may. God says, as that water pours onto us, "You are my beloved child, my very own. I have placed you here and called you to be my own. In you I delight."

In our baptisms, the secret of the story is told at the beginning, and nothing in all creation, neither death nor life nor things present nor things to come, can change the story. We are all children of God, baptized in the very name of the one whose secret we have always known: Jesus the Christ!

Amen.