

A WORD FROM THE PASTOR

Another unbelievable year of incredible generosity has struck again at Zion! That's the headline on the cover, and that's the good news with which we enter another January for what is now the sixth year in a row. Thank you! Thank you for listening – to the newsletter articles, temple talks, sermons, and a special presidential Christmas letter – and thank you for responding with your support. December was a very generous month for the Advent Giving Tree, for our Food Pantry & Clothing Closet, for ministries that reach out beyond the doors of our congregation, and for our operating budget, too. We entered December with a deficit of \$2,659.79, and with offerings that approached and surpassed \$25,000.00, we wound up in the black again, with \$100.00 to spare! You could call that cutting it close; but we call it reaching our goal, hitting our target, managing our resources responsibly, and keeping our fiscal house in order.

There are many high points we could identify in talking about December. The Sunday Evening Advent dinners were delicious and our services well attended. Average attendance at these evening affairs got off to a slow start, but ended on a high, loud, and sometimes raucous note with Carole Singer leading us on our journey of Christmas Carols from around the world. In between, we enjoyed revisiting themes of war and peace with the music of Taize, and then retelling the story of Christ's birth through Chrismons. Despite our slow start, we came back strong and actually improved on last year's attendance figures, which is the story of December at Zion. We extend our thanks to the Chancel Guild, the Men of Zion, our Church Council, and Zion's Youth and youth leaders for our delicious dinners; and we extend our heartfelt thanks to Zion's Senior Choir and Praise Team, along with musicians Fred Locker, Suzanne Walters, Phil Lehenbauer, and Carole Singer for helping to lead our Advent services.

These Sundays in Advent led us to Christmas Eve, and then to Christmas Day and New Year's Day, both of which fell on Sundays. The calendar created some high hurdles in our desire to finish strong. On New Year's Day, I was talking to Dean Yoder, who reminded me of God's great love for baseball, appealing to the first words in the Book of Genesis, which report God's getting it started "in the big inning." Here at Zion on New Year's Day, America's love for football made it even harder to end the year with our budget in balance. But that is exactly what we did. We showed great support for the families we serve through our Food Pantry & Clothing Closet with a very generous response to the Advent Giving Tree, which included almost \$1,250 to help with the purchase of Christmas hams and all the holiday fixings. We thank you for that. Our generosity also included over \$2,500 for additional local assistance. On top of that, we closed a sizable gap of \$2,659 between year-to-date expenses and income, ending in balance with a little bit extra to spare.

That is the wonderfully consistent story of Zion's persistent generosity. You can believe me when I say that none of us takes your generosity for granted, and all of us deeply appreciate all that you do, and all that you give, to make our being a part of Zion's church family spiritually uplifting, personally gratifying, delectably delicious, and lots of fun, too. In addition to all of this, we can and should feel good about the contribution we are making to the cause of God's kingdom and the work of the church. Thank you, and may God's richest blessings be yours!

AN OVERVIEW OF BENEVOLENCE FOR 2011

Zion takes great pride in supporting the work of the wider church. All of the money that is given to Zion is used to support the work of God's kingdom as best we can envision it and organize ourselves to do it. We are very conscientious in our desire to be faithful stewards with all the money that our members and friends share with us. That goes both for what we spend to support our ministry here at Zion and for what we give to support the ministry of others.

\$15,105	Our primary commitment to the work of the wider church comes through the support we give to the Synod. We gave \$15,105 to the <i>Northeastern Ohio Synod</i> in 2011. Our Synod keeps about 50% for local efforts here in Ohio, and sends the other 50% to the <i>ELCA</i> , which extends the reach of the church across the nation and around the world. Speaking of the work of the wider church, we contributed
\$ 602	another \$602 in support of this broader mission through the <i>Women of the ELCA</i> , along with giving blankets, quilts, school kits and health kits for <i>Lutheran World Relief</i> . We were also active with support in reaching out through the <i>ELCA</i> with
\$ 2,000	contributions totaling \$2,000 to help fund the <i>Lutheran Malaria Initiative</i> . Our major commitment here at home to assist in helping to respond to needs beyond our own is focused on <i>Zion's Food Pantry and Clothing Closet</i> . We can
\$ 6,543	also include such efforts as our <i>Turkey Give-Away</i> and the <i>Advent Giving Tree</i> , providing food for families and even gifts for children during the holiday season. Zion also provides local assistance in direct gifts to members and friends. We
\$ 1,250	would include a final gift from <i>the Steve Dague Fund</i> to Steve and his family; we would also include additional funds that provide occasional cash assistance,
\$ 3,658	gas cards, and support of outreach efforts that help others to make ends meet. During the course of this past year, we also received money for Lutheran Disaster
\$ 500	Relief to help with floods that struck the Midwest; and we provided support for a summer camp in Armenia that sought to foster leadership development and
\$ 400	mutual cooperation among all students in the public school system, including those with disabilities. Our support of the <i>2011 Souper Bowl</i> raised more money to assist the efforts of the <i>Shoes & Clothes for Kids</i> . These outlets of goodwill are truly impressive and deeply gratifying. Thanks for your generous support.

Zion's established practice over the years, when it comes to setting benevolence targets, is to set a goal of giving 15% of our offering income to ministries other than our own. According to our best estimates, this would have set as our goal the amount of \$28,680.00. Once again, because of your generosity and goodwill, we were able to exceed our target and give over **\$30,000.00** in support of many ministries that extend our love and service well beyond the boundaries of our church family. This continues an impressive record of generosity in exceeding our budgeted targets and goals, with \$37,500 given away in 2006, \$36,000 in 2007, \$55,000 in 2008, \$37,500 in 2009, and \$35,500 in 2010. These figures, of course, just touch the surface when it comes to describing the ease with which our members and friends share their time, talents, and treasure in proclaiming the life of God's kingdom alive among us. We are proud and grateful for all that your generosity allows us to do; and we offer our thanks to God and to you.

CHURCH COUNCIL NEWS

December's Council Meeting was scheduled immediately following the Chancel Guild Christmas Dinner, which, as usual, was an excursion into culinary excellence. Our Council meeting continued the good cheer we enjoyed during the Chancel Guild Christmas dinner. Jim Fidler called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m., and Juanita Cignetti, Dave Palumbo, Beth Shaheen, Dale Jacobs, Cathy Harvey, Mark Votaw, Renee Keith, and Pastor Sherwindt were in attendance, while Lorin Beaber, Vicki Givler, and Brian Milek were unable to attend.

Dave Palumbo shared the good news that we kept the string of surplus months going with a \$1,997.49 surplus in November, making it 8 of 11 monthly surpluses! This reduced the year-to-date deficit to \$2,659.79. A balanced budget for 2011 is clearly within striking distance. We continue to surprise ourselves with savings from our new HV/AC system. Otherwise, all is well with life at Zion.

ZION'S NOVEMBER FINANCIAL FACTS

November Income	\$19,644.95
November Expenses	\$17,647.46
November Surplus	\$ 1,997.49
Income thru November	\$223,784.56
Expenses " November	\$226,444.35
Deficit thru November	(\$ 2,659.79)
Our 2011 YTD Deficit	(\$ 2,659.79)
The 2010 YTD Deficit	(\$ 3,157.52)

Don't forget: this old news from November was overcome by the good news of December, namely, we erased the year-to-date deficit and ended with a surplus!

We thank you for your generous support!

MORE COUNCIL NEWS

Resource Ministry Elder, Mark Votaw: Thanks to you all and your support this has been another strong year at Zion. Six in a row! Woohhhooooo !!! Can you hear my excitement? I know I can feel yours.

- 2006** Not only have we come out on top
- 2007** AGAIN! But we also learned
- 2008** something along the way. We
- 2009** figured out that all of our big
- 2010** expenses come in the first quarter,
- 2011** while our big income comes in the fourth. This means that we put ourselves behind the eight ball and have to play catch-up all year long. (I promise no graphs this time!)

What I also promise is that Council has recognized this pattern and we want to frontload some of our giving



in the first quarter so that we don't have to see red all year long. Give us some time to knock our heads together, and we'll be back with a plan before you can say Woohhhooooo!

Property Ministry Elder, Lorin Beaber: We have completed parsonage roof, downspout, and fascia repairs, thanks to the goodwill and good work extended by Drew Griesen. We used a cold but nice morning in December to clear the gutters and clean the landscaping beds at the church, thanks to Chris Thomas, Dave Palumbo, John Rhodes, Dean Yoder, Carl Geib, Lorin and Jaret Beaber, Pastor, and Verle Elsass. We would like to thank Chris Thomas, Bob Lancashire, Carl Geib, Tim Himebaugh, and the Chancel Guild for helping to set up our Christmas wreaths and Poinsettia trees in the Sanctuary.

MORE COUNCIL NEWS

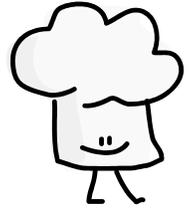
Zion's Witness Ministry: Jim Dansizen has led our Witness Team through a couple of community-oriented Prosecutor's Programs, a Community Yard Sale, countless meetings of the Sunday Brunch Bunch, with regular team meetings that provide oversight and updates of Zion's website. The energy and interest that he has brought to these many tasks has been impressive and contagious. We have been exceptionally well-served by the leadership he has displayed. It was with regrets that Jim told us of his increasingly demanding commitments with *Our Town*, the North Canton newspaper he and his family publish and love, commitments that have required that he relinquish his responsibilities as Witness Ministry Elder. While accepting his resignation with regrets, Council also expressed our gratitude and appreciation for all that he has so generously accomplished.

Mutual Ministry Convenor, Brian Milek: Now that Brian has become Vice-President, he has assumed the job of serving as the Convenor of Mutual Ministry, a ministry on which he has served for the last three years. His first act was to call a meeting of his team, which is set for Saturday, January 14.

Learning Ministry Elder, Renee Keith: The month of December was a busy one for our Sunday School, with the Christmas Play, Sunday rehearsals, the Advent Giving Tree, along with the pizza and gift-wrapping parties that followed dress rehearsal the day before their formal Sunday performance. All went well, and flawlessly, as did Sunday School participation in our Celebration of Chrismons Service and the Advent dinner the fourth and final Sunday of Advent. We extend our thanks to all, and look forward to the resumption of Sunday School in 2012.

THE ADVENT FOOD REVIEW

We enjoyed four inspiring evening services during Advent, each beginning deliciously with dinner. Zion's Chancel Guild got the Advent season off to an exceptional start, featuring their signature dish, chicken casserole. Our Senior Choir and Praise Team provided musical leadership during our Service of Lessons & Carols.



Dale Jacobs and Mark Votaw took it from there in preparing baked ham, Dale's mac & cheese, with the rest of the men filling the buffet table with desserts. Our service featured music from Taize, which always invites us to reflect on what to do with the violence of war in our desire to be faithful to the Prince of Peace.

Dave Palumbo led Council's preparations of pasta & Italian sausage the following Sunday. Our service was a celebration of Chrismons, involving Zion's youth in telling the story of our salvation through Chrismons, simple, hand-painted Christmas tree ornaments that symbolize Scripture verses that help us understand the meaning of Christ's birth.

Debbie Fox organized our youth and youth leaders on our final Sunday in Advent, providing the *grand finale* of pulled pork sandwiches, mac & cheese, and desserts galore. Carole Singer led us on a journey that featured Christmas carols from around the world – England, Wales, Norway, Germany, France, and Poland, with Negro Spirituals and American Christmas classics. The service featured Carole's vast selection of musical instruments from around the world, ending with our making a joyful noise to the Lord! Great food, wonderful fellowship, and inspiring worship: these have become the hallmarks of our Advent season at Zion.

GREAT NEWS FROM ZION'S SUNDAY SCHOOL

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO:



UPCOMING EVENTS – MARK YOUR CALENDARS!

Sunday, January 1: No Sunday School for our Pre-Kindergarten through High School classes

Sunday, January 8: The Schedule of Sunday School Classes for All Ages resumes at 9:15 a.m.

Sunday, February 22: Our *Farewell to Alleluia* signals the beginning of Lent on Ash Wednesday

Sunday, March 25th: The Youth of Zion and our Youth Leaders host our fifth Lenten Dinner

SUNDAY SCHOOL CLASSES: PRE-K THROUGH HIGH SCHOOL

This is just a reminder, but there will be no Sunday School classes for any of our youth (Pre-K through High School) on Sunday, January 1st, unless they want to join the Adult Sunday School class because they're just missing it so much! We will resume our normal class schedule on Sunday, January 8th, when classes begin at 9:15 a.m. Same time, same places, same teachers, and more students! Everyone is welcome, even friends ... especially friends. We look forward to seeing everyone as we start off the New Year 2012!

CHRISTMAS THANKS FOR 'T WAS THE NIGHT BEFORE ... A CHRISTMAS PAGEANT

A big thank you to everyone who helped with this year's Christmas Program. It was a wonderful program and the kids did a fantastic job, as always! We hope you enjoyed the storybook tale of the beautiful Christmas story, that special night when Jesus was born. It was a tale told by our three amazing readers that included Mary & Joseph, the baby Jesus, Gabriel and the angels, the Innkeeper, some townspeople, the shepherds, the Wise Men and their servant, King Herod, and a couple of priests.

Thank you Brooke Roman, Savannah Heller, Carley Frank, Cassie Frank, Summer Heller, Mallory Rhodes, Jeremy Fox, Eric Dague, Nathan Fox, Brooke Stout, Jaret Beaber, Grant Beaber, Weston Milek, Christopher Thompson, Kathryn Milek, Casey Walters, AJ Edwardo, Marcus Rhodes, Justin Dague, Amelia Milek, Kevin Walters, Christian Henderson, Max Jacobs, Brandon Stout, and David Panzarello.

A big thank you also goes out to our Sunday School staff, to all parents, and to our many volunteers for all of their help to make our program such a success. We would also like to thank Kelly and Suzanne Walters for their help with the music, and Brian Walters for taking care of the sound system. Everyone's time, dedication and commitment to our kids is so greatly appreciated! Thank You! Thank You! Thank you to everyone involved!



A BIG THANK YOU FOR A GREAT DECEMBER

December was a very busy month for Zion's youth, and there are many, many *thank you's* to share! First, thank you to everyone who generously supported Zion's Giving Tree this year. It was once again an amazing success! Not only were we able to collect all of the gifts for several families and toys for the clothing closet give-away, but we were able to collect \$25 for many families to ensure they would have a Christmas meal. That is truly a picture of what the Christmas Season is about – sharing God's love and helping those in need! It is so wonderful to know that Zion is such a compassionate, loving, and overwhelmingly generous congregation! A big *thank you* also goes out to Brooke and Taylor Roman for helping the Fox family in putting up our Giving Tree this year. Advent comes so quickly on the heels of the festivities of Thanksgiving that it's great to have help in making the transition from giving thanks to inviting gifts through the suggestions we hang from our Giving Tree on the First Sunday of Advent.

Secondly, *thank you* to all of the families of our Sunday School who donated cereal and fruit cocktail for Zion's Food Pantry, and for the additional toys you donated for our Clothing Closet give-away. These items are greatly appreciated both by those who oversee the Christmas give-away and by those who receive our gifts and dinners.

Next, we must thank our youth of all ages – parents and adult leaders – who helped to wrap all of the Giving Tree gifts. This is always a lot of fun and we ended our wrapping party with a Christmas craft! We had a great afternoon of fun, food, and service on Saturday, December 17th! Also, a *huge thank you* to our Sunday School leaders and parents who helped with our pizza party that afternoon.

Finally, *thank you* to all of the youth and their families who helped with the Youth Advent dinner on December 18th. We really appreciate the dedication of our youth and their families, especially during the busy holiday season. A big *thank you* goes out to the Roman family for their leadership in organizing our responsibilities for the Youth Advent Dinner. The pulled pork and macaroni & cheese dinner, along with the wide array of desserts were delicious and enjoyed by all. Also, thank you to all of the youth and their families who contributed food, helped to serve the meal and with clean up afterward. We are so lucky to have such a great group of families that are always willing to pitch in and help! In addition to taking the lead in making the fourth Sunday evening in Advent a great success, Zion's youth and their families also helped make the third Sunday evening in Advent a great success, which was the Sunday we told the story of Christ's birth through Chrismons; and our youth were there in force, adding great delight to the great joy this story of salvation proclaims and inspires. Thank you to all of our youth, their families, and our leaders. December was truly a great month for the youth of Zion and our congregation. Everyone should be proud of all we accomplished and shared!

Zion's Sunday School Staff would like to wish all of our families

God's Blessings for a Peaceful & Happy New Year!



JAYNE'S ECOLOGY CORNER

Not sure what to do with the live Christmas tree you put up this year? **Treecycling** is an easy way to return a renewable and natural resource back to the environment, instead of disposing it in a landfill where decomposition rates are slowed due to lack of oxygen. By doing so, you extend your Christmas tree's usability by allowing it to be turned into something else.

Christmas trees can be recycled into mulch and used in landscaping and gardening, or chipped and used for playground material, hiking trails, paths, and walkways. They can be used for beachfront erosion prevention, lake and river shoreline stabilization, and fish and wildlife habitats. However, the possibilities don't end there. Every year communities across the country are finding new ways to use **treecycling** for private projects, as well.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, about 33 million trees are sold in the United States every year. Compared to artificial trees, real Christmas trees are a renewable resource, with 98 percent of them being grown and harvested each year as a crop would be. They are carbon neutral and create organic, biodegradable waste, making them the greener choice for Christmas greenery. However, it is still important to keep them out of landfills where they biodegrade slowly due to low oxygen levels.

In order to ensure a supply of Christmas trees each year, growers must use sustainable farming techniques. For each tree harvested, one to three seedlings are planted in the spring, ensuring a healthy supply of trees.

Treecycling is the simple act of recycling your Christmas tree, rather than throwing it away. Go to [www. Earth911.com](http://www.Earth911.com) to find a site in your area that will treecycle your tree.

THE WOMEN OF ZION

The *Chancel Guild's Christmas Dinner* on Tuesday, December 13, continued the theme of exceptional food at Zion during the Advent season. The evening began with punch, assorted nuts, and conversation, followed by jello salad, with stuffed pork loin as our entree, a sweet potato casserole, and a choice of red velvet cake or chocolate cake for dessert. Helen Heller and Kay Davis were our hostesses for a great evening.

Zion's Comfort Givers get back to their regular schedule in January, meeting on the second and fourth Thursdays of the month at 9:30 a.m. in Luther Hall. Our quilters were very happy with the additional women who became a part of this great tradition of service last year; and we are hoping for more of the same. Please join us for coffee, some great conversation, and the gratifying feeling that we are making the difference God desires.

The Women of Zion meet for their **monthly Bible study on Tuesday, January 17th**, in the Resource Center, beginning at 9:30 a.m. Our study was designed by Patricia Lull and is entitled *To Follow and to Serve: the Gospel of Mark*. January's focus is on *Confessing Christ*, as we begin a two month study of the central section of Mark's Gospel. Once in chapter 8, another time in chapter 9, and a third time in chapter 10, Jesus tells his disciples that it is God's will that he suffer and die on the Cross. These are called "passion predictions" because they look ahead to the crucifixion, the passion of the Christ. Up to this point in Jesus' ministry, miracles abound as news spreads far and wide about Jesus. With this chapter, we begin to understand that it is not the miracles but the Cross that unlocks the secret to the meaning of Jesus' call to be the Christ. Join us in the Resource Center. You'll be glad you did; and so will we.

THANK YOU'S FOR ZION

We extend our thanks to the Chancel Guild for the extra work required with additional communion services during the holiday season, along with the added responsibility of caring for the many poinsettias that filled our beautiful Poinsettia Trees. We also want to thank our many members and friends who ordered enough poinsettia plants to fill the Poinsettia Trees and the Sanctuary, too. Our Sanctuary looks so festive in red that it just adds to the joy of the season. We would also like to thank Carl Geib, Bob Lancashire, and Verle Elsass for helping out when it came time to move beyond Christmas to Epiphany.

Before moving past Christmas too quickly, we would like to extend our thanks to a whole host of folks who added their talents to the music we enjoyed during the Advent and Christmas seasons at Zion: Fred Locker, Phil Lehenbauer, Suzanne, Brian, Kelly, and Kevin Walters, Dale Jacobs, Max Jacobs, Carole Singer, Ron Singer, Shirley Horton, Beth Heller, Vicki Givler, Helen Heller, Sue Geib, Joyce Gibeaut, Darlene Milavickas, Marilyn Espe-Sherwindt, Carol Rossbach, Matt Slease, Pastor Sherwindt, along with our Sunday School singers. Our thanks to all!

As readers will soon find out when you read page 10, the Dague family wants to thank us for the support and friendship that has helped sustain them as Steve has been recovering from a serious spinal chord injury almost four years ago. The last of the monies that came in through the Steve Dague Fund have now been distributed. While it isn't quite a four year anniversary, Eric's Boy Scout Troop will be serving a Spaghetti Supper here at Zion on **Saturday, February 11**, from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. The cost is \$6.00 for adults and \$3.00 for children. Please try to attend.

THANK YOU'S AND MORE

To Our Church Family at Zion,

Once again, *thanks* are given to the good people of Zion for allowing and empowering the Food Pantry Crew to be awesome facilitators of your generosity. The Giving Tree enabled us to purchase delicious boneless hams and scalloped potatoes for all of the pantry clients. As we look forward to 2012 we are hopeful for a better economy and the appearance of jobs. For almost a decade it has been tough going for all of Stark County, and we thank you for giving all of us the opportunity to serve during that period. We will continue to fight hunger to meet the needs of our community. Please always remember that hunger is not seasonal, it happens all year. Thank you, from all of us, for the opportunity to serve,

Shirley A.U. Cavender

*Joy comes not to him who seeks it for himself,
but to him who seeks it for other people.*

H.W. Sylvester

Martin Luther King, Jr., clergyman, activist, humanitarian, and civil rights leader, was born on January 15, 1929 in Atlanta. He led the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, delivered his *I Have a Dream* speech in 1963, and received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. His life will be remembered on Monday, January 16th, which is a national holiday

A WORD OF THANKS FROM STEVE DAGUE

It has been a long road from that cold wintry day in 2008 to now. It was February 17th, a Sunday, and that day changed my life forever. Darla had taken the boys to Sunday School to practice their Easter play. I was finishing up an insulation project in the garage. I was stretched out across the trusses, and somehow fell. The next thing I remember was wondering if the Lord would take me as I lay on that cold, concrete floor waiting for Darla and the boys to return. The helplessness of lying there was the most terrifying feeling I have ever felt. If Darla had stayed for church after Sunday School, it's unlikely that I'd be writing this thank you. But Darla came home. A call to 911 rushed me to the Emergency Room at Aultman Hospital. I had fractured both wrists, split my kneecap, had a large gash on my head; my neck was broken, but the spinal cord wasn't severed. Little did I know what a bruised spinal cord could do to my mobility, my life, and our life together as a family. One thing became clear before long: my family was quite a bit larger than Darla and the boys. All of you became my family in some pretty wonderful ways.

I was still going through the scary process of recovery when Zion sprang into action. There was a benefit concert and ice cream social at Zion one Sunday evening, and jaws literally dropped – so I've been told – when it became clear that Zion raised more than \$10,000 to help me and my family make it to and through recovery. When all was said and done, Zion raised \$33,033 in your desire to stand by us during a process that took far longer than anyone ever expected. It was rough going for a long while, but I made it through rehab at the Edwin Shaw Rehabilitation Hospital. I thought I was home free, until I began the application process for Social Security disability. That process was unbelievable in a scary sense; but your support proved to be unbelievable in a good sense, providing comfort, friendship, and every sort of blessing along the way. If it were not for you and the rest of my extended family, Darla and I know that we would have lost everything. Instead, we have gained everything. God bless you all.

It took two-and-a-half years from the day of my spinal cord injury to receive the news that my application for Social Security disability had been approved. Imagine that, two and a half years! When you first apply, you're denied, and cautioned against applying again, which you must do. When you are denied a second time, then you must appeal; and it takes years to get a hearing. It's true that when you get approved, you receive payments reaching all the way back to the day of your injury; but by then, most persons have lost their family, their home, their savings, everything. My attorney told me that your standing by us made me the exception, a miraculous exception to what usually happens on the way to recovery. We still have our family. We have our home. Our lives have changed. Roles have been reversed. Darla gets up and goes to work; I get to be home with the boys; but our family is intact. Sure, the challenges I face and struggle with continue. But I really love being home with the boys, getting them up, fed, on the bus, and then being here when they get home. I feel that's a miracle, too. What's more, I'm in an Edwin Shaw support group for persons with spinal cord injuries. There's only one person who walks in and out of these meetings. I'm that one, and that's a miracle.

It's going on four years since that fateful fall on February 17th, 2008. I'm still here, and all of you at Zion are a big reason for that. The Dagues are far more grateful for all that you have done than you can possibly imagine. We'll never forget the love you shared and the support you've shown. Thank you for caring; thank you for sharing; and thank God that we're a part of each other's lives forever.

THE YEAR OF MARK HAS BEGUN ... AGAIN

What kind of Christianity doesn't need Christmas? Isn't that the best part of Christianity? How can you leave out the beginning? We just enjoyed the high point of our faith. How could you not love the great traditions that surround the celebration of Christ's birth? What are you saying, Pastor, that we should all become Jehovah's Witnesses? No, that's not what I'm saying at all. I'm just calling our attention to the Gospel of Mark, which begins not with stories of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, but with his baptism by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. Mark doesn't have long genealogies, angel visitations inspiring magnificats, no immaculate conceptions or virgin births. Mark just begins: "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

We don't normally give that a lot of thought, because Mark comes sequentially after Matthew, who gives us the whole story about Jesus' birth, with facts about what came before, and some stories about what happened afterwards. Mark is shorter than Matthew, perhaps an abridged version for those who don't want to read as much. Historically, however, Mark came first, before all the other Gospels. His was the first Gospel proclaimed. In fact, Mark created the Gospel, which was joining the proclamation of the truth to the narrative of Jesus' life. More to the point, Mark joined the proclamation of the truth to the event of Jesus' death. The Gospel of Mark has often been called a passion narrative with a biographical beginning.

The focus on biography transitions to the passion narrative at the midpoint in Mark's Gospel, in chapter 8 with the first of three passion predictions that introduce the centrality of the Cross in understanding Jesus' divine destiny and mandate. The Son of Man "must" suffer and die on the Cross for the story of salvation to continue and the promise of salvation to be fulfilled. The disciples resist this truth. They deny this truth. They simply can't believe that this must be or will be the truth about Jesus. They are blind. That is Mark's point. This central section focused on the Cross begins with the story of a blind man who learns to see (Mark 8:22-26), and it ends with the story of a blind man who is given the gift of sight. (Mark 10:46-52) The point Mark is making is clearly obvious. Until the disciples can learn to see the centrality of the Cross in Jesus' mission, they are blind to the truth of the Gospel.

Another way of saying this is to follow the scholars in observing that the Gospel of Mark contains two great collections of material, one that deals with the miracles Jesus performed during his life, and the other that deals with the significance of his death. These collections are connected by the hinge of Mark 8:27-33, where Peter confesses Jesus to be the Christ. Peter's misunderstanding at this point underscores the crucial secret in Mark, namely, that it is impossible to understand what it means to confess Jesus to be the Christ until one has seen him on the Cross. It is the Cross – not the miracles – that holds the key to understanding the power of God's love, the wisdom of God's ways, the content of Christ's call, and ours, too.

There is absolutely no question that in Mark's Gospel Jesus is the one and only Son of God. Jesus Christ is the full revelation of the love and life of God, the one in whom the fullness of God's grace and glory has been revealed. Mark knows exactly who Jesus is and why, and he knows what he is doing with his Gospel and how he is doing it. He is calling attention to the Cross as the key to understanding the point of Jesus' life and the meaning of his death; and he wants us to understand that the Cross is the key to laying hold of the life that can be ours ... in Jesus' name.