

Sermon: The Beginning of the Good News

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8**

Fifty years ago, a German theologian named Ernst Käsemann wrote that “Beginnings are for the most part hidden.” He was talking about historical movements, but his words also apply to these first verses from Mark’s Gospel.

Mark aims to tell us the story of Jesus from baptism to resurrection. But before he gets to the story, he gives us the *beginning*.

It is unclear whether ‘The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God’ is an opening sentence or a title for the entire work. The line has no punctuation; it stands alone. Also unclear is whether these are the words that Mark actually wrote.

We have no original manuscripts for the Gospels, but we have plenty of ancient copies, and copies of copies, in multiple languages. But with each copy, often made for a particular faith community, we get variants. There are at least nine, maybe as many as twelve*, variants on just this first verse. Mostly, the conversation revolves around the words ‘Son of God,’ but as always, we work with the text we have, and this text says, ‘The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.’

But the Jesus story doesn’t really begin here. These first eight verses only serve as a prolog. They set the stage and prime our thinking for what is to come. Before Jesus came out of Nazareth in Galilee, a prophecy needed to be fulfilled.

And who fulfills it but John the baptizer, who simply *appeared* in the desert, proclaiming a baptism of repentance. Jewish baptism was nothing new. For a long time before John, baptism was a ritual one performed for purification or consecration of the *body*, not for the putting away of sin, and you could do it as often as necessary. For John, it was a one-time event to wash your *soul* clean. If you were a born Jew, there was no precedent for this. For John, your ancestry was not enough to secure your relationship with God.

Baptism by water symbolized the call to repentance, and for John, it meant looking forward to God's coming kingdom, but the one who is more powerful than John would baptize by the Holy Spirit, and that was something new, something more than a deep cleaning. John claims that Jesus would pour out God's Spirit on all those who would come to him. It also marks Jesus out as the one who would fulfill Scripture.

Notice there is no sign of Jesus until verse nine. The focus today is on fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy through John with an emphasis on baptism. It's no accident that John operated in the wilderness. In the first twelve verses, Mark mentions the wilderness four times. It has some significance.

The wilderness represents a separation from ordinary life. The wilderness is where God met the Israelites after their escape from Egypt, so it's a place of new beginnings. One can find their destiny in the wilderness, so it's a place of fulfillment. People from the cities and countryside came to John in the wilderness for baptism, so it's a place of hope. The beginning of the good news almost *had* to happen in the wilderness, far from civilization and the crowds. Once Jesus' very busy public ministry begins in verse 14, he never looks back except occasionally to find rest.

Another thing in Mark that I think is interesting are the allusions to Elijah, in Mark's description of how John was dressed. It's almost word for word a description of Elijah, God's prophet who is expected to return any time now. Jews celebrating Passover leave the front door open, just in case, and they pour a glass of wine for him at the Seder. By identifying John with Elijah, when John proclaims, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me,' Mark might be making a big claim about Jesus being more powerful than Elijah, who is also an anointed one, a Messiah. This is a point that might not be lost on Mark's original readers, even before Jesus enters the story.

Elijah is also a man of the desert. In the wilderness, he and John and even Jesus are free from society, free to follow God, to be God's servants and proclaim the Word of YHWH. They are truly free because they are free to follow the Lord, and not the dictates of the surrounding culture. They didn't need smart phones; they didn't need high-speed fiber optic internet connections or a 24-hour news cycle; they didn't need money or power to be in relationship with God. We need this kind of freedom, and we use Advent to prepare for it.

In Isaiah, a voice says, ‘Cry out!’ And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’ That people will wither like grass, but the word of the Lord will stand forever? This is the herald of good tidings? But Isaiah’s first word is ‘comfort’ – ‘Comfort my people,’ says your God. And see, the Lord God comes with might – like a shepherd, one who will gather in the lambs and gently lead them.

Is this a mixed message or what?

We’re living in a weird time when the foundations of what we thought we knew are shifting under our feet almost daily. Ancient enemies are becoming allies and vice-versa. We can’t tell if the climate is warming or cooling, but we do know that 2017 has been a good year if you’re a volcano, and a bad year for people whose long-kept secrets have been finally exposed to the antiseptic light of day. We’re living in a time when we still categorize people by gender, skin color, and bank account balance.

We’re also living in a time of hostility toward God by some, and of hostility by others toward those who worship God in a way different than their own.

How unwelcome must our good news about Jesus sound to those who have been wounded by religion? When we quote Isaiah, saying, ‘the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and *all people* shall see it together,’ we know that that is not the case – not *all people* want to have a relationship with God or with anyone who does.

For a faithful people, for those who live into their baptism, there can be no true hope except for that which God provides. When we’re alone or in exile or feeling trapped by circumstance, the only one we can trust to help us make things right is God. God’s compassion and care for *all people* overwhelms all other gods, including the money gods or the gun gods or the power gods who seem to latch onto and rule people whether they are aware of it or not.

We look to God for direction, to set things right in our lives and now Mark gives us a new beginning, which is, for the most part, hidden within us. Mark sees the ancient prophets of Israel, men like Isaiah, anticipating God’s intervention in our lives. Mark sees John the baptizer standing in a long line with them, and John points toward Jesus, who is coming to baptize us with the Holy Spirit, deep down into our hearts and souls. That is a gift we can look forward to. Thank God we get to prepare.

Amen.