

December 10, 2023  
Mark 1:1-8

Advent 2  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## “From the Beginning”

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as it is written in the prophet Isaiah ...”

A recent ad popped up on my Facebook page offering me a sweatshirt that was obviously targeted at my profile biography on the site. It had an image of the state of New Jersey with the words *“North Plainfield – It’s Where My Story Began.”* While I have no plans on buying this sweatshirt (and I’m also a bit disconcerted that Facebook uses my profile to produce such ads), it did get me thinking about my hometown and how indeed much of my life story began in that community. But as I thought about memories of my old neighbourhood, my schools, my church, and the friends with whom I shared my formative years, I also began to wonder if this statement is completely accurate. For one thing, I was born in Muhlenberg Hospital in Plainfield, the closest hospital to our home on Grove Street. Then I began thinking further back to the story of my parents – their places of birth, the story of how they met and married which led to my birth. Then I went back even further to my grandparents and generations of ancestors who came from Denmark and Germany. Soon it became clear that while North Plainfield will always be my hometown, the truth of *“where my story began”* goes back much further into my family history. In this second year of the Revised Common Lectionary, our focus will be on the Gospel of Mark, the earliest of the four Gospels of the New Testament. While Mark shares many of the stories and characteristics of the other three Gospels, it has some unique qualities that make it stand out from the other accounts of the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Gospel of Mark has been described as *“the shortest of the four and the most fast-paced, with its short sentences, action verbs, and a narrative that focuses more on what Jesus says than what he does.”* (Timothy L. Atkins-Jones). Mark is the shortest of the Gospels, and lacks many of the familiar stories, teachings, and parables from Jesus’ earthly ministry. Even his account of the resurrection of Christ is unique; in what most scholars believe is the authentic account of the Easter event, the Risen Lord does not appear; after witnessing the empty tomb, the women *“went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”* (Mark 16:8).

- “In no other Gospel is the humanity of Jesus more transparent, nor his divine authority more striking. Mark’s emphasis on the costly service, rejection, and death of the Son of Man, vindicated only by his resurrection and coming in glory, serves as a healthy correction to the doctrine of cheap grace that pervades many churches and individual Christian lives.” – Lamar Williamson, Jr.

The uniqueness of the Gospel of Mark is apparent to the reader from the first sentence, in which the author introduces his work as “*the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* (1:1). Modern Christians often find three surprises in the beginning of this Gospel: its abruptness, the meaning of the gospel as proclamation, and the importance of the titles “messiah” and “Son of God.” The abrupt beginning of Mark provides an opportunity to highlight a different feature of the Christmas celebration; while Mark contains none of the familiar stories of the birth of the child of Mary in the manger in Bethlehem, the angels announcing his birth to the shepherds, or the visit of the Wise Men from the East, it highlights the fulfillment of God’s promises of salvation in the life and work of Jesus: “*The public ministry, death on the cross, and resurrection of Jesus are events in which God’s love comes to humanity.*” (Pheme Perkins).

Mark uses two significant phrases to identify Jesus: “Christ” (“Messiah”) and “Son of God,” both of which express Jesus’ unique dignity. Mark will later use “Christ” as a messianic title (“*He asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’*” – 8:29). “Son of God” would be recognized by Mark’s original readers as an Old Testament phrase that speaks of royal terminology:

- “I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you.’” – Psalm 2:7.
- “I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.” – 2 Samuel 7:14.

Early Christians used the phrase “Son of God” as evidence of the exalted status of the risen Lord (“*So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you.’*” – Hebrews 5:5).

In our translation of Mark’s Gospel, the first two verses are distinct sentences separated by a comma. But other scholars believe that this is not the correct punctuation, that in fact the opening statement continues so that the “beginning” of the Gospel (“good news”) of Jesus Christ is not when his life begins, nor is it when

he is baptized by John in the Jordan River (1:9-11). In this reading, the opening statement would introduce the Gospel with the phrase *“the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as it is written in the prophet Isaiah ...”* I was first introduced to this interpretation of the Gospel’s opening by my pastor during my university years, who always insisted that the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ can be seen in the prophecy of Isaiah that points to the sending of the one who will prepare the way of the Lord: *“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”* (1:2-3; Isaiah 40:3). While the incarnation of our Lord begins at his birth as the child of Mary, the beginning of God’s story of salvation and the restoration of God’s people begins hundreds of years earlier in the words of the prophets that we hear throughout this Advent season:

- “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” – Isaiah 7:14.
- “For a child has been born to us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” – Isaiah 9:6.
- “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days.” – Micah 5:2.

From God’s promises through the prophets in the past, Mark moves to John’s call to his hearers to respond in the present and to his announcement of what God is about to do in the future. While Mark does not give his readers any additional background information about John apart from identifying him as “the baptizer” and stating that he *“appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”* (1:4), the Evangelist identifies him as the fulfillment of the “voice crying out in the wilderness” from Isaiah and the messenger figure prophesied by Malachi:

- “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight – indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?” – Malachi 3:1-2a.

By identifying John the Baptist as the one who appears “in the wilderness,” Mark points to the wilderness as the place from which salvation comes; in the Old

Testament, Moses, Elijah, and David all had to flee to the wilderness before they were able to fulfill their role on behalf of God's people:

- “When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from Pharaoh. He settled in the land of Midian, and sat down by a well.” – Exodus 2:15.
- “David remained in the strongholds in the wilderness, in the hill country of the Wilderness of Ziph. Saul sought him every day, but the LORD did not give him into his hand.” – 1 Samuel 23:14.
- “Then [Elijah] was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree.” – 1 Kings 19:3-4.

Jesus will likewise emerge from the wilderness to begin preaching the good news and will return there several times (*“He said to them, ‘Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.’”* – 6:31). The “voice crying in the wilderness” uses the words of the prophet to signal the beginning of the good news. The prophetic texts suggest that the one for whom the messenger prepares the way is God, whose royal power will liberate a captive people (*“See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.”* – Isaiah 40:10). Both John the Baptist and Jesus emerge from the wilderness to preach to the people. Historically, John exemplifies a form of prophetic leadership among the people that galvanizes popular hopes for renewal and liberation. His execution by Herod Antipas (6:14-29) indicates that such figures were seen as a serious threat to the established order. The repentance and anticipation evoked by John's preaching provided a receptive audience who *“from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins”* (1:5) a receptive audience for Jesus' ministry. The crowds who came to be gathered by baptism are *“the remnant, the redeemed who will experience God's coming on the day of salvation.”* (Perkins). The people of Israel were longing for a revival of prophecy at this time (*“The Jews and their priests have resolved that Simon should be their leader and high priest forever, until a trustworthy prophet should arise.”* – 1 Maccabees 14:41), so John's appearance and message caused great excitement among the people who flocked to the Jordan River to be baptized by John, *“a cleansing process that allowed them to return to their communities not only with a newfound commitment to their faith but also free from the burden of those sins.”* (Atkins-Jones).

While Mark offers few details as to John's background or who preceded his appearance in the wilderness, the Evangelist does report that "*John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.*" (1:6). While this description of his appearance and diet may strike us as strange, Mark's original readers would have recognized them as further signs of John being the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy:

- "He said to them, 'What sort of man was he who came to meet you and told you these things?' They answered him, 'A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist.' He said, 'It is Elijah the Tishbite.'" – 2 Kings 1:7-8.
- "But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine; so he asked the palace master to allow him not to defile himself." – Daniel 1:8.

As both John the Baptist's appearance and proclamation identify him as the fulfillment of the prophecy of the one who will come to prepare the way of the Lord, Mark also sees the Baptist as a forerunner of Jesus. Consequently, John's baptism cannot be an end in itself. The crowds who flock to John from Judea are not necessarily expecting another to come after the Baptist; so John points away from himself to the coming of a "greater one" and greater cleansing:

- "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." – 1:7-8.

The superiority of this "coming one" is demonstrated both by the Baptist's declaration of his unworthiness to undo his sandals and by the fact that he brings the Holy Spirit to God's people. As a herald, John proclaims the coming of the Messiah promised to God's people through the prophets. He is the coming Elijah of whom Malachi spoke, the one who will signal the coming of the promised day of the Lord:

- "Lo, I am sending you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse." – Malachi 4:5-6.

John the Baptist proclaims that while the crowds have come out into the wilderness to receive his baptism, he is not the one whom they should follow; he is the messenger who announces the arrival of the true Saviour of all God's people, who through their repentance and the reception of John's baptism will be the elect who are prepared to receive the one to come. Baptism in the Holy Spirit suggests a

permanent change in an individual's relationship with God that will come about through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Many people find it strange that any Gospel of Jesus Christ does not include the familiar Christmas story that we will hear on the day of his birth in the Bethlehem manger. But what Mark invites us to do in this season or preparation is to look to the true origin story of our Lord Jesus Christ and what it means for the beginning of our story as people of God. As the beginning of Jesus' ministry as the fulfillment of God's promises of salvation can be found in the words of the prophets, so we may see the beginning of our stories as children of God not only when we were baptized through water and the word and reborn as children of God, but to what that baptism means for us in the present due to its connection with what God has done for us in the past. Paul identifies baptism as our participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, so that we may look to the beginning of our salvation story as the basis for our faith in the present and hope for the future:

- “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” – Romans 6:3-5.

As we often point to our birthdays as the time and place where our life stories begin, we can also point to the day of our baptism as the moment when we were born anew to a living hope as children of God, “*sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.*” (ELW Holy Baptism). But as we may look beyond our birthdays to the stories of our ancestors to find the true beginning of the stories of our lives, we look beyond the day of our baptism to the Gospel story of Jesus Christ, the one who John the Baptist announces is the fulfillment of the promises of God proclaimed through the prophets. While we will celebrate Christmas as the day of the birth of our Saviour, we rejoice that from the beginning God has willed to redeem us through the birth of the child of Mary who is for us who is at the heart of our stories as people of God, the one through whom we have the promise of “*strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow*” because from the beginning it has been the will of our God of steadfast love to bless us with the Word of hope of this season that the child born of Mary truly is *Emmanuel*, “God with us,” who, as it was in the beginning, shall be in the present and future our Lord and Saviour, the one who was and is and is to come, Christ our Redeemer.

Amen.