

## *A Starting Point*

Mark 1:1-11

January 9, 2022

I have always loved the freshness of a brand-new year, the beginning of a semester, the opening page of an unopened book, the first day on a new job, the turning of a calendar. I was that annoying kid in your class who couldn't wait for the stack of textbooks on the first day or a crisp new syllabus on day one. Each starting point, no matter how significant or minor, offers unlimited potential, open skies. What is past is past, and an unknown future awaits. Over the last several weeks, I've heard many of you express the hope that the commencement of 2022 might represent such a fresh start in our individual or communal lives, the opportunity to blaze new trails, to set aside some old ways, to find a deeper purpose, more joy in the journey of life. As I listen, more than resolutions, what I hear in these hopes are the prayers of a people who recognize the need for change and who find, in these early days of a new year, the courage to pursue that change.

Maybe that is where you find yourself on this January morning. You're at the outset of a year that has never been lived before. You know very well all that is beyond our control and influence, but you also sense what is your responsibility—what is within your capacity.

Today at Second Church, we begin in the beginning. Two beginnings, actually—one for each testament. Though Matthew is the first gospel you come to when you flip through your Bible, scholars are in agreement that Mark was the earliest of the gospels to be recorded. Mark tells his story in sparing language. The narrative moves swiftly. No Christmas story. No poetic prologue. Instead, the readers of the narrative are cast into the wilderness where a truth-telling prophet named John immediately

(that's Mark's favorite word) appears preaching and baptizing. We have no context, no backstory, no biography for this man named John. All we know is that he was a baptizer and that he was calling for a new beginning, for repentance, for change. But before we can even wrap our minds around that message, Jesus suddenly appears on the bank of the Jordan River, where he is immediately baptized by John. Eleven verses in, so much has happened. It is an abrupt beginning to the gospel story.

When Matthew and Luke remember this account, they fill in some details. They smooth out some rough edges. For example, each of these later writers record that the heavens, the skies, were opened as the Spirit of God descended at Jesus' baptism. Perhaps, like me, the picture in your mind is of clouds gently parting to reveal streams of light upon the glistening water. Mark's language is far more explicit. According to the first gospel, the heavens do not serenely separate. They are ripped apart. The Greek word is *schitzo*, as in schism or schizophrenia. It signifies more than a temporary crack in the wall between God and humanity. No, that wall itself has been torn down forever. In fact, Mark uses the word a second time at another important moment near the end of his gospel. When Jesus takes his last breath from the cross, the curtain of the temple, which had been the dividing line between the God of the universe and God's created beings, is (*schitzo*) torn apart *from top to bottom*. An irreparable schism in the line between heaven and earth. A tearing that starts at the top. An irreversible divine decision to join and redeem humanity. From the beginning to the end of his gospel, Mark wants us to know that Jesus represents something entirely different: a brand-new way of understanding God, a brand-new

call to faithful living. Mark's Jesus is not the baby asleep in the hay but the Son of God come to save us from the chaos and destruction we have come to call normal. Over the next six weeks at Second, we will be meeting Jesus again, seeking to better understand what it means to follow the One who ripped the heavens apart to make a home among us.

Of course, that day in the Jordan River was not the first time that God had torn down dividing walls between divine and human. In fact, you might say that this is how it all began. The first words of the first book of our Bible give witness to a God who is already closing the gap between heaven and earth as soon as both are created. Out of a formless void, God creates a world. And then God creates all of humankind in the image of God. It is one of the most surprising, remarkable moments in all of scripture—that human creatures are made in the image of God. That all of us, each of us, carry with us the likeness of God in these fragile, broken, human bodies and minds. From the creation of the world, to the covenant with Abraham and Sarah, to the incarnation of Jesus Christ, we have a God who refuses to keep distant from humanity. Over and over again God comes among us, offering a starting point.

This morning, I'm wondering how that conviction might change our lives in the year ahead. I wonder what difference it would make if we believed that we are created in the divine image. I wonder what difference it would make if we hear the words of God's Spirit spoken not just to Jesus but to us: "Beloved daughter of God. Beloved son of God." I think the impact could be profound. Mark says that John was out in the wilderness preaching about repentance, about forgiveness. In other words, John the Baptizer was offering the freshness of a new beginning to anyone who would listen. The invitation to a starting point.

Each year, Marist College conducts a poll asking Americans about their New Year's resolutions. And every year, all the usual suspects make the list. Want to name them? Diet. Lose weight. Exercise more.

Spend less money. Save more money. Get a better job. But in recent years, literally over the last four or five years, a different goal that wasn't even in the top ten some years ago has steadily climbed to number one. It doubled from one year to the next. That resolution in four words: *Be a better person*. Broad goal. I have some guesses about the factors that led to this increase, but I take it as a sign of hope for our future. Be a better person. I think it's why we're here this morning. John proclaimed a starting point that had everything to do with being better people.

This morning we remember that Jesus himself was baptized, that Jesus himself submitted himself to a beginning. A commissioning and a commencement. As I watched the moving memorial service last Saturday for Archbishop Desmond Tutu, I remembered a story that his friend and fellow South African priest—professor at Duke Divinity School Peter Storey—told a group of us students several years ago. The story goes that when the future Archbishop was a young, new pastor in a rural parish, he was charged with teaching catechism classes to a group of 13 year olds in the parochial school. On a New Testament quiz, he included the question: "What did the voice from heaven say at Jesus' baptism?" In response, one of the students in the class wrote: "You are the Son of God. Now act like it!" I imagine that student had heard words like those before at home. I certainly hope he was given full credit for the answer. I can imagine Tutu's laughter in reading it. You are the Son of God. Now act like it.

Baptism is a marker of our identity. *You are a child of God*. And, baptism is a call to a new way of living. *Now act like it*. This morning, we are called to remember who we are and to live into that reality. Of course, we know that we will mess it up, that we will spill coffee on that crisp new unmarked sheet of paper. That we will inevitably fail in our attempts to be better people. After all, most resolutions fail to survive the transition to February. And that, my friends, is why it matters that we gather here, where we are reminded over and over again who we

are. *You are beloved children.* The words describe a transformative reality. You belong to God.

And you are commanded to *act like it.* That's what it means to follow Jesus. That's what it means to be a community whose identity is found *only* in the gift of belonging through Jesus Christ.

Consider how that might change your life—that you can choose today. That this morning can be your starting point. I've been reflecting on our life together and on my call as your pastor over the last several weeks. I do love the freshness of a new beginning and the turning of years and the marking of anniversaries. They always lend themselves to reflection. I was ordained as a minister of word and sacrament on Epiphany, January 6, 2008. That day, I presided at the Lord's Table for the very first time. Two weeks later, I celebrated my first baptism—actually two baptisms—twins in the congregation I was serving. Those twins are now fourteen years old. That day I gave my life to the conviction that the starting point described by John is the invitation to life that is truly life. I've given my vocational life to the belief that communities of Christians can be a witness to that truth.

But this can *only* be the case if we *act like it.* You might know (but you probably don't) that our denomination—the Presbyterian Church USA—sets forth what we call the Six Great Ends of the Church. They're kind of like resolutions for the body of Christ, the purposes for which the Church exists. Among them is this charge: to be an exhibition of the kingdom of God to the world. That is, if we are God's people, we must be a demonstration of what Archbishop Tutu called, "God's dream for the world." That's a high calling. We fall short of it often. But that is no excuse not to try again, and again, to be a picture of God's dream, of what God intends for all creation.

You will have your own answers, but here's what I think that looks like for us in this fresh new year just beginning:

–It looks like creating a community where all are welcomed because God welcomes all. No exceptions, no barriers, no separation.

–It looks like worshiping the God of abundance with our whole hearts *and* with our lives. It looks like celebrating God's presence in this sacred space and in the places we find ourselves all week long.

–It looks like truly opening ourselves to be freshly equipped. That we would pray for a better understanding of God's Word, of God's will, of God's love.

–It looks like serving with selfless hearts, meeting the real needs of those around us and those beyond our horizons.

–It looks like the kind of humble self-examination that honors God's providence by confessing our limits and our failures.

Friends, this is the work of ministry to which we have been called. And we can start today.

Late last year I had the privilege of spending some time with Gloria and Bill Gaither. Since that time, Gloria and I have become email pen pals, exchanging words that we find meaningful and moving, workshopping texts with each other. Just before Christmas, she sent me these: "Chris, may the Incarnation be more than a sweet story this year. May it be a personal recommitment to let this God who reaches for us be incubated in us and delivered to the world, no matter the cost. The cost may get greater as history unfolds, but our very souls must be His dwelling place, and His message of transforming love must be our life force."

Friends at Second, I want to say this as clearly as I can today. You can start again. You are not imprisoned by a past you cannot change. If, on this January morning, you are ready to renounce the harsh words you have spoken, to seek the good you've left undone, to release the resentment you have held too tightly, to let go of pain you've carried for too long, to repent of pride that has wounded those you love, to abandon

judgment that was never yours to pronounce, to offer forgiveness you have withheld, to leave behind *anything* that has created a wall between your heart and the undeniable, unconditional, eternal grace of God, then let now be the moment when you invite God to tear it apart, to speak this truth over you: You are my child. You are beloved. All of us are. Now, let's start acting like it. Amen.