

December 4, 2005
Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8
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“The Beginning of the Gospel”

Where does something begin? How would you trace the roots of the age-old conflict in Israel and Palestine so that you could point your finger to a particular place and say, "Yes, this is where it all began"? If you could trace all the influences and factors that have shaped your life to some definite starting point, where would you say everything that has made you who you are began? I suspect you would need to talk about quite a few generations before you could say, "This is where it all began." Every writer has to make a choice about where and how to begin a story. Where does a life, a history of a people in conflict or even a story, really begin?

Mark opens the story of the gospel of Jesus Christ with a strange wilderness prophet named John. Long before the first Christmas parade, God sent a prophet named John as the herald of salvation. John was no jolly shopping center Santa; he did not wear a red fur coat or a patent leather belt. He wore a tunic of roughly woven camel hair and a girdle of animal skin. He did not feed on sugar plums and candy canes, but on locust and wild honey. John came to the wilderness of Judea preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

You could say, at least from Mark's perspective, the herald John the Baptist is the beginning of the gospel. Each of the four gospels begins in a different way. Over the next three Sundays, we shall see how the other gospels begin their stories of Jesus Christ. Next Sunday we shall listen to the evangelist John's soaring poetic theology of the Word made flesh. Then, on the 18th, we shall hear Luke's story of the young Mary trembling at the angel Gabriel's word. On Christmas Day, Matthew will tell of the life-changing choice that Joseph makes. Today, we begin with Mark. In Mark's gospel, the story of the coming of Jesus does not begin with John's eloquent and exalted theology; it does not include Luke's domestic scenes with Mary; it does not speak of Matthew's story of Joseph, who has the courage to defy convention. In Mark's gospel, there are no angels singing in the night sky. In Mark's gospel, we do not hear of the visit of the wise men or Herod's cruelty against the baby boys of Bethlehem. In Mark's gospel, the story of Jesus begins with this wilderness prophet named John.

In Mark's gospel there is no time to warm-up or to get ready. This prophet's cries in the wilderness awaken us to something new and unexpected. Yet, if we are not careful, we will miss an important key that Mark gives us to understand the whole life of Jesus. Before we rush to follow John into Mark's story of Jesus, look again at the opening words. The gospel does not really begin with a wild-eyed, anti-social prophet named John, but with a word about Jesus: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Mark's gospel begins with two words about Jesus.

The first word is that Jesus is the Christ. Christ is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word, *Messiah*, which means "the anointed one." The gospel begins with a word about Jesus' relationship to all humankind through Israel. Jesus is a human being, made of flesh and bone, who is anointed by God to save the people. He is more than a great teacher, humanitarian or prophet. He is the Savior who has come to deliver us from bondage, sin and oppression. The Jewish people expected a king like David to restore the fortunes of the people. No king had ever risen from the people to fulfill their hopes and dreams. Now, the words of the prophet Isaiah are true: "Comfort, comfort, my people, says your God, speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid." God is sending the One who will bring everlasting comfort to the people, deliver them once and for all from sin and begin the eternal reign of God's peace. In the Messiah, God speaks tender words of comfort to the people. As flesh and blood, Jesus is one with his people. The deliverance comes from one who shares their humanity.

The second word is that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is connected to God as no one else has ever been or will ever be. Mark wants us to understand, right from the beginning, that the gospel is the good news about Jesus, the Son of God. At the baptism of Jesus, a voice from heaven echoes the truth that Jesus is God's Son. Yet, the irony of Mark's gospel is that no one, except the demons, really understands that Jesus is God's son. The first person to glimpse the truth is not a disciple, but the Roman centurion who looks at the dying form of Jesus on the cross and cries out, "Truly, this man is the Son of God." It is only after the crucifixion and the resurrection that the church begins to see clearly what Mark tells us at the beginning of the gospel - Jesus is the Son of God. In other words, when you and I read the gospel, we know something that those who are participants in the story do not know. We know it from the beginning.

By telling us from the very beginning that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God, Mark is telling us that the coming of Jesus is not an accident of history or a last-minute plan. Mark is telling us that Jesus is not God's Son because of the life he lived. He was not chosen to be the Messiah because of the gifts he had. He is Messiah and Son from the beginning. He lived the life he lived because he was God's Son, chosen from the beginning to be our Savior. Long before a teenaged David was anointed to be King; long before Moses, with a price on his head for murder, fled from Egypt; long before Sarah, in her old age, laughed in the face of God at the very idea of having a baby and even before God created the hippopotamus, the Bible says, "In the beginning, God." When there was nothing but the infinitely loving being of God, there was the gospel. The gospel began in the being of God before there was time or space or a garden so fresh and green you could taste the morning. When Mark says, "The beginning of the gospel," he wants us to connect the coming of Jesus with the opening words of Genesis, "In the beginning, God." Mark wants us to see that God's great plan, from creation to redemption and Genesis to Revelation, is all gospel.

In these opening words of Mark's gospel, we hear both the historical and the eternal dimensions of the gospel. We see Jesus as both human and the divine. Jesus is the Messiah whose coming is proclaimed by a prophet named John. He comes to a particular people at a particular moment in history. At Christmas we celebrate, not a myth, but a historical reality. God acts in human history to save and redeem. We even have the name of a Roman official, Pontius Pilate, in the Apostles' Creed to remind us that Jesus came

into the world in a definite time and place. Karl Barth once wrote that our eternal salvation is totally dependent on our ability to retell this history. In a specific time and place, God sent the only Son, Jesus, to redeem and to save the world. Salvation is not some immaterial philosophical idea or unformed mystical experience. Our salvation flows from an event in time when God meets us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We claim that the birth of Jesus Christ is the focal point of human history. In Jesus, God invades our world and our lives with saving power. When Jesus calls Peter and Andrew, heals a woman possessed with evil spirits, feeds the hungry, gives sight to blind Bartemaeus, forgives the sinner, we know that the salvation of God touches the lives of ordinary people such as you and me. Jesus comes to give hope to the family that has lost a child, to heal the troubled spirits of a despairing man, to rebuild trust in a divided community. The meaning and value of my life and of all history is found in Jesus, the Messiah and the Son of God.

By placing these words about Jesus at the beginning, Mark tells us that God took the first step for us and for our salvation. Before the first human heart turned to God, God had already turned to us in Christ. Before the first person lifted a hand in violence against another, God's hands were lifted toward us in love. Before Moses ever knew he had a temper, or Abraham told a lie to pass Sarah off as his sister, or David's heart skipped a beat when he saw beautiful Bathsheba in her tub, or Herod made killing babies public policy, God's love was turned toward Moses, Abraham, David and even Herod. Before Palestinians and Jews began their bitter struggle, even before addiction to crack cocaine ever ruined a young girl's life, even before husbands and wives broke each other's hearts, and even before parents and children didn't understand each other, there was God's love for us in Jesus Christ. The gospel begins in the very being of God.

A young woman, who grew up in a difficult home, struggled for years with self-doubt and a sense of unworthiness. She felt unloved and unlovable. She seemed to have a gift for making choices that only increased her isolation and self-contempt. She began to see a counselor who helped her unravel the threads of her life story. After a long time, she followed the last thread of the last story to what seemed to be the end. There, she found another story. She found the story of God's love for her in Jesus Christ. God had loved her from the beginning. Christ was with her in a way no one else had ever been. In discovering that she was loved, she began to be able to love.

This week I received an e-mail from a friend in the church. Something at the bottom of the e-mail caught my eye. At first glance it seemed unconnected with the matter about which she had e-mailed me. Yet, on second glance, it seemed the foundation of everything. She wrote, "Jesus loves me (and a lot of other people who don't even care), this (and maybe only this) I know."

I do not believe that the conflicts that plague the earth, that disrupt our homes, that divide our communities, will ever be resolved until we discover that there is a story that is deeper and more powerful than all the stories of hurt, murder, injustice, greed and hatred that we so love to tell. God's love for the entire world in Jesus Christ is the one thing that is big enough to overcome the evil, pain, deceptions and tragedies of life. God's love in Jesus Christ has been there from the beginning. Even now, it is there for you, for me and for all

people. If we were to unravel the threads of our lives to get to the very beginning of things, the last thread would lead to this wonderful story of Jesus Christ. His story is the beginning and the foundation of our lives. His story is our story, grounded and rooted in the very being of God.