

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. *Amen.*

The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. What did Mark's hearers/readers think that meant? To begin: a little about the opening of the Mark's Gospel; then a little about Advent themes, and third about our own waiting and preparation here.

Mark's Gospel begins "The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, '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.'" John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism for the repentance, the forgiveness of sins...and on. Several observations (and my spell-check objects to my verb-less jerky and Mark's.) Think ahead. How much of what we're reading is the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Does Mark call this the "beginning of the Gospel" simply labeling the start of his book using a new word, or must he mean more? What else about his phrase? Note where this work starts, with Isaiah and with John the Baptist. Which of them is the beginning, and what sort? Is this some odd biography, which starts with one ancient prophet predicting the biography's subject and with his first cousin? How many biographies begin with either of those people in the subject's life? The cousin is in the desert, not where Jesus is at the same time or where he was when he was a baby or youth. Is this the beginning of the biography of Jesus? What is this the beginning of?

Biblical prophets had come from the wilderness and John comes from the wilderness saying he's a forerunner. Does

that mean that this work is going to be the prophecy of John the Baptizer, the witness of John? Is the beginning John's link to Isaiah, and his description of what the forerunner of Messiah would be? Mark says he is quoting Isaiah, but the lines actually combine phrases of Exodus, Isaiah, and Malachi. Additionally John's clothing echoes the Prophet Elijah's garb—and Elijah's return was to signal the coming of the Kingdom. John's call made people of Judea and Jerusalem come to hear him and then John identifies himself not as the One to come, but as coming to prepare the way. Again what is this book the beginning of? The witness of John as the beginning of the Good News?

Perhaps Mark's whole book or that recounting is the beginning of the Good News, not so much as contained in the pages, but is intended to be alive in the hearers'/readers' present and future. Do we go to this story, not to look at the past, but to think about how it could or should unfold in our lives? Ways we unfold the good news.

Part of our thinking about these three ways to look at the first phrase of the Gospel is to consider its end. It is abrupt, with a white-clad figure at the tomb telling the women that Jesus has gone ahead to Galilee and that the disciples will see him there. Did the disciples get that message? Did they actually stay in Jerusalem or go back to the walking around, in the way Jesus did? Did they understand that he had gone back to Galilee to renew his mission, to continue being a servant of the liberating kingdom? Jesus had gone ahead to prepare the way of the reign of God as John had prepared the way for him.

Mark may well have thought that the disciples had gotten it wrong again, that they had neither heard nor "gotten" the women's message of the return of Jesus. However, Mark's

blunt ending is less about those disciples. More likely it is intended for its readers/hearers, those then and those of us who do get the message whenever we hear this gospel. We are to hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest and then continue, if not to finish the gospel and the work for the realm of God. The story is in our hands, and so rather than Mark's story ending with the women's announcement, it sends readers, sends us, back to the beginning of the gospel seeking repentance for the forgiveness and for the life to come. Each of these three ways of hearing "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God:" as a simple title, as introduction to John the Baptist's time, and as the beginning the Son of God's work to lead us to repent to be ready to join him in the life to come seem there.

Gospel, then, is more than the title of a kind of book, more than the plot of the book, but also the whole idea and reality, the work, of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. While we may wonder which of these three ways to hear "gospel" Mark intended, since all three energize its hearers, all must be there. Mark then leads us into the good news of Jesus and his work for and with us, whoever, however we are. We are pulled in to hear, respond, and understand how God acts in the world for all people through incarnation in Jesus, and through on-going and present work for us.

The way we respond to this beginning of the idea of gospel then is both to repent, in the light of some self-examination, and to prepare and wait as patiently and energetically as we can. If we hear the good news of the book's title, of John's preparation and story leading into the narrative about Jesus, and/or of the good news of the Savior's actions then and now, we also think of ourselves. How do we respond? We

want to be ready to meet the newborn Savior. For most of us, we find we're not ready, not good enough, not just enough, not engaged enough in the list of works both the prophets and Jesus tell us to do, not focused enough to meet Jesus as we are. We often intend to do more, be more, do other, be other, so we repent, we're sorry, and we try to spiff up, to do more and better.

Jesus comes to us as we are, where we are, not in power but as a tiny vulnerable baby, and he is every bit himself at his birth. We have to wait for his presence with us, and that takes both repenting of our misdeeds and mislives. In trying to rework ourselves we observe and realize that the wait is always long, both for our own transformation and for the coming of the realm of God. We need to repent and wait for that coming, but also to prepare as best we can. One of the hardest parts of that preparing is to recognize that for most of us, we are who we are—and God knows that, accepts us, and promises us that Jesus understands that reality. We are to join in the work that the prophets name, but to accept our human frailties and limitations. We're not to wait until we're God—because that's not going to happen, but to accept who we are and do the work we are called to in the tradition of God's call to us.

Advent then asks us to watch, repent, wait, and prepare to join the good news of Jesus. We here have been and are continuing to engage in that preparation. Advent asks us to do this individually, but here we've been at that for months as a community. Who are we? What are we here called to be and do? Emmett Jarrett spoke here on Wednesday and was clear about urban mission. It's in cities, of and for cities. He said several times that the foremost components of urban ministry were of presence and relationships, waiting and listening. We

spent much of yesterday afternoon trying to reach for our sense of that process here and now with our bishop. People mentioned listening and relationships, passions and decisions, mistakes and initiatives—that all sounds like Advent to me—repenting, watching, preparing, and waiting. We cannot choose a new mission any more than we can invent to be a person in line with what Jesus calls us to. We are called as individuals, and each of us is to work at being that person, and doing that person's best, not someone else's. As a parish we are new, changed/the same and unchanged, a mix here, as the bishop observed, that is both unique and not so unique, like all people, all communities. Our Advent task is together to repent, watch and wait, listen and strengthen existing relationships while making new ones. We're a community of worship—we're clear about that. Let's keep listening and waiting to hear and understand how we are to proceed, and what we are to do. It is our constant call, but the particular effort of Advent. How to prepare the way of the Lord? However we do that, we understand the gospel of Mark. We understand the good news that Jesus comes to welcome us to paradise with him always. That's Mark's Gospel, that's good news.

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