

Sunday, December 6, 2020
Second Sunday of Advent (Year B)

Isaiah 40.1-11; Mark 1.1-8

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1330390257298531>

(Sermon begins at about 12:45)

“The Beginning of the Good News. Just the Beginning”

Like many ancient writings, the Gospel According to Mark starts off with a prologue—the first 13 verses—which, typically introduced the main characters and provided the basic knowledge needed for the hearer to follow the ensuing story. The prologue often gave a bit of a summary so that there were no surprises. The ancients did not like suspense, believing it caused the mind to wander. To prevent this from happening and to keep the audience engaged, the author needed to provide clues as to where the story was going.¹

One of the interesting clues in the prologue to Mark’s Gospel comes right at the very beginning. Literally the beginning. The first words are “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mk 1.1). Some scholars believe that these words may have been intended as the title of the book rather than the opening sentence. Regardless of the author’s intent, I am going to leave you in suspense, because there is more to say about this beginning, but I’m going to hold off for now. And hope that your mind does not wander.

What I will say at this point is that Mark, in his setting the stage for the telling of the good news of Jesus Christ, goes back in history to another beginning. Or to the foretelling of a new beginning. Mark allegedly quotes the prophet Isaiah. Allegedly, because, if you compare what Mark attributes to Isaiah with the actual quote, we heard in today’s Old Testament reading, the two do not quite mesh. In actuality, what Mark “quotes” is a blending of text from three sources (verse 3 indeed being from Isaiah). But for our purposes, let’s stick with the original attribution. It is, as they say, close enough for government work.

The statement “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’” (Mk 1.2b-3) or at least the last part of it, comes from Isaiah chapter 40, which is the beginning of a new section in Isaiah. Beginning with the words “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God” (Is 40.1), this is the beginning of another bit of good news. This is the beginning of a prophecy that the Babylonian Exile will soon be coming to an end and the Jews will be allowed to return to their homeland after being displaced for 50 some-odd years. Restoring God’s people to their home.

The Exile was a significant event in the life of the Jewish people. And the return home at the end of the Exile was huge. It was the beginning of a whole new era in their history. One that was cause for great joy and celebration. Hearing the words of the Prophet Isaiah in Mark’s Gospel would have reminded Mark’s audience of this time in their history and all that went along with it. It also would have signaled that the story they were about to hear—the story of

the good news of Jesus Christ—was at least as big, at least as important, at least as joyous, as their return from Exile nearly 500 years before.

The cited prophecy, in its original context, was a promise that God would make the way in the wilderness—the route between Babylon and Judea—smooth. Unlike the Exodus, leading to another all-important beginning for the Hebrews—a 40-year wilderness journey fraught with drama—the return from Exile would be far easier. God would provide a clear path for them to follow, moving them from Babylon to Judea as quickly as possible. In light of these ancient journeys, Mark’s echoing of the image of a messenger crying out “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” would have held promise for the people that they are about to make another journey. A journey that will lead them to a new home. Only this time it will not be a physical home, but rather a metaphorical home, a spiritual home. Mark’s Gospel promises that God would provide a messenger to point the way to this new home, to this new beginning.

And that messenger was John the Baptist. What John does and where he does it, sends a further message about this new beginning that Mark’s Gospel promises. Again, to understand how the imagery of John the Baptist would have been received and interpreted, we need to go back to ancient history. At the end of the Exodus, the Hebrews entered the Promised Land to begin their new life. And where did they do that? At the River Jordan. “After the death of Moses, the servant of the Lord, the Lord spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses’ assistant, saying ‘My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites’” (Josh 1.1-2). A new beginning.

So, John being out at the River Jordan proclaiming a message of repentance would have spoken volumes to the people. Perhaps this is why people were flocking to see John. Because of the promise that was implied in not only the message, but also the location. We don’t know exactly where John did his baptizing, but the stretch of the River Jordan nearest Jerusalem was at least 20 miles away over desert and hilly terrain. So, the fact that people were willing to walk over 20 miles in inhospitable terrain into the middle of nowhere to see John was pretty amazing. And says something not only about the appeal of his message, but also about what the people yearned for. A new beginning.

And that is what John promised. While offering a sacramental sign of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, this was just the opening. Once they had experienced what John had to offer, he let them in on a little secret. That he was not the one they were looking for. That he was just a messenger pointing to the new beginning they truly wanted. “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” (Mk 1.7-8). Today’s Gospel reading does not specifically name the one who is to come. But, of course, we know who that is. And in the next verse after today’s passage, Jesus does come to be baptized by John, thus beginning his public ministry. Thus beginning the “beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.”

Okay, maybe it’s time to end the suspense. So, this statement that Mark’s Gospel is “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God” . . . By all accounts, the Gospel tells the story of Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection. What appears to be more than just a

beginning. It appears to be a complete story. Well, sort of. There is the subject of the ending—a unique situation in Mark’s Gospel. The original story ends with Mary Magdalene and some other women going to the tomb on Easter Day and discovering that Jesus had been resurrected. We are then merely told that the disciples then went out and proclaimed the message of eternal salvation. A longer ending was later added, including several post-resurrection appearances, a commissioning of the disciples, and Jesus’ ascension. All the usual stuff. But then again, doing so makes for a complete story. Or does it?

In Mark’s telling of the commissioning of the disciples—in the longer ending—Jesus says, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (Mk 16.15). Then, after Jesus’ ascension, we are told that “they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it” (Mk 16.20). This was the followers of Jesus beginning their own work. Continuing the work Jesus began during his earthly life. By opening the Gospel the way he did and by the way he ended it—regardless of which ending is used—Mark makes clear that the good news of Jesus Christ, the work of Jesus Christ, was just the beginning. That what is presented in the Gospel is just the beginning. That there is more to the story. And that “more” is up to Jesus’ followers. That “more” is the work they will do to carry on Jesus’ mission and ministry.

In this year unlike any other, we find ourselves lamenting the fact that we cannot be together during this Advent season. That we cannot be together at Christmas. At least not in the same physical space. But then again, after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, the focus of the disciples was not to just sit around in a room together and talk about how great Jesus was and everything they had learned from him. No, they dispersed. They went out into the world and proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ to those they encountered. This was how the good news of Jesus Christ was to have a beginning—a beginning that allowed the Jesus movement to continue to this day. Through the personal witness of those who had come to know Jesus.

While we cannot be together in the same physical space this year, we can be faithful to the task of the early disciples by taking the wilderness situation we are experiencing and turning this time into an opportunity to proclaim the Gospel. To continue the story. Because we are the continuation of the good news of Jesus Christ. As his followers, it is our job to make sure the story is not complete. It is our job to keep the story going.

Mark opens his Gospel in his quote from Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you.” We are the messengers that come after. We are the ones who keep the story alive. We are the ones who ensure that the Gospel According to Mark is just the “beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.” Because our job is to continue to live and proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. Our job is to be the voices of those crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord.

¹ *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1804.