

Advent 2
December 10, 2017
Mark 1:1-8

Several years ago I had the privilege of chaperoning a trip with a group of seventh and eighth graders from our middle school to Washington D.C. On the last day we went to an amusement park south of D.C. I love roller coasters and have never met one that scared me enough to not climb aboard – until that day. The Intimidator – aptly named – and with a sign leading up to it stating it is highly probably you will momentarily blackout due to the speed of this ride, which was the tipping point for me. Yet, I did go on one that did something I had never experienced before. As I stood in line and watched time and time again the group ahead of me take off, and I do mean take off, my palms started to sweat a bit. My heart began to race. Fear began to set in. There was still time to turn around. But I fought through those emotions and finally found myself firmly harnessed waiting. You see, what I had witnessed was the cars of that coaster taking off like a fighter jet launched from the deck of aircraft carrier. This coaster literally thrust you out of the shoot without warning and with a force and speed I had not experienced on any other ride. The beginning of this ride smacks you square in the face and was simply exhilarating and breathtaking.

Now, that’s probably not a fair comparison to the beginning of Mark’s gospel; however, in as close a manner as an author of a literary work might be able to deliver a beginning that feels like we are immediately thrust into the action of the story Mark does his best to capture the immediacy of the message he is trying to get across. Like a race horse, he gets out of the shoot rather quickly and immediately, is in full stride and gets to

the point as he tells his audience right from verse 1, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” This is a beginning. Something new is happening. Even Mark has created a new genre of literature. Never had a gospel been authored. He was in uncharted waters. Perhaps even with his own sweaty palms and fears about how this might be received. Yet, also excited and eager. To share this story. To tell the good news. To even create a new beginning in his community some 30 years following the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Eye witness accounts of Jesus’ life may have been beginning to fade away as the decades passed. Perhaps, the verbal stories of this itinerant preacher were beginning to seem more like idle tales of the past. Mark might have witnessed this in his own community and would have none of it. The gospel, that is good news, had to get out. He had to write it down, preach it, and preserve it. Something new had happened. His community had to know about it. The world had to hear about it and so off he went making a splash from the get go, even bypassing what we so expect to hear years later. The story about the angel about coming to Mary announcing she will conceive a Son. The birth of this child in a stable or of wise men and shepherds bearing gifts. This is the pattern of Matthew and Luke, but not Mark who immediately catches us off guard and bears for the point of his gospel. This is a beginning. God has acted and done something unlike anything the world had witnessed before.

This opening sentence, often referred to as a title, has a way to proclaim not only the good news that the long-anticipated Messiah God promised to Israel has arrived but it also speaks for the entire gospel and the good news brought through Christ’s death and resurrection as in this beginning it draws us to the end of what God has done as we hear

echoes of these same words spoken by the centurion following Jesus' death, "Truly, this was the Son of God."

Then, at Mark's beginning, he recalls the prophecy from Isaiah where God speaks and advises God is sending God's messenger to prepare the way of the Lord and make the Lord's paths straight – the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. It is God who acts first in Mark's gospel just as it is God who has always acted first in the long history of God's people. Who we find at the advent of this new beginning in Jesus Christ is John the Baptist, an unusual character to say the least, located in the wilderness (i.e. desert) attired in camel hair, a belt around his waist eating locusts and honey and calling people to repent, change their lives, discover this new beginning, be transformed by it and be filled with the water of life Jesus gives. Dressed in attire similar as the prophets of old, such as Elijah, John is the messenger of God calling the people out of their old life and into a new life. A new and promised beginning. Pointing to the Christ child which was coming into the world.

Our text draws us into language of preparation and makes us reflect on how we prepare for the coming of our Lord? It causes us to think about where in this world do we find our own wilderness and even in the midst of that discover the reality of the incarnation – that we aren't alone. That new beginnings happen, even in the wilderness. That while we don't always know why we find ourselves in the midst of those arid moments of our lives, God is at work and God has the ability to turn us toward God, repent of the ways we distance ourselves from God and become spiritually dry, and once

again lead us to the promised water of new life, new beginnings, and the comfort God provides for God's people.

We are in the midst of that new beginning. A new church year. Soon, even a new calendar year. In a world in which new beginnings at times are difficult to see and where it is all too easy to fall into despair, hopelessness, and despondency from the likes of the political disunity in our country that has reached toxic levels almost unparalleled in modern American history, heinous and evil attacks on innocent lives from college campuses and churches to the streets of Charlottesville, Las Vegas, Ferguson or Staten Island. Or how about global climate change, the chaos surrounding health care and taxes. Or the tragic fact one of every five children in our country goes to school hungry thus continuing the tragic cycle of poverty and despair. Or the problem of human trafficking enslaving millions of people in the sex-for-sale industry with average girl being forced against their will a mere 11 years old. Add to all of this ISIS, Boko Haram, missile testing in North Korea, genocide in Syria, refugees with nowhere to go and Puerto Ricans still longing for basic necessities. That's not even to mention racist divides that continue, glass ceilings that remain intact, the host of women abused, assaulted, and controlled by men in positions of power or things that may hit much closer to home - cancer, depression, anxiety, fear, addictions, loss of a job, mounting bills, low grain prices, broken relationships, etc.¹

We need new beginnings. We need the gospel of good news, the incarnation of the Word made flesh, the very presence of God meeting us and the world in the midst of the wilderness just as God did to God's people in the wilderness of Babylon where they

too were help captive against their will, in despair and felt abandoned by God, and longing for hope and restoration and onto the scene comes the prophet announcing this good news, this new beginning, “Comfort, O comfort my people.” And God did act bringing a return to their land through the hands of a foreign ruler, Cyrus of Persia. Meeting them and offering them new hope, new life, and a new beginning.

Perhaps that’s our Advent preparation this year. Praying for new beginnings. Letting down our guards and allowing the Holy Spirit to turn us back to God. Setting our sights on Jesus Christ, pointing to him, turning to him, glorifying him, praising him, proclaiming him, seeking him, and letting him guide us into new beginnings, new life, and new hope. Incarnational hope. God with us promise and hope. We are not alone hope. New beginnings found at the font and the Lord’s Table – fed, forgiven, and sent to proclaim new beginnings. Live out new beginnings. Respond to new beginnings through loving God, giving to God, faithfully stewarding our money, our time, our talents. New beginnings lived out in loving our neighbor, offering forgiveness, receiving forgiveness, letting go of bitterness and grudges, restraining for the tempters ways of spreading gossip against our neighbor, and standing up against injustice, speaking against powers that create not life but death, endings, and division.

New beginnings abound if we but open our eyes, turn from the beat of the world and our desire to satisfy our flesh, and seek the God of new beginnings who can bear forth the incarnation of new beginnings in our life, here at Bethany, and guide us, like Isaiah and John, to be messengers of the promise of new beginnings, the promise of hope, the promise of God with us, the promise of new life, and the promise there will come a

day when God will overcome the power of evil in the world. That is the good news that Mark thrusts his audience into. God is yet again acting. Coming to people who cry out in the wilderness for help. Bring, through God's Son, Jesus Christ, comfort to God's people. Comfort to a world in need. The hope and promise of a new beginning and new life. Amen.

ⁱ Reverend Michael Brown; Sermon titled "God at Our Doorsteps."