

Great Beginnings: Mark's Gospel
Mark 1:1 – 8
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
November 27, 2016

What makes for a great beginning?

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The movie Raiders of the Lost Ark begins with Indiana Jones making his way through a dangerous, booby-trapped cave somewhere in the tropical jungles of South America. Indiana Jones barely gets out alive. It was a great beginning to an adventurous movie.

What makes for a great beginning? What are the ingredients that are part of making a good, memorable and noteworthy start to a task or project?

Today is the first Sunday in Advent, the beginning of a new church year. The church year is not the calendar year. In life, our calendars identify our priorities. We follow sports calendars and school calendars. Farmers follow agricultural calendars for planting and harvesting. The calendars we keep help us manage our commitments and prioritize our principles. Calendars reflect the things that are important to us. The secular calendar year organizes life according to its mostly godless priorities. The Church Year is a spiritual calendar that organizes life around the story of God's involvement in human history, the story of salvation.

During this season of Advent, we will look at the beginning of each of the four gospels. Today we look at the beginning of Mark's gospel. The first thing he teaches is the need to remember our spiritual roots.

Look to your spiritual roots

² As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,

Mark begins with an appeal to the Hebrew scriptures, to the prophet Isaiah; As it is written. The story of Jesus does not begin out of nowhere. Mark understands, and wants us to understand, that the arrival of Jesus is part of the story of salvation that began with Abraham and continued under Moses and the prophets. The message of Jesus is part of the unfolding story of the Jewish people and of salvation history. God is working his purposes out. Everything that will follow in the story of Jesus is a reflection of God's unchanging purpose as revealed in the prophesy of Isaiah. John the Baptist's arrival is the most important event in Israel in four-hundred years. John's arrival is the fulfillment of God's purpose. It is part of God's plan.

The example of Mark's gospel tells us that when we begin the task of asking how God is leading, what does God intend for us, that we too should begin with our spiritual roots. Begin with God. Begin with the spiritual tradition that has been entrusted to you. As Christians, we take our bearings in life from the spiritual realities of the faith we

confess. The opposite is true as well: beware of receiving counsel and guidance from folk who are not part of the Christian community. Secular therapists; government paid guidance counselors; neighbors who are not church goers; friends who claim to be "spiritual, but not religious;" such folk do not understand the things of God. Such folk do not share our heritage. We begin with our spiritual roots: the Judeo-Christian heritage, the teaching of the scriptures. It is important that we listen to those who share our spiritual commitments.

Related to this first point is the next one: listen to God's word.

Listen to God's word

"Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,' "

How do we know God's will? How do we grow in our understanding of God's ways? God has revealed himself to us through his word. We learn about God by the study of his word. Through the centuries within the Judeo-Christian tradition God has sent his priests, prophets, apostles, and other leaders, to declare God's word, to write his word. God's word has been faithfully passed on to us in the pages of Holy Scripture. Study the scriptures. In doing so we, can learn how God is at work in our world.

Mark is telling us that John the Baptist is the person fulfilling the prophetic promise given by Isaiah. John the Baptist is "the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.' " John the Baptist's arrival represents the next stage in the unfolding revelation of God's word to his people. John was the most important person to be born in Israel in four hundred years. There had been no prophetic word from God for generations. The period of the Old Testament, the Old Covenant, was coming to a close. John is the transition person. He is present to proclaim the coming of the Messiah. I will say more about this in the last point of this message.

Great beginnings have spiritual roots. A good beginning is founded on learning God's word. Third, a good beginning is based upon an honest self-appraisal.

Practice honest in your self-appraisal

⁴John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

In the opening chapter of Dale Carnegie's famous book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* he tells the story of the capture of the notorious criminal, cop-killer, Two-Gun Crowley. Crowley is surrounded by police in an apartment building. He is wounded, and blood flows down his arms. He writes a letter addressed "To Whom It May Concern." He says of himself, "Under my coat is a weary heart, but a kind one - one that would do nobody any harm." Carnegie quotes another famous American as saying, "I have spent the best years of my life giving people the lighter pleasures, helping them have a good time, and all I get is abuse, the existence of a hunted man."

The speaker? The Chicago gangster, Al Capone. Clearly, these two are men whose self-appraisal is seriously skewed; their self-understanding is not connected to the reality of the lives they have lived.

The Bible is an honest book: so honest, it makes people uncomfortable. What are we told in v. 4? John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John proclaims “a baptism of repentance.” It is easy to miss how surprising this is. The Jews would baptize a convert to Judaism: a convert needed his sins forgiven! But baptism was not intended – to the Jewish way of thinking – for those *born* Jewish.

Yet God sends John the Baptist to the Jewish people, to prepare the way of the coming Messiah. And, the message John declares to prepare that way is the “*baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*” – for the Jewish people. They needed a new self-appraisal.

Making a great beginning means taking an honest self-appraisal. The biblical message is that all men and women have, at their core, a sin problem. We are not the men or women we are supposed to be. John the Baptist came on the scene proclaiming baptism for repentance and turning from sin. A great beginning means making a true, accurate, self-assessment.

Great Christians – the men and women of faith whom we naturally look to for inspiration and example – often describe themselves not as spiritual giants, but as the greatest sinners, the worst example, and the least worthy of God’s blessing. What is going on? Great Christians are not measuring themselves on a curve, against other believers. They see God in his glory more clearly and, consequently, they see their own personal need (and the greatness of Christ’s grace) more completely.

A great beginning has a spiritual root and is founded on God’s word. It is based upon an accurate self-appraisal. Next, a good beginning is willing to put in the needed effort.

Put in the needed effort

⁵ And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins..”

One of the “firsts” of our recent trip to Israel was a visit to the traditional site of the baptism of Jesus. Until recently, this area of the Jordan River was in a security zone and was not available to tour groups. Getting to this spot today is relatively simple. We left Jerusalem at 7:00 am on our bus. We traveled through the Judean wilderness and arrived at the site an hour or so later. In the ancient world, getting to where John the Baptist was baptizing took a great deal of time and effort. It was not a simple morning jaunt. It was a multiday walk from Jerusalem to where he was preaching and teaching alongside the Jordan River. Hearing John did not involve a casual effort. You did not just turn on the television. To hear John the Baptist required time and sacrifice.

Of course, anything worthy in life takes effort to accomplish. We must be willing to work at it. We are told that people from all over Judea and Jerusalem would make the effort to come and see John, hear him preach, and be baptized by him.

The example of the people of John's day presents us with a challenge. How willing are we to be inconvenienced for the sake of our spiritual lives? How willing are you to truly put God first in your life? What would happen if you gave him the first day of every week? If we acknowledged that Sunday is not our day, it is the Lord's Day? What if you made the commitment to be in church every Sunday; and not just when you feel like it – and certainly not if the Eagles are playing at 1:00pm; or if Penn State has a home game that weekend. What would happen if we gave God the first of every day? Pray and say, "O.K. God, it's your day." What would happen if we really gave him the first 10% of our paychecks? What would happen if we gave God our gifts first, our time first, and our abilities first?

Guys, let me ask you, "Do you remember when you first fell in love?" When you are in love, you are captivated by the one whom you love. You think about them all the time. You only see their good points. You are willing to sacrifice. When Lois Ann and I were first in love, she lived in Texas and I lived in New Jersey. She was a G.U.D. – Geographically Undesirable Date. It did not matter. I was a poor seminary student. Every spare penny went to phone calls and airline tickets. Sacrifices were motivated by love.

God's people are willing to sacrifice out of their desire for God and their love for Jesus Christ. Jesus is a consuming priority in life for those who really love him. If you love Jesus, everything mentioned in this sermon will make sense. It is ultimately a matter of love. If you get your love life with Jesus Christ straightened out: you will want to give him the first part of your week; you will want to give him the first of your day; you will want to give him the first part of your paycheck. You will want to make a good beginning.

The next thing we note about making a good beginning is the ability to sort out what is important and what is not. Those who make a good beginning disregard superficial matters.

Disregard superficial matters

⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey.

Not only is John's ministry center inconveniently located, but John himself can accurately be described as a *character*. John lived in the wild. His diet included honey and insects. And his clothing was made of camel skins and leather belts. [I am wearing my camel's hair sports jacket this morning in John the Baptist's honor – though I hope that I am more stylishly dressed than he could accomplish out in the Judean wilderness.☺]

Looking through the biblical record and through Church history, it seems clear that God has a fondness for choosing and using quirky characters to accomplish his purposes. When God draws us to himself, we may need to travel into the wilderness. We may find ourselves going *out of our way* in order to find the knowledge of God. And, when God draws us to himself, we may encounter folk who seem odd. God likes to use odd people. [We should all find that an encouraging thought☺!] The point is this: making a good beginning involves comprehending what matters and what does not matter; learning how to disregard superficial matters. Those who introduce us to the truths of Christ, who teach us the knowledge of God, are giving to us the greatest realities of the universe. We must learn to look beyond their clothes, style (or lack thereof), accent, background or pedigree.

Next, making a good beginning, as given to us by Mark's gospel, requires acknowledging Christ's authority.

Acknowledge Christ's authority

⁷ And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.

John is an important person in the spiritual history of the world. But John also knows his place. John's work is as a signpost, as a pointer. His purpose is not to build a constituency. He is not to draw people to himself. As he will later say, "He (Christ) must grow greater, while I (John) grow lesser.) John acknowledges Christ's authority. John has an important place in human history. At the same time, he knows that – graded on a curve – in the light of Jesus Christ's work in history – his (John's) role is a small matter. It is Christ who ultimately matters. John declares that Christ – the one who comes after him – is so much greater in stature that John is not even qualified to be his servant. John does what is required of him: he acknowledged Christ's authority.

And this leads to our final observation about new beginnings from the opening of the gospel of Mark: turn to Christ in believing faith.

Turn to Christ in faith

⁸ I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit

There is important symbolism in John's ministry that we do not want to miss. Let me explain why John's arrival is so significant in the story of salvation.

If we ask the question "What made the Jews unique among the people of the ancient world?" The answer revolves around the presence of God in their midst. All ancient peoples had temples, laws, sacrifices, priests and prophets. The Jews were unique because God's presence dwelt in their midst. When they were a wandering nomadic people, God's presence, the Shekinah Glory, would settle over the Holy of Holies of the Tabernacle. Later, when king Solomon built the permanent temple in Jerusalem, God's presence again visibly settled over the Holy of Holies of the Temple.

First Kings 8:10 – 11 reads: And when the priests came out of the Holy Place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, ¹¹ so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD. It was God's presence amid his people that made the difference.

However, the legacy of the Jews as God's people was checkered. In many ways, they failed. Because of their disobedience and failure, God's presence would one day depart the Temple. This was the sad message of judgment of the prophet Ezekiel.

Here is how Ezekiel describes the departure of God's presence from the midst of his people. Remember, God's presence is particularly associated with the Holy of Holies, the innermost part of the Temple. In Ezekiel 9:3, God's presence leaves the Holy of Holies and moves to the threshold of the Temple. Now the glory of the God of Israel had gone up from the cherub on which it rested to the threshold of the house. Next, God's glory moves from the threshold of the Temple to the east gate of the Temple. Ezekiel 10:18 – 19 tells us Then the glory of the LORD went out from the threshold of the house, and stood over the cherubim. ¹⁹ And the cherubim lifted up their wings and mounted up from the earth before my eyes as they went out, with the wheels beside them. And they stood at the entrance of the east gate of the house of the LORD, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them. And then, in Ezekiel 11:22 – 23, we are told that the glory of God departs the city of Jerusalem. Then the cherubim lifted up their wings, with the wheels beside them, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them. ²³ And the glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain that is on the east side of the city. God's presence is leaving the Temple, the city, the people of Israel. In departing, God's presence is moving east. What is the mountain on the east side of Jerusalem? It is the Mount of Olives. What is on the other side of the Mount of Olives? It is the Judean wilderness. And then, beyond the wilderness, is the Jordan River. This is the route God's presence takes in leaving. The ministry of the prophets ends in ancient Israel. After this comes four hundred years of silence. The question is raised: will God return to the midst of his people?

John the Baptist is the herald of the return of God's presence amidst his people: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.' Do you see the message in the symbolism of John's work? The glory of God departed the Temple and headed east, into the wilderness, beyond the wilderness to the Jordan River. Jesus' advent represents the return path of God's presence. When Jesus comes to John to be baptized in the Jordan river, the Spirit of God descends upon Jesus. After baptism, the Spirit sends Jesus *into* the wilderness. After the temptation, Jesus begins his ministry. Jesus' advent marks the return of the glory of God to the people of Israel. It is significant that in the first eight verses of Mark's gospel, we see the person and work of Jesus Christ being lifted up. John, the transition figure, baptizes with water, but Jesus Christ, the one to whom John points, will give the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who brings us into God's own family. It is through the work of the Holy Spirit that we are adopted into the household of God. It is through Christ's work, his sacrifice on the cross, that the way is paved that we might become the children of God.

Close

A great beginning has a spiritual foundation and it is guided by the teaching of God's word. A good beginning has an accurate self-appraisal, recognizing that we are men and women with a sin problem. Next, a good beginning is willing to put in the work to find God's remedy to the problem of sin. And, in the search for that remedy, a good beginning is not put off by superficial matters. It is okay if God uses quirky people to communicate his truth. A good beginning begins with Christ. And, finally a good beginning calls us to turn, believe and place our faith in Jesus Christ.

This is my invitation to you as we close today. The only sure beginning to life is based upon faith in Jesus Christ. We, you and me, are men and women with a sin problem. We are not the persons we are supposed to be. A good beginning, a sure foundation, is a life that is built upon faith in Jesus Christ. I am inviting you to lay that firm foundation in your life today. Turn to him in believing faith. Confess your sin. Confess your need. Ask him to enter into your life and remake and remold you, to make you into the man or woman or young person you ought to be.

Say "Amen" Somebody!

Mark 1:1 – 8

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who will prepare your way,

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