

December 3, 2023 - Advent 1

Prayer of the Day

Stir up our hearts, Lord God, to prepare the way for your only Son. By his coming strengthen us to serve you with purified lives; through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the 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 of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "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."

Sermon

"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

Imagine watching an Agatha Christie movie. You expect it to be a whodunnit. You expect the story teller to mis-direct you, and give you all kinds of false clues, and hide the identity of the murderer (because it's almost *always* a murderer!) until the last couple seconds of the movie

But instead of that, the opening scene shows the murder being committed, the camera pans back, and you see who the killer actually is! This is quite likely going to be a moment of disappointment, because it's not what you expect. What you expect is a twisting story line, leading up to the final gathering of all the suspects, with Hercule Poirot or Miss Marple telling the story again the way it actually happened, concluding with the final finger pointing at the guilty party.

But now that's not going to happen.

So you begin to wonder, "What's the mystery actually going to be about? There must be *some* kind of surprise coming; what will it be? Or, what will *they* be? What's the motive? What's the background? What secrets are about to be revealed? And who's going to figure it out?"

It just might be that there are going to be more mysteries to unravel than just, "Whodunit?"

I believe that this is what Mark is doing at the beginning of his gospel story. He's already told us who the main character is, and why he's important. So, we know right at the start that this is not going to be a "whodunit?"

But that's not all that this first line, this introduction to Mark's story, does. There are multiple layers to this one simple sentence, which reveal that a whole lot more is going on than simply, "Here's the good guy of the story you are about to hear."

So, let's take this short sentence one word at a time, and see what Mark is saying.

Keep in mind that Mark, as with most of what we call the New Testament, was written in ancient Greek. So Mark's first word is "**The beginning.**"

We are immediately sent back to the first verse of Genesis 1, which of course speaks of the beginning of creation. But Genesis also ties in the story of the people of Israel, not today's country, but the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Leah and Rebecca, Jacob and his wives, Job,

Isaiah, Ruth and Naomi. The New Testament writers insist that the Jesus event is a continuation of the long story of the Hebrew people.

But it's also more. By invoking the creation stories of Genesis, Mark is also suggesting that God is beginning a *new* creation in the Jesus event. It's consistent with the past, but it's also a new start.

The next word in Mark's opening sentence. "The beginning **of the good news**," or "**gospel**."

The word Mark uses was usually used to mean "good news of victory in war." It's a term celebrating that "our side" is better than the other guy at war. "Good news" in the Roman Empire context meant another conquest of another enemy, and another piece of land or province or city or waterway added to the Empire.

It's difficult to overstate the importance of the Roman context for the authors of the New Testament. The Empire impacted every aspect of everyone's life, and set the priorities for how everyone did everything. Rome celebrated strength, the glory of conquest, the power it had gained *over* other peoples and their kingdoms.

Mark is taking one of the Rome Empire's words, "good news," and *subverting* it, redefining it, using it in a *completely* different sense, a dangerous sense, to be honest. Rome wanted to define its terms, its people, all other people. Mark is not just using the vocabulary that the people of the Empire were used to using. This is a direct challenge *to* the Empire, the Empire's priorities, to the Empire's self-understanding, to the Empire's very existence.

And the reason this is the case is because of the Name that Mark then introduces.

"...the good news **of Jesus**...."

This is how radical Mark, and the whole early church, were. How dangerous, how risky.

A normal, every day, unremarkable "day labourer" from nowhere (which is what Jesus was) is not normally the stuff of "victorious good news," unless he had somehow helped to win a battle. And Jesus didn't have anything to do with that! Mark is redefining one of the Empire's big words, turning it on its head, and making it about anything *but* the glory of the Empire.

But the name of Jesus *also* hearkens back, again, to *Jewish* history. This name, in Hebrew, is pronounced Ye-shu-ah. In the gospels, we pronounce it "Jesus." But when it's in the Hebrew scriptures, we pronounce it Joshua.

And *this* is the name we have for the right-hand-man of Moses, the one who helped Moses lead the people out of slavery in Egypt and through the wilderness. And who then took over leading the people when Moses died, and lead them into the Promised Land, into the place of liberation and freedom, which was accomplished through the promise and action of God.

"Je-shu-ah," "Joshua," "Jesus" (however it is pronounced) means "the one who saves." A hint of what is to come. And that hint is clarified even more by Mark's next word.

"...the good news of Jesus **the Christ**...."

The term, or, more properly, the title "Christ," is another "borrowed" word, again from the Jewish tradition. "Christ" in Greek means the same thing as "Messiah" does in Hebrew: "anointed one." Anointing, in this sense, was a ceremony in which a person, a people or a thing, was set aside for as specific purpose, a holy purpose, a divinely appointed purpose. Traditionally (but not exclusively) it was performed by pouring oil over the head of the person, hence the phrase "anointing with oil."

Anointing was an integral part of coronating a king or queen and ordaining a priest. In the early church it was a normal part of baptism, by which the church prays for the anointing of the Holy Spirit, and it is a central part of prayers for healing.

By giving the title “Anointed One” to this nobody from nowhere, Mark is subverting the entire hierarchy by which the Empire was structured, by which religious traditions are structured, , and, quite frankly, by which our own self-understandings are structured.

It’s as if Mark is saying, “If you want to see who God is, if you want to be involved in what God is doing, you need to be paying attention to, you need to be hanging out with, the nobodies from nowhere, and let go of your obsession with the great and the powerful.”

And now, with the last couple words of his opening sentence, Mark goes completely off the deep end.

“...Jesus the Christ, **the Son of God.**”

There is an official imperial inscription in Rome, from before the time of Jesus, which hailed Caesar Augustus as “Son of God” and declared his birthday as “a beginning of good news [gospel] for the world.”

So Mark ascribing this title, this role, to a peasant Nobody from Nowheresville, is a pretty subversive, if not treasonous, statement!

Again, this is not just using the vocabulary that the people of the empire were used to using. Mark’s story, Mark’s priorities, Mark’s message, and ultimately the One to whom Mark is pointing *with* his “gospel,” are *all* direct challenges *to* the empire.

Mark is proclaiming that the empire does not define us. The nation does not define us. Our passports and driver’s licenses, our health cards and our credit cards do not define us. Our language and our families do not define us. Our privileges and our challenges do not define us. Our successes or our failures do not define us. Our bank accounts and income do not define us. As individuals, as a church, or anything else.

We can begin to see how dangerous and risky this “Jesus stuff” really is. Not just “was” back in the day. Not just “was” in the Roman Empire. “Is” today. Every standard by which *we* measure *life* is declared null and void. All because Mark has the audacity, the unmitigated gall to say that the One who does do all of this, the One through whom God is re-creating the world, is a common day-labourer from nowhere.

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” was a loaded sentence to begin Mark’s story of Jesus. And it still is.

We are in the season of Advent, the season of hope, the season of anticipation, the season of preparation, and the season of waiting. Some things are clear to us: the date of Christmas, who’s here today at worship, what we’re likely to have for lunch when we go home.

But there are a whole bunch of mysteries, too. What does the future look like for us as individuals? For this congregation? For this parish? For the church as a whole? What does the future hold for this town? This province? For the country? For the victims of the 40+ wars that are raging around the world right now? For the climate of this planet?

And how are we, as anointed followers of that anointed nobody, called to respond to all of these mysteries?

If I had a nice, simple answer to that question, I’d write a book and be rich!

But let’s remember that Mark has already given us the introduction to this story that we are living. In spite of all the mysteries that surround us (and they *are* legion!), we *already know* the identity of the one who has been promised, who has come, who will come, who *is coming*, and who walks with us, into *and* through, *all* of our mysteries.

This day, this church, this world, you and me and everyone else, are already a *part* of “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the [subversive!] Son of God.” Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers of the People

A - Beginning again, we trust the promise that we will be heard as we offer our prayers.

[*Short pause*]

A - Gracious One, you come in mystery, confounding our wisdom, hidden in the ordinary. May we embrace the “not knowing,” the “not yet,” the “soon,” trusting your promise in the midst of life’s conundrums. God who comes,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Gracious One, you come in introduction, making yourself known in baptism, in welcome, in addressing us by name, and sharing your name with us. May we welcome others as you welcome us, and introduce ourselves to your hurting world. God who comes,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Gracious One, you come in story, in plot twists and parables, in the unfolding of events, in the gradual process which reveals life. Grant that we may trust your presence in every step of **our** stories, and give us excitement as we anticipate each turning page. God who comes,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Gracious One, you come in life, calling us together to travel in community. Guide your church in its current fog, that we may live in your presence, even if we can’t see the next step. God who comes,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Gracious One, you come when light is dim, when hope seems pointless, when life seems a burden. Use us to touch all who are sick, who are hungry, who are cold, who are excluded, who are forgotten, especially those whom we name before you.

[*Long pause*]

God who comes,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Gracious One, you come in **our** mysteries, reminding us who the main character of our story really is. Give us faith to trust the story, and to live more deeply into your presence. God who comes,

C - Hear our prayer.

P - Into your hands we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

C - Amen.