

2 Advent B
Beginning at the Beginning

December 10, 2023
Mark 1:1-8

Last week I talked about beginning at the end. This week we start at the beginning. The first words in the gospel of Mark are: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God.”¹ The beginning for Mark is the good news – the gospel – *euaggelion* in Greek, from which we get evangelical – like in Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We begin with the good news, not with Jesus Christ.

There is no Christmas story in Mark. Mark never tells us about the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. That wasn’t important to him. For the Gospel of Mark, the birth of Jesus is not the beginning of the gospel.

Mark begins by quoting Isaiah – sort of. Some of these words are found in Isaiah, but others come from Exodus and Malachi. So, if you ever have troubles remember an exact Bible passage you can take comfort that even the Gospel writers had troubles doing that. The gospel begins with the Word of God – with the promises of God – words and promises that were given by God long before the birth of Jesus.

That’s very important to remember: the Gospel begins with the Word of God, with the promises of God.

From the Word of God declared in the Old Testament, Mark moves on to the Word of God proclaimed by John the Baptist in the wilderness. John’s clothing is similar to what the prophet Elijah wore. John continues in the tradition of the prophets – someone who proclaims God’s word to the people. While the prefix, pro- at the beginning of prophets means “before.” It could refer to proclaiming a promise *before* it happens; but, more likely, it refers to proclaiming God’s promises *before* people. Prophets are public proclaimers of God’s Word.

The word that is proclaimed at the beginning is a word of repentance – having a change in thinking and life. It is a word of baptism – being washed. It is a word of forgiveness of sins – being cleansed. It was a word that brought large crowds out into the desert. They came confessing their sins. They came to be baptized. They came to have their sins forgiven. The word of God that John proclaimed was powerful in its effect on the people.

The beginning of the Gospel is God’s word of promise to forgive the sins of those who repent. Believing God’s promises and repenting of sins prepares us for the coming of Jesus: “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.”²

John, dressed in the uniform of a prophet, declares that someone is coming who ranks much higher than that of a prophet of God: it is Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

However, these few words at the beginning of Mark were probably misunderstood by his readers.

In Greek usage, *euaggelion*, the word for “gospel” or “good news,” often referred to the announcing victory in battle. The messenger from the front lines ran back to announce to the king: “We’ve won!” That was *euaggelion*. It presents a bit of a different picture if we translate those opening words with, “The beginning of the **victory** of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” This

¹ Mark 1:1

² Mark 1:7

word of good news of victory right at the beginning puts an image our minds. Winning, being victorious has an obvious effect on the people. They jump up and down. They shout and yell. They are full of joy, hugging each other, giving high fives. On one hand, the proclamation of the gospel – of Christ’s victory – should have a similar effect on those who hear it – not that we will be jumping up and down and yelling in church like the home team after a football win. We proclaim Jesus’ victory, but, at the same time, Jesus does not appear much like a winner in this gospel. Mark tells this story of Jesus to correct some misunderstandings about the one called Christ or Messiah and Son of God.

The phrase, “son of god” was common among Greek people. Greek mythology had a number of children of gods. Perhaps the best-known one was Hercules. He had a god for a father and a human mother. (Does that sound familiar?) He was a super-strong, super-powerful, mighty warrior, who defeated his enemies in battle.

Remember, there was a war between going on between Jews and Romans at the time Mark was written. What could be more hopeful to them than hearing that a mighty, powerful, strong Son of a God was coming? They knew how Hercules had defeated his enemies. Shouldn’t they expect the same from another son of a god? One who is even more powerful? Wouldn’t that be the good news?

The readers of Mark are in for a surprise – in fact, there are many surprises throughout this book. The hero of Mark’s gospel is not someone like Hercules who fights and defeats all of the evil forces; but it is Jesus from the obscure town of Nazareth who dies on a cross. It is someone who lets the power of evil seemingly destroy him. What appears like a defeat to everyone will become Jesus’ victory with the resurrection. Jesus was not what the people expected.

While Mark clearly has a beginning to his writing. He doesn’t have an ending. The last verse in Mark, after the angel tells the women about Jesus’ resurrection, is: “So [the women] went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”³ Rather than a shout or even a whisper of victory or good news, there is silence. Rather than jumping up and down for joy, there is confusion and shaking with fear. That doesn’t sound much like a victory. That’s not an ending. The Greek ends in the middle of a sentence.

The story in Mark of Jesus’ victory begins at verse 1, but it doesn’t end at chapter 16, verse 8. There is silence and great fear. The good news of Jesus’ victory can’t end with silence. Good news has to be proclaimed. What good is a victory if no one ever hears about it? We have to proclaim it.

The good news begins with the first verse of Mark, but it doesn’t end with the last verse. The good news of Jesus’ victory over sin and sickness and death, is still happening. It happens with us.

The good news is hearing, believing, and trusting God’s Word. God uses others to proclaim the good news. There is the word from the prophets. There is the word from John the Baptist. There is the word from the man in white at the empty tomb. There should be a word from the women; and there should be the word from each of us. We have been told the good news. We believe the good news. We believe in the power of God through Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to forgive sins, to wash sinners clean in baptism, and to give new life to the dead.

³ Mark 16:8

Whenever that is declared, the Gospel of Mark continues. While it has a beginning, the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God is still being written through our words and deeds.