

December 6th, 2020 • Second Sunday of Advent • Holy Communion • Online Worship

“Where New Life Starts: When in Doubt, Keep Going”

Homily by Rev. Patricia Farris



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.”

About sixty years after Jesus had died, the Gospel writer, Mark sat down with parchment and quill to write a gospel, to capture people’s attention and imagination, to get them involved in the story, to get them engaged in what for him was clearly a life-changing story of redemption and grace. As Mark began to write, perhaps he asked himself: what words can I use? What’s my headline?

We just heard Rachel read what he decided to say. “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Wow! No Hollywood writer could have done it better. Crystal clear. Gripping. Intriguing. The *beginning*—there’s more to come...good news...might want to pay attention...of *Jesus Christ, Son of God*...but I thought he was just that carpenter from Nazareth? Oh, no! “*The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, Son of God!*”

Immediately, Mark continues: “as it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way...” Mark was a genius. He’s pulling it all together in his opening words. He focuses the people’s attention, and then he begins to layer in echoes of their history and their prophets. Genesis: “in the beginning, God created heaven and earth.” Exodus: “I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared.” Malachi: “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me; and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.” Genesis, Exodus, Malachi, Isaiah...

It’s also interesting to note what Mark doesn’t say. He doesn’t say: this is the story of Jesus Christ. Or this is the life of Jesus of Nazareth. No, he makes a bold theological and pastoral proclamation about the *euangelion*, the evangel, the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God. He’s not being a reporter here; he’s telling us what he believes to be true. He’s saying “This is where new life starts!”

Now in the first century, that word *euangelion* was widely used to refer to any kind of good news people might share with one another: family celebrations, special blessings, a birth...and so forth...

So we know that to Mark’s first audience, his news came with the connotation of something truly “good”, something to be welcomed and desired. And we who now live in such a “bad news” moment welcome it as well. *The good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God*. Mark’s portrayal of John the Baptist out there in the wilderness is all about good news for the people. About a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. And this news sounded so good, Mark tells us, that 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.

He told them: the one who is coming after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit, with holiness. Mark wants us to know the good news that the kingdom of heaven is here. Your sin will be forgiven, your brokenness made whole, your

wearied bones made strong, your aching hearts restored to the fullness of life. You—and you—and you—you will be baptized with holiness. Good news indeed!

For Mark, it is all just as God has promised. “Comfort, o comfort my people.” “Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up. Do not fear! Say to the cities of Judah, “here is your God!” See, the Lord God comes with might...he will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.”

The beginning of the good news is the forgiveness of our sin and the restoration of our wholeness. As the wonderful writer, Kathleen Norris, asks: “Can it really be that mercy is at heart of our God?” True mercy? We who live in this time that is both “sentimental and profoundly unforgiving”, as the Archbishop of Canterbury has described? Can it really be that the REAL good news is that mercy is at the heart of our God? Mercy for you and you and you and you...mercy for me?

You remember the old hymn... “Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling...why should we linger and heed not his mercies, mercies for you and for me? Though we have sinned, he has mercy and pardon, pardon for you and for me...”

How we need a sense of that mercy these days. Mercy for the ways we fall short. Mercy to undergird the kind of resilience and endurance we need to live these days with grace and hope. Mercy for the ways we feel inadequate to share with John the Baptist that work of preparing the way of the Lord. Mercy for the many times we are tempted to wonder if our efforts really make any difference. Mercy to bring the strength we need to not let fear or resignation keep our spirits hostage. Mercy to forgive ourselves for not being perfect. Mercy for the times we lose our temper or lose our perspective or let our spirits droop with anxiety. Mercy to remember God’s promised assurance and keep going on. Mercy for forgetting that God’s good news has already begun in Christ Jesus...

So begins God’s new beginning in Christ Jesus, the new heaven and the new earth, beginning even now, in our midst, in forgiveness and mercy, in redemption and love, in healing and wholeness, for each of us, and for all. This is God’s promise, the ground of our hope, coming into the world in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Coming to create new beginnings, to open the future wide with hope. This is news that can change everything about how we live: God loves us and wants us—all of us—to be whole and holy and loving and free and filled with hope. This is our story! This is our song! This is where new life starts!

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

Notes:

Kathleen Norris. *Living By the Word. The Christian Century.* November 29, 2005.

Archbishop Rowan Williams quote in Miraslov Volf. *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace.* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005.

Will L. Thompson. “*Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling.*” UMH #348