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 First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia
 First Sunday after Christmas Day, December 29, 2019
 Texts: Isaiah 42:1-4, Mark 1:1-20

The Beginning

Introduction to Scripture

In worship since last fall, we have been following the Narrative Lectionary, a four-year cycle of Bible readings. The way the cycle works is that in the fall semesters, we read primarily from the Old Testament, hearing the sweep of God's dealings with Israel. In the spring semesters, we read from one of the four gospels, in turn. This semester, it's the Gospel According to Mark. From today through Easter, we will cover the book of Mark.

For centuries, the gospel of Mark was considered sort of second rate. Greater authority was given to Matthew and John since they were thought to be written by two of Jesus' twelve apostles rather than mere apostolic men like Mark and Luke. A famous statement by the 5th century theologian Augustine that Mark was primarily a follower, a lackey, and a digester of Matthew held sway well into the 1800s. But all that changed with the rise of historical criticism. Modern scholars deduced that Mark was indeed the first gospel and that Matthew and Luke used Mark as a primary source. It's dated to around 70 AD, nearly forty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. A close reading of Mark reveals what a sophisticated storyteller and serious theologian Mark was. As we work through his gospel this semester, we'll notice that Mark is thrifty when it comes to details. He chooses them carefully, so you better pay attention. We'll find in Mark dramatic irony, and stories spliced on purpose within another, and what is called Mark's "messianic secret." And we'll find his whole narrative pointing toward the cross, asking implicitly what it means to follow a crucified Messiah.

So, we begin now with the first twenty verses of Mark, chapter one. Listen for God's word. *Dramatic Reading of Mark 1:1-20.*

Sermon

There are two camps when it comes to entering a cold swimming pool: inch your way in or dive in. I'm in the latter camp, and I think Mark the gospel writer is, too, literarily speaking. Mark just dives into his gospel. I know that on the liturgical calendar we are celebrating the Twelve Days of Christmas. But I'm sorry, Mark doesn't have any Christmas. There are no infancy stories about Jesus, like Luke and Matthew have so you can stick your toes into the water and get used to temperature. There's no high-flying poetic introduction like John has to warm you up. It just starts: On your *mark*, get set, go! Then, like the freestyle racer it's swim, swim, swim toward the black tile cross at the other end of the pool. Only for Mark it's immediately, immediately, immediately toward the rugged Roman cross at the end of his story. Mark uses the word "immediately" or a variant of it 47 times¹ in his short gospel which gives the

whole story a sense of urgency and purpose.

So, Mark just dives in and takes off. He starts with seven words that take 13 words to translate into English, namely: The beginning of the good news (i.e. the gospel) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It's not a sentence. It's more like a title or just an announcement. Even so, it is a peculiar way to start a gospel. Granted, no one had ever written a gospel before. Mark's creating a new genre. But why would you announce the beginning of something the reader knows is the beginning? A preacher would never say, "I'm beginning my sermon." She would just begin. Perhaps Mark has something else in mind by the word "beginning."ⁱⁱ

Where does the gospel begin? How does the whole thing get launched? According to Mark it starts with John the Baptist. In the ancient world a herald would be sent ahead of a king to announce the royal arrival. John the Baptist is Jesus' herald. Dressed in camel's hair cinched with a leather belt, fashion harking back to the prophet Elijah, and subsisting on a diet of bugs and honey, John was the voice saying, "Heads up! Monarch sighting! Get ready and straighten up!" Crowds flocked to hear him and be dunked by him in the Jordan River, dramatizing their willingness to repent and change their ways. Baptism wasn't entirely new. The Jews had ritual washings. John expands on the idea of washing clean in order to prepare for the new thing that he believed God was about to do.

Did you notice where Mark locates the beginning? The geographical place? This is one of Mark's details worth noticing. Mark locates the beginning in the wilderness. "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness. . . . John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness." The wilderness is a dry, rugged, barren place on the edge of civilization. It's risky and dangerous. And for the Jews, "wilderness" is a loaded word. Remember how the Israelites had to wander forty years in the wilderness before they entered the Promised Land? You think that wilderness is where God isn't. But there's nowhere that God is not. Even in the places that seem the most forlorn and hopeless, God is there. When Mark points out that the Good News begins with John the Baptist in the wilderness, maybe wilderness is as much a theological place as a geographical place.

In the wilderness, John proclaimed that there was someone coming after him, someone far greater than he. Invoking a slave and master image, John says, "I'm not even worthy to reach down and untie his sandals." Sure enough, that someone did appear on the scene. Jesus showed up, already grown. He came with the crowds and was baptized by John. So, the story of Jesus begins with his baptism.

Let me pause and tell you that two big themes in the Gospel of Mark are Christology and discipleship, i.e. who Jesus is and what it means to be his disciple.

Well, in the opening words we have already heard Mark tell us who Jesus is. He says that Jesus is the Christ (i.e. the Messiah, God's anointed one) and that he is the Son of God. That identity – Son of God-- is repeated here at his baptism. And we'll hear those same words identifying Jesus as God's Son two more times, once in the middle of Mark's gospel at the Transfiguration and once at the end of Mark's story on the lips of a Roman soldier when Jesus is on the cross. Here, it's proclaimed by a voice from heaven. "You are my Son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased." In Mark's telling of Jesus' baptism, the voice is heard only by Jesus. It will take the rest of the story for others to understand who he is. And there will be a lot of misunderstanding, a whole lot of misunderstanding before it's all over.

As for the theme of discipleship, what it means to be Jesus' disciple, Mark makes it pretty

clear that discipleship is following Jesus—just that simple and that hard. Discipleship is acting in ways that Jesus acted. Since the earliest times of the church, Jesus’ disciples have been baptized just like Jesus was baptized. Baptism is our beginning just like it was like Jesus’ beginning. In fact, we followed the example of Jesus this morning when we baptized Clara. So, I think it’s quite fair for us to put ourselves in Jesus’ place and hear that voice from heaven speaking to us, too. I think it’s good for each of us to hear from God, “You are my child, my beloved. With you I am well pleased.” As that affirmation is the foundation of Jesus’ identity, it is also the foundation of our identity. Each of us is a child of God. We belong to God. And God delights in us. That’s something worth remembering anytime, especially when we are in the wilderness.

Well, the wilderness is exactly where the Spirit immediately sends Jesus after his baptism. Actually, the verb Mark uses is stronger than that. The Spirit *drives* Jesus into the wilderness. That seems strange, doesn’t it? Even cruel. The wilderness is a harsh and hostile place, a place of vulnerability, as we’ve noted. The Israelites had to learn to depend on God in the wilderness because there wasn’t anything or anyone else you could depend upon. It took them forty years to learn that God is trustworthy and would sustain them.

Interestingly, wilderness pops up again later in Mark’s gospel. There’s a crowd of 5,000 people that have followed Jesus and his disciples to the wilderness. It grows late. They get hungry. There’s no food. The disciples rustle up just a few fish and a little bread, and then, in this barren, unlikely place, Jesus feeds the multitudes, and they are satisfied.

Ryan reminded us in the Longest Night service that it is in the darkness where new life germinates. Seeds grow first in the dark soil. And resurrection happens in the empty tomb before dawn. Similarly, the wilderness is where important things happen. Jesus was tested in the wilderness. He faced wild beasts, Mark tells us, in the wilderness. We may never have been in a geographical wilderness, but if you live long enough, you certainly will have spent time in the theological wilderness. You find yourself alone. You find yourself in a place that feels dark and hopeless. You get tested. You are scared by wild beasts with names like divorce, disease, unemployment, death. But as angels waited on Jesus, God sends angels to wait on us. God sends messengers to sustain us. Sometimes they literally show up on our doorstep with a casserole. Other times they are there with just the right words, just the right opportunity, just what we need to make it through. And yet other times, I believe they are invisible and whisper in our ear words we need to hear, “You are God’s child, God’s beloved, God’s delight.”

After forty days in the wilderness, Jesus came to Galilee, Mark tells us. Here Mark inserts an important note, namely that it was after John’s arrest. If wilderness wasn’t already a foreshadowing that this story about Jesus was going to include some difficulty and that being his disciple wasn’t going to be a walk in the park, this note about John’s arrest tips us off. Being Jesus and being associated with him were going to be costly.

In Galilee, then, Jesus begins his ministry proper by proclaiming the good news of God. “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near.” That is, the time you’ve been waiting for, the time announced by the prophets and John the Baptist, has finally arrived. The glorious new day of God’s rule, in which God makes everything come out right, has just dawned. This good news calls for decision. Repent and believe, Jesus says. Turn toward God in faith and obedience.

Then Jesus calls his first disciples by the Sea of Galilee, two sets of brothers who are

fishermen. “Follow me,” he says. And they do. They drop their nets and immediately follow him.

We stand on the cusp of a new year, a new beginning. In some sense, we are always in a place of beginning when it comes to discipleship. So, it’s on your mark, get set, go. Just do it. Dive in. In faith, follow Jesus wherever he goes. Follow him in the wilderness. Follow him along the seashore. Follow him to the cross. Follow him remembering the voice, “You are my child, my beloved. With you I am well pleased.”

The beginning of the good news, Mark announces. But not its end. It begins anew everyday as we point our feet in the direction of Jesus and fall in step. Amen.

ⁱ John Donahue and Daniel Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, (The Liturgical Press: Collegeville, MN, 2002), p. 65.

ⁱⁱ Cynthia M. Campbell, *Christmas in the Four Gospels*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2019), p.2.