

“A Very Good Place to Start”

Sermon: Year B, Advent 2

Text: Mark 1:1–8, Isaiah 40:1–11, 2 Peter 3:8–15a

Preached: December 10, 2017 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Grace to you, and peace, from Christ Jesus, who is the beginning and the end. AMEN

Recently, I was going through some old papers that my mother kept from my early childhood. I came across a story that I had written in first grade. My mother apparently had seen budding promise in it, because she had carefully stored it away. It was a typical child’s story, though there must have been some marks of genius that were evident in it, at least to a mother, and it was precious to her. On the final page—I was wordy even back then—I had scrawled “The End.” Remember how you would put those two words right in the center of the page when you had finished your story, and maybe draw a little picture beside them? That way everybody would know that there wasn’t any more to the tale, that the story had been resolved (even though, as I remember, most of the stories I wrote back then didn’t really have a clear enough plotline that it would be obvious to somebody that the story was done unless I told them), and that the reader could move on with his or her life. The story was over. Finished. There wasn’t going to be anymore. Even as adults, that’s kind of the way we expect our stories to be: sequential, orderly, the way Charly might teach his freshman composition students to construct them.

Well, apparently the writer of the Gospel of Mark went to a different school. The writer of Mark, the first gospel written of the four we use, some 40 years after Jesus’ earthly ministry, and the one we’ll be reading during most of the coming year, takes a very different approach. Instead of putting the words “The End” when the story is done, the writer *starts* with the words, “The Beginning.” “*The beginning* of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Now, before this week, I had always kind of thought of verse 1 as simply a title for the story. But then, when I thought about it, I realized that the writer could have just given as a title, “The Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Why would he include those words, “*the beginning* of the Good News of Jesus Christ”? After all, it should be pretty obvious that we’re at the start of the story. “Let’s start at the very beginning, a very good place to start.” Those words must mean something.

Then to complicate matters, the story as Mark tells it *doesn’t* start at the very beginning, or at least it doesn’t start where we think the story ought to start. Mark doesn’t tell any of the stories of Mary and Joseph, or of angels singing “Glory to God in the highest,” or of shepherds and wise men, and all of those things we associate with the beginning of Jesus’ life, the oh-so-familiar Christmas stories that we’ll be telling one another in just another couple of weeks. In Mark, the Nativity doesn’t seem to matter at all. He just plunges in midstream—literally, since the first action in the story is John baptizing Jesus in the Jordan—with an adult John the Baptizer and an adult Jesus, whom we know nothing about...and he brings in a quote from an ancient prophet that places the beginning of the story further back in time, and attaches it to a promise that you and I only understand because we just heard that same passage from Isaiah: “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.” So even though Mark says this is the beginning, it’s clear that this is all part of a larger story that has been going on for a long time. It’s kind of like the Star Wars movies, where you discover as you go along that the first movie is actually midway through the whole sequence, and the greater sweep of the story is only revealed as you hear more and more of the parts of the story. And yet, Mark calls this “the *beginning* of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” How can it be the beginning, if it’s the middle of the story?

Maybe the answer lies in that word “gospel,” *evangelion*, which is where we get our word “evangelical,” and which we translate as “Good News.” Have you noticed when I come out to the middle of the assembly to read the gospel that I announce it kind of like the writer of Mark does: “This is the Good News of Jesus Christ”? The term “gospel” is not the word for a collection of stories. Rather, it was the term for a newsflash. An official imperial newscrier would journey from town to town, proclaiming an *evangelion* to people—perhaps news about a victory that the empire had won, or a magnanimous act that the emperor had performed, or the birth of an heir to the emperor, a “little Caesar”—who, by the way, would be called officially “the son of God.” Hmmm, where have we heard that term before? If an *evangelion* was announced

to people, it was because something big had happened that would change everything, something had happened that mattered, and people needed to know about it. So the writer of Mark isn't announcing the beginning of a story *about* Jesus...he's alerting us to the fact that this Jesus he's announcing to us *is* good news for us and for the world, that things are about to change because of him. And the fact that it's the *beginning* of the Good News implies that there's a lot more good news to come.

And the writer ties this good news back to the good news that was promised in Isaiah, with the echo of John as the voice crying out in the wilderness, and all the promises of restoration and comfort and peace that God will bring. Well, that's all well and good, you say, but we're 2000 years down the highway here, and it still looks like there are a lot of bumps and potholes and some pretty deep valleys and some very steep inclines on this road that the coming of Jesus is supposed to level out. The world still has some pretty rotten things going on in it. It would be easy to begin to think that God has given up on this whole project, or that God isn't going to keep God's promise.

If we think of the Good News of Jesus as a story that is over and done, a story that had "The End" written on it 2000 years ago, then it's easy to end up at that conclusion. But if we see the Good News as having a grander sweep, if we see the coming of Jesus as the beginning of something that is happening as we speak, something that is still unfolding, then we get a different perspective. God's sense of time is not our sense of time....2nd Peter says that a thousand years in God's eyes is like a day. And Peter says that God is not being slow, God is being patient with us...giving us time to respond to the Good News, time to change the way we think and behave in light of that news, and time to announce that Good News to others, time to help God even out the rough places in our world, time to raise up the lowly, time to give graciously of ourselves as heralds of the Good News we have experienced. Peter actually says that *we* can hasten the new heavens and the new earth by learning to live righteously and at peace with one another, by living out amongst ourselves and those around us the vision of righteousness and peace kissing one another. See, you and I are part of the story. You and I are active characters in this ongoing tale of redemption and restoration of all that is broken. The story hasn't ended...we're right in the middle of it.

By the way, spoiler alert: The original ending of the gospel of Mark is even more abrupt than the beginning. We expect a Gospel book to follow a pattern in telling the story of Jesus: birth, life and miracles, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension. Matthew and Luke give us that. But Mark, in its original form, simply doesn't. In your Bibles, you'll probably find marked some brackets at the end of Mark indicating where material was added at a later date, with things that Jesus said and did after the resurrection. But the oldest manuscripts leave us hanging. After the crucifixion, the women go to Jesus' tomb, and see a young man, an angel, which means one who announces news...it's from that same word "evangel." And he announces more Good News to them, "Jesus has been raised, he is not here. Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." And they go home. Boom. That's where the gospel of Mark ended, with Good News that clearly is not the end of the story, with an announcement of more Good News that places the next part of the story in our hands. Jesus is no longer in the tomb, but is out alive and active in the world, waiting for us to come along and continue the story with him. Sequel to follow.

This time of Advent is a reminder that the coming of Jesus is not a story that has had "The End" written on it. It's Good News with "The Beginning" stamped on it, and that beginning is new every time we hear it—it's new every morning, from year to year, age to age. And God's promise is that there is more Good News to come for each one of us. The story isn't done yet. And you and I, sisters and brothers, have been written into the story, with a role to play in bringing Good News and comfort to a world that is longing for it. Thanks be to God. AMEN