

December 4, 2011
Advent 2, B
Mark 1:1-8

THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD. This is the first sentence in Mark's gospel – the first thing out of Mark's mouth, so to speak. **THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD.** What a great beginning!

If you were sitting down today, to write a gospel – a record of the life and ministry of Jesus – how would you start? “Dear So-and-so...” just like a letter? That's how Luke starts his gospel, pretty much: **I... DECIDED... TO WRITE AN ORDERLY ACCOUNT FOR YOU, MOST EXCELLENT THEOPHILUS, SO THAT YOU MAY KNOW THE TRUTH...** That's a good way to start - give an orderly account.

Or maybe you'd go back in time a little bit, take a flying leap at the story by filling in the back story. That's what Matthew does. He starts out with family history: **AN ACCOUNT OF THE GENEALOGY OF JESUS THE MESSIAH, THE SON OF DAVID, THE SON OF ABRAHAM...** And then he goes on to list the whole family tree. That's a good way to start – set the scene.

Or maybe you'd take the bird's eye view, from a cosmic perspective, like the one we get in John. You know these words: **IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD, AND THE WORD WAS WITH GOD... ALL THINGS CAME INTO BEING THROUGH HIM.**

Luke is telling a story, Matthew is recalling family history, John talking about first principles.... And today we have Mark's version. What is Mark trying to do?

THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD. You know, when Mark sat down with his goose-feather quill in his hand, and his lambskin parchment on the hand made table in front of him, so far as we know, no one else had ever written a gospel before. Even though Matthew is the first Gospel in the New Testament, scholars are pretty sure that Mark was the first one chronologically. It was probably written within a generation of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection – maybe 25 or 30 years after the facts. Not long – but long enough.

Thirty years can sure fly by – what were you doing 30 years ago? I bet some things stick out in your mind like mountain tops: the birth of your child, your marriage, heading off to university, falling in love, getting your first job... you don't forget those things. Those are easy to write down. But the details – that's harder. Was it Aunt Susie who drove you to the train station or Auntie Beth? The devil is in the details.

Mark licks his quill. He scratches behind his ear. He gazes at the ceiling, trying to find the right words. There was this man – who wasn't a man, but he was a man, but he was more than a man, and we loved him, but he left us, but he came back and now, and now, and now the world is completely different, but I don't know how to tell that part of the story. Yet.

Where do you start? **THE BEGINNING. THE BEGINNING. THE BEGINNING** of what? Of your life? Like when he plucked you up out of a pile of fishnets and squawking seagulls and called you a fisher of people? **THE BEGINNING** of insight? Like when he spat on the ground and mixed up a little mud and spread it on your blind eyes, and you could see? **THE BEGINNING** of redemption? Like when they hauled him away and beat nails into his hands and he groaned with the weight of the sin of the world? **THE BEGINNING** of forever... but Mark hasn't got that figured out. He doesn't know how the story will end. The last words in his gospel, right there in chapter 16, before the scribes and editors tacked on another ten verses to try and clean up the story, the last words he writes are these: **SO THEY WENT OUT AND FLED FROM THE TOMB, FOR TERROR AND AMAZEMENT HAD SEIZED THEM; AND THEY SAID NOTHING TO ANYONE, FOR THEY WERE AFRAID.**

Well, they must have said something – to someone, sometime – right? Or we wouldn't be here today! But that's the ending – today we are at **THE BEGINNING. THE BEGINNING** of what? Mark tells us: **THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS.**

Aha! There it is! What is a gospel, after all? A gospel is **GOOD NEWS**, *euangelion* in Aramaic, *evangel*, in English. The story that Mark is about to write, with ink on his sleeve, and his hand cramping as he forms the letters, he knows that the story is more than a story. It is **GOOD NEWS**. He knows that because he has seen it. He has seen what **GOOD NEWS** can do in a community. It can break down old fossilized traditions, and open people to

the goodness of God's kingdom within them. GOOD NEWS can soften hardened hearts and liberate them from guilt and pain and suffering, so that joyously they believe that they are the beloved children of God. GOOD NEWS can galvanize a community to stand up for justice for the downtrodden, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovery of sight for the blind.

Mark has a story that will change the world and he tells us right here in the first sentence: THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD. Mark doesn't have a virgin birth. He doesn't know anything about anyone named Mary or Joseph or Zachariah or Elizabeth. Mark doesn't have angels or sheep on the hillside or stars or magi – all of that got added later, because other stories needed it. Mark just lays it on the line: THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD.

He puts two titles in a row: CHRIST, meaning anointed one, and SON OF GOD. He doesn't want to explain how he knows this, or justify the truth of these claims, he just wants to get them down in black and white and move on to the more important stuff – in his mind.

I am encouraged by Mark's lack of interest in the birth narratives. Maybe it happened that way, maybe it didn't. Mark doesn't care – because to him it's not important. And for many of us, living in this era of scientific certainties, and living in this culture infected by biblical literalism, maybe we should just follow Mark and ignore the birth narratives altogether. They cause us huge intellectual torment for very little gain. Mark got it all out of the way in once sentence: And on he goes.

Except he doesn't go on – in the 'forward' sense of that word. He goes backwards. Back, to tradition, to Isaiah, the most important prophet of Judaism. He goes back to the text of comfort, COMFORT, O COMFORT MY PEOPLE says Isaiah in chapter 40. And what comforts them? The knowledge that God is coming! Mark reaches back to old Isaiah, to begin his new story of the coming of God. He reaches back and finds these words: PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE GOD'S PATHS STRAIGHT.

Mark is at the BEGINNING of his gospel. What do you do at the beginning, before you can do anything else, before you can start, before you can lay out

your tools on the workbench? Before you can chop the vegetables for the soup? Before you can do any of that, Mark tells us PREPARE. My father likes to say, “clear the decks!”

You can't do anything constructive in a mess! Clear the decks! PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD, put the dishes away, wipe the table, get the sawdust off the floor. Make space. Make room. Empty out a little bit. This is a beginning. When we put our Christmas tree up the first thing we do is get rid of a chair in the living room. We make room! In order to display our Christmas ornaments in the house, first we put away the usual bric-a-brac. We make space

PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE GOD'S PATH STRAIGHT. That's a tall order. Is that up to me? To MAKE GOD'S PATH STRAIGHT? Mark remembers that John the Baptizer had a good idea: repent! Repent. Put away unskilful habits, unhealthful attitudes, self-destructive beliefs: repent. That might work for us. But there are other ways to MAKE GOD'S PATH STRAIGHT in Mark's BEGINNING time.

Our Advent journey is full of spiritual practices, practices that make room in our hearts for God to be born again. The spiritual practice of writing Christmas cards - pray a blessing with each one. The spiritual practice of Christmas baking – ask God's Spirit to fill each person who enjoys the treats. The spiritual practice of welcoming family – dedicate your hospitality to strengthening love in the world. You can think of others, the ones that match your special traditions. They can all be spiritual practices if we do them with awareness.

And there is Mark, sitting at his table long into the night, scratching furiously on the parchment to get the story right. We're going to visit him a lot this coming year, as many of our texts will come from Mark's gospel. Today we meet him at THE BEGINNING, when he gives us good news. It is life-changing, world-changing, universe-changing news, and we are a part of it, we are part of that good news which spun from the cross to the fearful women at the tomb, to Mark to the church and down to us and on through us to generations yet to come. It starts here: Mark 1 verse 1. It starts here in the heart: PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD. It starts here. Today. This is the BEGINNING! All over again!

(A sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. Kate Crawford at First-St. Andrew's United Church, London, Ontario www.fsaunited.ca)