

## **“Blazing a Path to Christ”**

Salado UMC, Texas

10 December 2017—2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent

Preaching Text: Mark 1:1-8

**“Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood . . .**

**Make big plans, aim high in hope and work” Daniel H. Burnham (1846 - 1912).**

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Most new beginnings are of great consequence. Beginnings offer for us a tone of what follows. Beginnings offer hints as to what we might reasonably expect. The beginning of Mark’s Gospel is unique among the four Gospels. Matthew begins: “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” Luke offers this for its opening strategy into the gospel story: “Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us . . .” John inaugurates his gospel, writing: “In the beginning . . .” We reason that these are diverse introductions for diverse theological motives. How is Mark’s beginning so unlike the others? Does this make a difference?

Beginnings also create in our minds ways to ponder the end. Mark’s end is plainly unusual: “They said nothing to anyone for they were afraid” (Mark 16:8). This unsettling and cryptic finish to Mark’s Gospel had those who canonized the Bible struggling for more palatable endings. In fact, readers will find three distinctive endings for Mark in sound study Bibles. Accordingly, Mark’s authentic conclusion really doesn’t end the Gospel at all. Rather it points to a story to give us hope and a new sense of beginning. “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But 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.”

“He is not here,” is conceivably the best “good news” of all. Neither manger nor tomb can hold God’s incarnate Messiah. This is what we have come to hear—God’s good news announced in Jesus!

Every new beginning offers us a new opportunity for hope. Whether we begin a new job, a new marriage, take a vacation, enter a new phase of schooling; each new beginning appears on the horizon as a sunrise of hope. Mark 1:1-8 is today’s lesson. It begins the good news/gospel of Jesus Christ. Hear the launch of Mark’s story:

**[1:1] The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.**

**[2] As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,**

**"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;**

**[3] the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:**

**'Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight,' "**

**[4] John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. [5] 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. [6] Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. [7] 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. [8] I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:1-8).**

We are in the season of Advent. Advent begins a new Christian year. As a church we anticipate and hope for the good things God will do among us. Perhaps, God will bring us healing and wholeness? Perhaps, God's preference for peace can somehow creep into our world? Perhaps scientists will discover a cure for one of our planet's potent diseases that plague our human family? Whatever are our hopes and dreams, we embrace this hope at Advent more than any other time of the year.

Israel, in the first century BCE, euphemistically speaking, "entertained" an occupying Roman army. For most folks, poverty and hunger were the order of the day in Palestine. A small nation with a proud tradition had just about given up hope. Israel had waited for Messiah for so long, that most people did not actually know what to expect. Some anticipated a warrior/Messiah who would overthrow the detested Romans. Yet, most people did not have a clue about what to expect. They just knew that they were near the end of hope, which is like being at the end of your rope.

Then suddenly, from the wilderness of all places, John the Baptizer proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Why? Because, as Mark tells us, John "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.' "

We today are not in such dire straits. We have a more or less well functioning economy. Our nation now has remarkably low jobless rates. Certainly, we have our problems, but our lives are "tolerable," as Southerners like to say.

Yet, we know that there has to be more. We each live in a wasteland of broken relationships. We each live in a desert of broken promises. We each live in a wilderness of a lifetime of bitter disappointment. I am not saying that having a roof over the head or food in the belly is not worth a hearty thanksgiving. However, many of us at times have a hollow feeling in the pit of our stomachs. We know that God intended more for us. But what?

Advent and John the Baptizer offer us hope in a new beginning. Whatever vexes you and whatever it is that is unfulfilled, this is the season of the year to begin again and set it aright. There comes a moment in all our lives when it is time to begin anew. This new beginning offers us an occasion to regain the divine hope that God offers us.

I want to draw on an image from deep within Isaiah's prophecy:

In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz came to him, and said to him, "Thus says the Lord: Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover" (Isaiah 38:1).

King Hezekiah obviously is near the end. We are not—or I certainly hope we are not. Yet, the image of "setting our house in order" is a good one to begin anew. During the balance of Advent, as we await Christmas, we get our house ready for guests. We dust, we vacuum, we decorate, we cook, we bake—all

for those who come from near or afar to visit us. This visitation is all about relationships. We love those who visit us.

If this is true, then this season I suggest that we set our spiritual houses in order. Why? Because in this sacred place, and in your sacred life, we all have the opportunity to prepare for the most important guest we will ever receive. The guest is the one of whom John tells us this Second Sunday of Advent: “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.” If we can put our terrestrial house in order, why not go the second mile, and put your heavenly home in order, too?

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