

Advent 2: The Beginning

Mark opens his narrative about the life and ministry of Jesus with these words: The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God. I remember the point emphasized by almost every English or writing teacher I have ever had was that you had to have a good thesis statement up front. You begin with what you want people to know; with what is most important. Mark certainly makes it clear what he thinks is most important about the story he has to tell when he states he is writing about the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God. In that strong statement of Jesus' identity we often overlook those first two words: the beginning. It seems that to Mark the beginning of the gospel comes early in the relationship between God and Israel. This seems a little odd to us. This is especially true I think because most of us associate the beginning of Jesus' story with the manger in Bethlehem, or perhaps with the visit of the Angel Gabriel to Mary announcing she would bear a child. We think of the story as told by Matthew and Luke, often placing parts of them together to make one story. The beginning of the gospel news like the New Testament itself seems to start with Matthew where the first chapter gives us a genealogy for Jesus' place within the lineage of Israel's people and with his birth. But there is no story of Jesus' birth in the gospel of Mark. Instead you might have noticed when I read the opening passage of Mark it contained a portion similar to the passage we also read this morning from Isaiah. Mark opens with Isaiah's words telling Israel that the Lord will send a messenger to prepare a way for the Lord to come. There will be a voice crying out in the wilderness to prepare. Mark sees this as the place to start telling the good news of Jesus Christ. The question is why. Why does Mark introduce us to John the Baptist first through Isaiah? John the Baptist actually appears in all four gospel accounts, but only in Mark do we meet him first. In all four gospels, the same portion of Isaiah is quoted in connection with John the Baptist. Why does Mark see this promise of a messenger so important that it begins the story he tells? Mark uses Isaiah's words to identify the messenger who is preparing a way in the wilderness. This connection is made in all the gospel accounts, but only in Mark does it occur first. Why do we meet Jesus as an adult, not as the babe in swaddling clothes? Perhaps it is because Mark's gospel is so focused on the acts Jesus performed, not his teachings; not on Jesus' relationship to any but God. Mark clearly identifies Jesus as the anointed one, the son of God but the support for this statement comes from the prophet Isaiah and John the Baptist's appearance in the Judean countryside, not a genealogy or the story of a miraculous birth. Given that Mark states Jesus' identity as a known fact, then why does Mark sound this note about preparation for the Lord's coming so loudly? Why does John the Baptist appear so early in the Advent season's passages, even when Mark is not the lectionary gospel for the coming year? Perhaps it is because the focus of Advent is on preparation, of being ready. Just because we hear the story of John the Baptist so often, perhaps we miss some of the details which are found in the story. The Isaiah passage opens with "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." Up until this point Isaiah's word from God has been all about the judgment which God will make on Israel and Jerusalem, but here the news is that God is about to act to redeem them. The exile will soon be over and they will leave Babylon and return home. This passage is then a metaphor describing this journey back to God from the wilderness. Although the returning exiles would probably not have walked through it, the Syrian Desert was between Babylon and Israel. This creates a parallel with the journey through

the wilderness after leaving Egypt. That is the context for Isaiah, but what does Mark want to establish with this connection? One of the obvious connections is that Mark sees Jesus not only as being the Christ but the one who comes after John who came after Isaiah. The Advent of Jesus marks a new chapter in an ongoing story. John the Baptist is essentially an Old Testament figure as the description of him is based on descriptions of Elijah as found in 2nd Kings. He lives in the wilderness, he eats locust and honey, his clothing is a loin cloth. Although we often see the Hebrew word translated as belt, it really describes a garment more like one seen in Tarzan movies. In no way does John the Baptist fit into the mainstream of religious thought—just like Elijah was a voice which opposed the mainstream of Israel’s political and religious leaders. John the Baptist’s physical appearance would have been startling to his contemporaries; just as his message was definitely not one to make the mainstream religious leaders comfortable. John’s role is to announce that God is going to come and visit God’s people. Isaiah said there would be a messenger to announce the visit, John is that messenger. The message is not to prepare so that the Lord will come, but to tell the people the Lord is already coming whether you are ready or not—so you had better prepare. Repent and be forgiven; repent and be baptized with water to be ready for the one more powerful will come and baptize with the Holy Spirit. Mark wants us to realize that the kingdom of God has dawned with the coming of Jesus; the reality of God’s rule is established through a new covenant sealed in Jesus’ blood. But the new covenant is rooted in the old. In the Isaiah passage we hear the voice of God saying I am coming to my people and nothing will stop me: mountains will be torn down, valleys filled in, rough places will be leveled and made smooth—whatever it takes to get my people to return to me. In the good news Mark is preparing to tell us—we discover just how far the desire of God to reconcile to us will go—ultimately to the cross. But here at the beginning of the story Mark is telling we have connections which tells us this has always been God’s desire: for us to repent and turn back to God. So part of why Mark begins the story the way he does is to make certain we understand that continuity—that faithfulness of God to us. Isaiah says, “Comfort, O Comfort my people.” And knowing the faithfulness of God to us is a comfort. Isaiah’s imagery of God coming as the shepherd who feeds the flock, gathers the lambs in his arms to carry them as he gently leads the mother sheep is one which describes careful tending. By this connection to Isaiah’s words of hope to the exiles, we have the basis for some of the descriptions of Jesus. Mark tells us that God is ushering in a new age, but makes it part of a continuum. And Mark’s present is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. In this statement he is not just talking about the beginning of his narrative. Mark is telling us that the whole gospel account is just the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. What Mark is narrating is just a part of the ongoing story of God and the people of God. As Mark’s listeners heard the stories of some of their forebears in the faith, when we read Mark’s gospel we learn of the stories of our ancestors in the faith, we are called to take our place and do our part in the still ongoing story of God and the people of God. People came from the towns and villages of Judah into the wilderness to hear John the Baptist proclaim that the Lord was coming. They came and they responded to his call to repent, they confessed their sins and were baptized. Perhaps one reason the second Sunday in Advent focuses on preparation as preached by John the Baptist is the sense of urgency found there. We know when we hear that John is the voice crying in the wilderness that Jesus is close; the active ministry is about to begin. The waiting is over. John calls the people to repent NOW. The time is NOW. This urgency which runs throughout the gospel of Mark is another reason

why Mark begins his narrative with Jesus at the beginning of his ministry. When you begin the story with the birth of Jesus there is a waiting period before we hear Jesus' message for us. And what do people do who are in a waiting mode—they procrastinate. Most of us have the tendency to delay preparations for an event until the time for that event is close. There is nothing like knowing you are going to host friends in your home to propel you to a thorough house cleaning. Mark wants his listeners to have that sense of urgency about their preparations for Jesus' return. Mark tells his listeners that God's appearance is imminent; the promised anointed one is coming, repent so your sins can be forgiven. When we read that John the Baptist cries out in the wilderness "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" each Advent, do we take it seriously? Do we clean our spiritual houses and make sure that we have room prepared for Jesus? When we enter the season of Advent, are we looking back and enjoying the beauty of knowing of God's continuing faithfulness? Are we looking forward to the second coming when God will firmly establish the kingdom and there will be no more hate, violence or grief? Both of these are distant events for us; either 2000 years ago or at some unknown future time. Both of these views can lead to procrastination. But Mark tells us the story he is telling is the beginning of the good news, a continuing of God's care for us. Prepare the way for Jesus to enter into your life is the message we need to hear. For the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God is that Christ is still present with us. Thanks be to God.