

“Where’s the Beginning?”

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

One of our neighbors in my hometown worked in a local bookstore and would often bring home books that had been taken off the shelves. The books would normally have been returned to their publishers; but instead of returning the entire book, the publishers merely required that the bookstores take off the front covers and return them for credit, and discard the rest of the books. But instead of throwing them in the dumpster, our neighbor gave them to us, so we always had a wide variety of books at our fingertips. The only problem occurred when the store’s employees got a little overzealous with ripping off the covers, and instead also ripped out the first several pages of the books. It meant that we were deprived of the book’s beginning, which often meant understanding the rest of the book impossible. It is very difficult to appreciate a story when you don’t know it’s beginning.

I often have this same feeling when I approach the Gospel According to Mark, which begins with the phrase *“the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”* (Mark 1:1). When I read these words, my response is usually *“where’s the beginning?”* Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark omits what most of us would consider the beginning of the gospel story of Jesus Christ: his birth. In a few weeks, we will hear Luke’s detailed account of the birth of Jesus in the manger in Bethlehem, as well as the story of the angels appearing to the shepherds to announce that *“to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.”* (Luke 2:11). While the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel is somewhat different, it provides us with details of Joseph’s reaction to Mary’s pregnancy and how in a dream the angel informed him that Mary *“will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”* (Matthew 1:21). Matthew also gives us the story of the visit of the Wise Men, who come bearing gifts to pay homage to *“the child who has been born King of the Jews”* (2:2). While John’s Gospel does not provide us with a similar account of Jesus’ birth, it locates the beginning of the story of Christ in the very beginning: *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”* (John 1:1).

But even though Mark announces that his Gospel commences in “the beginning,” it appears to be missing several pages. After quoting the prophet Isaiah, the first person we meet in this Gospel is John the Baptist – not the child of Zechariah and Elizabeth to whom Luke introduces us, but the adult Baptizer who *“appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”* (1:4). When Jesus appears later in the first chapter, he isn’t the child of Mary wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, but a fully-grown man who *“came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’”* (1:14-15). Jesus then goes on to call his first disciples and begins his ministry among his people. There doesn’t appear to be any “beginning” to the beginning of Mark’s Gospel!

What may appear strange to us might actually be due to the way in which this author understands the meaning of the word translated “good news.” “Gospel” (*euangelion*) in Mark probably refers to the oral preaching that took place in the decades before this first gospel was written, the proclamation (*kerygma*) that Jesus is the only source of salvation:

- “For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, asking that by God’s will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you.” – Romans 1:9-10.

- “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” - Romans 1:16.
- “... on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.” – Romans 2:16.

The gospel that is “beginning” for Mark in this place is not merely the story of the birth of Jesus, but the entire proclamation of the good news of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that has been proclaimed since the apostles first began preaching the good news on the day of Pentecost. It is this use of “gospel” for the preached message about Jesus that *“captures the significance of oral testimony as the root of Christian faith.”* (PHEME PERKINS).

There are other aspects of this beginning of Mark’s Gospel that are significant not only for this Evangelist’s account but also for the message that is proclaimed through it. Mark will use “Christ” as a messianic title that identifies Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s prophetic promises. It will form the content of Peter’s confession – *“you are the Messiah”* (8:29) – where it represents an insight that distinguishes Jesus’ disciples from the popular opinions about Jesus. Mark also identifies Jesus as the “Son of God,” which human beings did not confess prior to the crucifixion. It reflects a truth about Jesus that can be understood only when the fullness of his divine purpose is realized – when he is crucified, died and was buried, and on the third day rose again. Christianity began with a new message about what the God known through the Hebrew Scriptures had done in Jesus Christ.

- “The abrupt beginning of Mark provides an opportunity to highlight a different feature of our Christmas celebration: the fulfillment of God’s promise of salvation ... The public ministry, death on the cross, and resurrection of Jesus are the events in which God’s love comes to humanity.” – PERKINS.

It is fitting that we are reminded at the beginning of this new church year that our relationship with God begins with the Gospel message of Jesus Christ, that *“if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united in a resurrection like his.”* (Romans 6:5). The beginning of the good news that is ours begins when we are baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection, through which we are *“reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ.”* (ELW Holy Baptism). Our hope for the future begins with the good news that through Christ’s death and resurrection God has given us *“a new birth into a living hope ... [and] an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you”* (1 Peter 1:3-4). For us, the beginning of our encounter with the Gospel of Jesus Christ is when we heed John the Baptist’s call to *“prepare the way of the Lord,”* to look upon every day as a new beginning in which we rise to give thanks and praise to God and serve others as children of his marvelous light:

- “[Holy Baptism] signifies that the old person in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily sorrow for sin and through repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.” – Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*.

Unlike those books we received from our neighbor, the Gospel of Mark isn’t missing some pages. While we hear the story of the birth of our Savior from other gospel sources (primarily Matthew and Luke), Mark reminds us that the beginning of the gospel that is the message of *“good news of great joy for all the people”* (Luke 2:10) is the full gospel message that the Church of Jesus Christ has and continues to proclaim: *“Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.”* Our lives begin where the Gospel begins: with the good news that is ours in the child born of Mary, the one who for us and for all people will always be *Emmanuel* – God is with us! Amen.