

“From the Beginning”

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

One of the positive aspects of this year’s social distancing and staying at home has been that I have had the opportunity to read many of the books that have been gathering dust in our basement. One of these books was a thriller by one of my favourite authors, Dean Koontz; but as I was reading the book, I began to notice that he was making frequent references to past events that were not included in this novel. After a search on the internet, I discovered that the book I was reading was actually the second in a five-volume series on this character; while I was able to follow the story, there were details that were missing, and after I finished the book I ordered the first volume so that I could follow the story from the beginning and fill in the missing parts that were not included in this edition. There are times when we may come into a story that is in progress, and that while we may be able to follow the plot we know that something is missing that can only be understood if we go back to the beginning. If you are late for a movie, you may be lost because some of the details of the story were in the beginning of the show. If you begin to watch a television series in its second or third season, you may not understand the relationship of the various characters that was established in the earlier episodes. In real life, many of the events that take place in our communities and nation can only be fully understood if we go back in history to where various events and conflicts have their origins. If we are to fully understand a narrative, we must start from the beginning.

The opening of the Gospel According to Mark seems to offer a promise that we are getting into this story from the beginning. The opening of this Gospel (which is probably the earliest of the four Gospels) announces that it is “*the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*” (1:1). The “good news” (*euangelion*) is the “gospel,” the message about Jesus Christ that was proclaimed long before the four Gospels of the New Testament were written (Paul introduces himself at the beginning of Romans as “*Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God*” – Romans 1:1). This oral testimony (*kerygma*) was at the roots of the Christian faith and the means through which the gospel was shared in the early decades of the Christian Church (“*Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us ...*” – Luke 1:1); it is the message that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, “*the Messiah, Son of the living God*” (Matthew 16:16) and the “Son of God,” which has its roots in royal terminology, the newly anointed king who is declared God’s adopted Son:

- “I will tell the decree of the LORD: He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you.’” – Psalm 2:7
- “I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of earth.” – Psalm 89:27
- “I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.” – 2 Samuel 7:14.

During his ministry, God refers to Jesus as God’s “beloved Son” (“*And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’*” – 1:11), and even demons acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God (“*Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and*

shouted, ‘You are the Son of God!’” – 3:11). During his Passion, Jesus accepts the title (“*Again the high priest asked him, ‘Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?’ Jesus said, ‘I am’*” – 14:61-62) and is acknowledged Son of God by the centurion at his death (“*Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, ‘Truly this man was God’s Son!’*” (15:39). Mark does not assume, however, that human beings confessed Jesus as Son of God prior to the crucifixion; “*for the Gospel of Mark as a whole, emphasis on the miraculous power of Jesus is subordinated to the presentation of Jesus as the beloved Son of God who accomplishes God’s Will on the Cross.*” (Pheme Perkins).

After such an auspicious beginning, we may expect that Mark will then turn to the familiar and beloved Christmas story replete with angels, shepherds, and a child in a manger. But surprisingly, there is no account of Jesus’ birth in this Gospel; in fact, the first time we are introduced to Jesus he is an adult on the banks of the Jordan River preparing to be baptized by John the Baptist. It feels as if we have come into the story in its second volume or joined a movie a half-hour after it has begun or are watching the second or third season of a television program. How can Mark claim that his work is “the beginning” of the Gospel when the beginning we are celebrating this season is missing? Other Gospels do a much better job of sharing the story of Jesus from its *actual* beginning: Luke gives us the beloved Christmas story along with an entire first chapter describing the angel Gabriel’s announcement to Mary, Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, and her beloved song the *Magnificat*. Matthew focuses on Joseph and gives us the account of the visit of the Wise Men to pay homage to Christ, the newborn king. Even John’s Gospel speaks of the birth of Jesus as the moment when “*the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.*” (John 1:14). Mark’s Gospel, on the other hand, seems to be missing a few pages; how can this Evangelist claim that this is the “beginning” of the Gospel when an important part of the story is nowhere to be found?

Mark certainly knew about the accounts of Jesus’ birth that were circulating at the time (Matthew and Luke shared a common source that the used in various ways in their Gospels). He would not deny the fact that Jesus was born and lived as a full human being; Mark’s focus is rooted in his understanding of the true origins of the Gospel, the “beginning of the good news” that was proclaimed long before Jesus was born in the Bethlehem manger. Mark connects this good news with the prophecies of salvation in the Old Testament; some translators believe that the opening sentence of the Gospel should continue so that “*the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*” has its origins “*as it is written in the prophet Isaiah ...*” The announcement of the “*messenger ... who will prepare your way*” (1:2) is the message first proclaimed to the exiles in Babylon: “*In the midst of devastation and despair, of hopelessness and certain destruction, the exiles hear the good news: God is here, God is victorious, your God reigns.*” (Karoline Lewis). Mark points to God’s word of comfort and hope spoken through the prophet as the true beginning of the “good news” that is fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ:

- “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God ... He will feed his flock like a

shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.” – Isaiah 40:1-3, 11.

The beginning of the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy comes with the appearance of John the Baptist “*in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*” (1:4). In the Old Testament, salvation traditionally comes from the wilderness; those who come to be “gathered together by baptism” by John are the remnant, the redeemed who will experience God’s coming as the day of salvation. Those had responded to the Baptist’s call (“*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*” – 1:5) were certainly among Jesus’ earliest followers that are identified in John’s Gospel:

- “The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, ‘Look, here is the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, ‘What are you looking for?’ They said to him, ‘Rabbi (which translated means Teacher), where are you staying?’ He said to them, ‘Come and see.’ They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day.” – John 1:35-39.

Mark includes some details about John the Baptist which may appear strange to us but for his original audience would identify him as a prophet of God. His clothing – “*camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist*” (1:6) recalls the prophet Elijah (“*A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist ... it is Elijah the Tishbite.*” – 2 Kings 1:8). John’s diet of “*locusts and wild honey*” as abstention from meat and wine also marked him as a prophet (“*But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine; so he asked the palace master not to defile himself.*” – Daniel 1:8). The presentation of John the Baptist as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy is completed when John points away from himself to “*prepare the way of the Lord*” in his proclamation to the crowds that “*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.*” (1:7-8). The Baptist’s role in Mark is to introduce Jesus as the Coming One, the fulfillment of God’s promises which “*God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son ...*” (Hebrews 1:1-2). Mark begins the Gospel of Jesus Christ with a clear announcement of the coming (advent) of the Lord, inviting the readers of this Gospel to “*identify Jesus’ appearance with the approach of God*” (Perkins).

- “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ reaches back to the promises of God and helps us imagine God-filled realities, both now and in our future life with God ... The good news of God brings hope to those who find themselves in the peripheries of our world, but it also belongs there. God’s good news of grace announces God’s presence on the fringe, God’s love that goes beyond the boundaries of where we thought God was supposed to be, and God’s promise that there is no place on earth God will not go or be with us.” – Lewis.

We are blessed with four Gospels that offer us unique perspectives on the Gospel message that is at the heart of our Christian faith, the Word of God that is “*a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my*

path.” (Psalm 119:105). Luke’s Gospel blesses us with the beloved Christmas story of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, and the angel’s announcement to the shepherd’s that “*to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord*” (Luke 2:11). Matthew begins his Gospel with “*the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of David, the son of Abraham*” (Matthew 1:1), identifying Jesus as the fulfillment of the covenant promise God made with Abraham that “*in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*” (Genesis 12:3). Matthew also identifies the birth of Jesus as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah that “*the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us.’*” (1:23; Isaiah 7:14). While John’s Gospel, like Mark, does not contain an account of Jesus’ birth, like Mark it points the beginning of the Gospel message far earlier than the birth of our Lord in Bethlehem; John goes all the way back to the origins of the universe, where “*in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*” (John 1:1); Jesus is the one who we confess is “*true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary*” (*Small Catechism*). Mark’s Gospel blesses us with the powerful message that “*the one who comes in fierceness comes from the one who gave words to the prophets and will be accomplished by the holy power beyond comprehension ... this is the canon of the good news of Jesus Christ.*” (Julia Seymour).

Our reading of Mark’s Gospel is not the same as coming into a movie in the middle or beginning with the second volume of a novel. While we need to go to other Gospels for the story of Jesus’ birth, Mark invites us to see the beginnings of the good news, the Gospel, in the word of God spoken to us in the Hebrew Scriptures, the promises God made through the prophets that are now fulfilled with the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The message that God is faithful to God’s promises, that in Christ God has accomplished what God had promised from the beginning, is a source of strength and hope for us in these uncertain times; as God’s Word brought the powerful message that “*the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken*” (Isaiah 40:5), we can meet even these most difficult days with the confidence that even though “*the grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever*” (40:8). We join our voices with the psalmist who celebrates the good news that “*steadfast love and faithfulness have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other ... righteousness shall go before the LORD and shall prepare for God a highway*” (Psalm 85:10, 13) and live in trust and hope “*in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and new earth, where righteousness is at home.*” (2 Peter 3:13).

- “Advent marks the coming of Jesus Christ into human history. Mark begins the gospel of Jesus Christ with a clear announcement of the coming (advent) of the Lord. This passage speaks at any season to those who can hear a voice crying in the desert.” – Lamar Williamson, Jr.

As we focus on the child lying the manger, Mark invites us to look upon the Christ Child as the fulfillment of all of God’s promises from the beginning, and offers us hope in this Advent season that “*the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*” (Philippians 1:6). It is the word of Advent hope in this season that “*as it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be, world without end.*”

Amen.