

Out of the Water: In the Beginning

Mark 1:1-11

Today the gospel reading is from Mark, the first chapter, the beginning in the first verse. Mark writes, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God.” It is not simply the good news, because the good news isn’t finished yet. Mark’s gospel doesn’t tell the complete story, and it can’t tell the complete story. When Mark put down his pen, the story of Jesus Christ, Son of God had not finished. And today, the story of Jesus Christ is not finished. The story goes on because Christ is alive, present and active in the world, living in you, working through you. No, Mark is only writing the *beginning* of the good news.

Now, you might expect that beginning to start with the story of Jesus birth. That’s where Luke and Matthew start, and where most writers would start. Every now and then, I’m in a group where we are asked to tell the story of our life as a brief introduction, where you grew up, where you live, etc. The older you get the harder that gets because you have to skip more of the story, and boil it down to its bare essentials. But usually people begin something like, “Well I was born and grew up...” in New Jersey, or California, or Georgia, or Pennsylvania. That’s how we mark the beginning of our lives. I was born in Martinsville, Virginia. I’ve only been a couple of times, and only when I was a child. I can’t really even picture the city; I hear they run a NASCAR race there! But it’s where I was born – where I had my beginning. And every time a form asks, “Where were you born?”, I put down this city I hardly know.

But Mark tells the story of Jesus in a different way. It is the beginning of the *good news* of Jesus Christ, Son of God, and immediately we are taken into a wilderness baptism. John the Baptist, Jesus’ cousin, son of Mary and Zechariah, was in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. People came from the whole surrounding area, they came out from Jerusalem to this deserted place by the Jordan River. They came seeking some cleansing, they came out with heavy consciences, they came out with guilt and regret, they came hoping to be made whole again, seeking to be righteous, and they would confess their sins before John. John was straight out of the Bible, a strange looking character. He wore a camel hair coat and leather belt around his waist, like the second coming of Elijah. He ate locusts and wild honey.

John lived in the wilderness, he was not part of the humdrum of everyday society where people were making their mistakes, trying and failing and falling short. He was different, he lived in a different place and different way; he was a prophet, and he offered the possibility of a new beginning. So they came, from every direction, fresh start. But John knew his limitations. He told them. “I baptize you with water, but this is just a ritual. One is coming after me who is so much greater than me, I am not worth to untie his shoes. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit; which is another way of saying, he will give you a truly new beginning.”

Baptism is about beginnings. Today is Baptism of the Lord Sunday, and I’m starting a series of messages on baptism, called “Out of the Water.” What comes out of the water of baptism? What grace, what mercy, what healing, what challenge comes to us from the waters of baptism? Today we are beginning at the beginning, and the beginning is simply that – the beginning. Baptism is about starting out. When a child of Christian parents is baptized, it marks the other half of that’s child’s birth. The child is born in water, then baptized in water, and both are beginnings. When parents bring their children for baptism, there is a real sense in which they are completing the work of child birth. The beginning of the child’s life is not complete until he or she has come through the waters of baptism. When an older child, it is also a beginning. I was baptized at 7 years old, and even at that young age I knew it was the beginning of my life following Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. When I asked to be baptized, my father—who was also my pastor—asked me if I wanted Jesus to be my Lord and Savior and if I knew what that meant. I did not give a fifteen year old answer, or a thirty year old answer, but I gave a pretty good seven year old answer -- and one that still works today. I said I want Jesus to forgive my sins, and I

want to do what he tells me to do. And so I was baptized, and began as a follower of Christ. And when an adult comes for baptism, when a person is in their twenties or thirties or forties and comes to be baptized, it is also a beginning. It is the beginning of a new life, the beginning of following Christ, it's the beginning of living as a child of God. It's the beginning of a life marked by grace not by works, a life marked by mercy and not by karma, by acceptance and not by judgment.

So Mark begins the story of Jesus with baptism. John is out in the wilderness baptizing, Jesus came out from his hometown of Nazareth in Galilee to meet John and be baptized. Jesus was probably 29 years old, give or take; he had lived nearly three decades, years about which we know almost nothing. For all intents and purposes, this was his beginning. He entered the water and was baptized by John, and when he was coming out the water, Jesus saw the heavens tear open and the Spirit of God descended on him like a dove. Did other people see it? Or was it only Jesus who saw it? We don't know that for sure – none of the gospels tell us. We only know that *Jesus* saw it, and my guess is he was the only one who saw it. The Spirit of God rested on him, and he heard a voice from heaven saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved: with you I am well pleased."

And *there* is the difference between the Jesus' baptism and John's baptism. John baptized with a baptism of forgiveness of sins. Jesus was baptized with the Spirit, a baptism of acceptance and affirmation as God's child. *You are my Son, the one whom I love: with you I am well pleased.* The story of the good news of Jesus Christ, son of God, begins here with the Father's acceptance and affirmation of him in the waters of baptism. The Father is pleased with his Son, and Jesus hears his words of affirmation in the beginning. The Spirit of God rests on his Son, and it rests there in the beginning. The Father's affirmation doesn't come *after* Jesus has done a good job; it doesn't come *after* he takes on the Pharisees, or tackles the demons, or goes to the cross. It comes here in the beginning. He is affirmed and accepted for exactly who he is and what he is: the child of God. And at every step along the story, the Father honors the Son, holds the Son, and loves the Son. The resurrection is nothing less than this: The Father says, this is my son, in whom I am well pleased – and death cannot have him. The whole story is sketched in the beginning, in the waters of baptism.

What is your beginning? Or rather, what is the beginning of the *good news about you*? When I sit in a group and tell my story, it usually starts, "born in Martinsville, Virginia." But that's simply the beginning of my *biological* life. The beginning of the *good news* of me, that's the same as the beginning of the good news of Jesus. That beginning was in Danville, Virginia, in a little church on Edgewood Drive, when I passed through the waters of baptism and began to follow Christ. The heavens did not open; I did not hear any voice other than someone saying, come this way, congratulations, we're so proud of you. But later, I did hear see and I did hear. Later, I did see that the Spirit of God came to rest on me, and within me as God's own child, accepted and beloved. Later I did hear, a still voice in the soul telling me that I am God's child, and that I am accepted and beloved. And that is the beginning of the good news about me. The good news about us is the grace and the mercy and the hope that covers our story because God has claimed us as his own, and made us his children with Christ.

This is the healing that binds up our brokenness; this is the mercy that covers our sins; this is the redemption that lifts our failures; is the great affirmation that no negative thought or feeling or word or deed can undo. You are God's beloved child, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. Amen.