

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” That’s it. That’s how the Gospel according to Mark begins. What do you notice?

Maybe you notice what is not here. No angels making announcements or appearing in dreams, no prophecies of a birth. No journey to Bethlehem. No birth. (As in Matthew or Luke) No long prologue, no poetry. (As in John)

Mark jumps right in; announces a BEGINNING. Something new is happening. It begins now. It is good news. The voice of God heard in Isaiah sets the good news in motion, announcing a messenger crying out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord.”

And John the baptizer appears, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. People come out to him from all over Judea. All the people of Jerusalem come. They are baptized, confessing their sins. Though one more powerful is coming, John is powerful. What is the draw?

There is the expectation of forgiveness, a lifting of the weight of a troubled conscience. But why leave the city and the Temple, where sacrifices for sin can be offered every day, and there are baths with flowing water all along the long ranks of steps up to the Temple Mount? We know the power of ritual; it doesn’t make sense to discount it.

Maybe the people come to John because his cleansing baptism is available to all, rich and poor. No animal has to be bought or given up to make a sacrifice. Maybe the draw is John himself, who wears the clothing of the prophet Elijah. You’ll remember that Elijah was carried up to heaven in a chariot of fire, and is expected to return to earth as the forerunner of the Messiah.

However it is, there is something different, something new in the air, something more for which John prepares us. That something, that someone is Jesus. In the verse that follows this morning's reading, Jesus comes from Nazareth and is baptized by John. Then things really take off.

Jesus is tempted by Satan (2 sentences in Mark).

John is arrested and Jesus comes to Galilee proclaiming: "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news."

He calls his first disciples: Simon, Andrew, James and John.

As he teaches in a synagogue, a man with an unclean spirit appears; Jesus casts it out.

He heals Simon's mother-in-law of a fever.

The villagers bring all the sick and demon possessed to him and he cures them

He goes all through Galilee proclaiming the good news and casting out demons.

He heals a leper.

News of Jesus spreads. He stays out in the wilderness.

People come out to him from all over.

All of this happens in quick succession in chapter one—a steady stream of proclaiming and healing that leaves us breathless. And this is only the beginning. It is all good news. There is no resistance to Jesus at all here. Only the first unclean spirit calls out: "Have you come to destroy us?" The answer is yes. This is the beginning of the end for evil, for all that opposes the healing and wholeness God sets in motion in his Son.

The whole beginning is the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. John is prologue to it. Maybe you remember him as harsh, scary, off-putting. But notice this: in Mark, no one is called "you brood of vipers"; there is no ax lying at the root of the tree; no winnowing fork, no wheat and chaff, no fire. John's baptism of repentance is good news.

How is that? Our image of repentance—shame, remorse, long faces—fits more readily with the harsher image of John, with his tongue-lashing of the Pharisees (in Matthew) and of the whole crowd (in Luke). We know we sin, fall short over and over again. We expect to be scolded and threatened. “Repent” doesn’t sound like good news at all; we’d just as soon avoid it. Why should we be sorrowful and severe while the world around us makes merry? This is hardly the time of year for repenting.

What to do with this tame and gentle Baptist who does not scold or scare us into reforming ourselves? Does not demand repentance but draws the people out into the wilderness with him to encounter again the tender grace of God that Israel knew in wilderness after the Exodus.

Where Isaiah speaks of a highway in the desert to prepare the way for God to bring the people back from exile in Babylon, John proclaims a way to prepare our hearts and lives for the coming of Christ in and among us. His preaching and baptism are the beginning of repentance, the beginning of God’s transforming of hearts, minds and lives—so that all people can receive the outpouring of love and forgiveness in God’s Son.

We don’t always think of repentance in that way. Forgiveness sounds like gift and grace; repentance sounds like miserable work. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury in the early 1940’s, suggests that our notions of repentance are too limited. Repentance is more than remorse and lamenting our sins. It is about getting “a new mind,” having our mental models of reality and God changed.

To repent is to adopt God’s viewpoint in place of your own. There need not be any sorrow about it. In itself, far from being sorrowful, it is the most joyful thing in the world, because when you have done it you have adopted the viewpoint of truth itself, and you are in fellowship with God.¹

¹William Temple, *Christian Faith and Life* (S.C.M. Press, London, 1963), 67.

Of course, no one can “get” the mind or viewpoint of God. The transformation of our mind and heart is the work of the Spirit. Our part is to show up, to be awake, attentive to where the Spirit wants to work in my mind, heart, life. Another way to say it is that to change my mind, I have to know my mind—to be able to see where my thinking may be distorted or my heart seems hard.

To get there I probably need to spend some time out in the wilderness with John the Baptist, away from the noise, the concerns, the distractions. I need to listen in the silence, to be still, or walk on the canal, or write in my journal. Confess: what is nudging at me, what is getting stirred up.

Here is an example. For years I have resisted and pushed back against the commercializing and sentimentalizing of Christmas. It’s hard to keep the secular and the sacred separate. It drives me crazy; makes me angry. It’s become almost impossible to prepare for the mystery of the Incarnation while putting so much energy into resistance and resentment.

I’ve finally realized the obvious: I will never change what passes for “Christmas” out there. Furthermore, no one seems to expect me to change it. It’s not my responsibility. All I can hope to change is my own mind, my own energy and focus. I could let the rest of it happen and listen, instead, for what God intends in the Incarnation. (What a concept!) What a relief, what a joy even to anticipate the change.

I suspect that our beginning a new year with the Gospel acc to Mark has something to do with the beginning of the shift. This good news begins without the birth, just starts out in the wilderness away from the center of culture and power. John the baptizer *appears*—almost as if out of nowhere—as truth springs up from the earth in the psalm. (Psalm 85:11) He invites us into the good news that we, too, can repent; can get, be given, receive a new mind. We, too, can accept

the grace of being prepared, of being made ready to receive into our hearts and lives the One who has come and is coming still.

You may already have sorted all this out. I wonder, though, where and how John may appear for you, in your life this Advent; where you might need the gift of God's working in you to give you a new mind.

Perhaps there is a perspective that was once useful for you in navigating your way in the world, one that might have hardened now into an obstacle to growth and deeper relationship with God.

Or maybe a defensive shell has hardened around a loss, an old hurt or disappointment.

Perhaps you are carrying the image of a God who is accusing, judgmental, unfair.

Who knows when or how John will appear with the good news you need to hear to prepare the way of Christ in you—calling out, whispering in your dreams, tugging at your sleeve.

His appearing is only the beginning of the good news. Who knows what flood of new life and joy will follow, when we open ourselves to the transforming of our mind and our life.