

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

That first line we heard in this morning’s Gospel reading is Mark 1:1. *It’s the very first verse* of his account of Jesus’ story. And then, after just a quick nod to the prophet Isaiah, at verse 4 we are up to John the Baptist. As my Biblical Studies professor used to say, Mark hits the ground running.

No genealogy, no angels appearing to virgins, no cousins getting together to swap pregnancy stories. No star, no shepherds in the field, no heavenly host, no *nothing*. If it had been up to Mark, there would be, God forbid, no creche to set on Christmas eve. No, for Mark, the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begins elsewhere.

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”. This first verse of Mark’s Gospel is believed by many to actually be its *title*. But notice Mark doesn’t call it “the good news”. He calls it “*the beginning* of the good news”. That is important, and we’ll come back to it later.

For now, though, Mark is grabbing us by the hand, taking us up to a spot overlooking the Jordan River, and pointing to the crowd gathered on the shore and the masses still streaming down. “People from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem” were going to see John, he says. It’s the 1st century Palestinian version of the 10 West at rush hour.

So *the beginning* of the good news is this weird character standing waist-deep in a river talking about forgiveness and dunking every single person willing to join him in the water. Even Mark’s first audience, believers living some 40 years after Jesus’ crucifixion who were familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures, even they would have been wondering. Really?? So many people?

Mark gets that. So he includes a few details designed to help us all trust this good news. John is *at the Jordan* which, for the people of Israel centuries before, was the crossover point into the Promised Land. John is *dressed like Elijah*, who was one of Israel’s greatest prophets. And John is saying, “*it’s not about me*, it’s about the One who is already on his way. God is doing something really big here, and you don’t want to miss it. You don’t want to miss out on *the life that will be offered to you* when he comes.”

It’s a pretty great pitch. Especially wrapped in John’s refreshing humility: “I’m not even worthy to untie his sandal”, he says. But people of John’s time were not unaccustomed to holy men claiming to speak for God. Any more than you and I are unaccustomed to our twenty-first century visionaries pitching stuff that is guaranteed to make our lives fabulous. So what was it that made John’s proclamation so irresistible to so many?

I'm wondering if it might have been that wide-open offer of forgiveness. Of cleansing, and release, and renewal through this enacted symbol of bathing in the river. Forgiveness *at the very outset*. At the beginning of the beginning. Because if you look closely at Mark's text, it sounds like people were being baptized, *then* confessing. God's forgiveness comes first. And friends, that's good news that I think we all need to hear.

Now, this is not about guilt. You and I are not terrible people. I mean, I don't think we are. But aren't we, and isn't everyone out there, burdened? Burdened by things we have done that we wish we hadn't. Burdened by secrets we keep because if other people knew them, maybe they wouldn't approve of us or respect us or love us? Burdened by old resentments that we can't seem to let go of. Burdened by patterns of behavior we know aren't good for us, and for the people around us. Burdened by failures we didn't even see coming.

Wouldn't it be great if we could just lay all of that down? If we could sink down into cool water and know it is all just washed away? Well that, according to Mark, is what the good news of Jesus begins with!

So maybe preparing for his coming, this Advent, might include putting ourselves just here. Remembering that we are already forgiven. We've been to the river.

It's what our baptisms signify and effect, whenever or wherever they take place. Because when we remember that, we don't have to be afraid any more. We don't have to be afraid that God won't keep loving us. We don't have to be afraid of what other people might think or say. And we don't have to be afraid of the next part of the beginning of this good news – the necessary next step in preparing for Jesus' coming.

And that is the naming of these burdens that we are setting down. Naming them – and understanding them. Not to shame ourselves, but to help us let go of them. To clear the space that all of this baggage, the pain, anger, hurt, and resentment, have been taking up inside of us (and maybe inside of some of the people we have hurt) so that the life that we all have been *made* for, the life that Jesus brings, has room to grow. So that we can get on with the beginning of the good news.

The way Mark tells it, the people were confessing right there in the river. Maybe they were shouting out what they were so glad to be rid of as they were coming up out of the water! It can feel pretty good to come clean.

But truth to tell, to *really* do that, in a way that brings more than momentary relief – a way that leads to real freedom and hope – we need to do more than just take a quick

dip. Confessing takes courage, and time, and practice. As in a spiritual practice. That's why we do it in the liturgy, week in and week out.

In 12-step programs, it's called "taking a fearless moral inventory". Whether you or I go talk to someone else – a priest, a therapist, a sponsor – or we do it on our own, we take the time to tell the truth, and remember and give thanks that we are already forgiven.

It's not complicated. But it can be very hard to do. In fact, the only time it is ever easy is when we do it for somebody else instead of ourselves. In an Alanon meeting I was in once, a woman talked about the fearless moral inventory that she had been taking for her husband! It's one of the greatest temptations we face, I think. To confess other people's sins. And believe me, because I know this to be true: that doesn't help us prepare for Christ to come. That doesn't clear out any space in us at all.

As a matter of fact, focusing on other peoples' shortcomings, and failures, and narrow-mindedness, and carelessness, and lack of consideration, and control issues, you get the idea...focusing on other peoples' *stuff* distracts us in a big way from getting on with the good news of Jesus.

Which brings me back to my promise at the beginning of this sermon, to revisit Mark's decision to call his Gospel "the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God". Mark will go on to tell how Jesus called all who follow him to participate in God's healing of the world. Jesus will show them how to confront hypocrisy and injustice, and offer their lives for God's purpose.

And when Mark comes to the end of his account, which we will hear at Easter – this is Mark's year! – he will leave us hanging, with an empty tomb and frightened women. Mark's Gospel will seem unfinished. But it makes perfect sense, though, when we remember that he only promised us the *beginning* of the Good News. The fact is, the Good News is still being written.

So on this second Sunday of Advent, as you and I prepare to celebrate God's coming to us in the birth of Jesus the Christ, let's be reminded that the real beginning of the Good News isn't the stable. The real beginning is God's offer of forgiveness, for us and to everyone.

Let this be the gift we focus on this Christmas. This gift that we ourselves have received. This gift that we may give to one another. This gift that gets us ready. Because Jesus is coming. He keeps coming. And that good news keeps beginning, over and over again.