

Mark 1:1-8 (Second Sunday in Advent—Series B)
“The Gospel Begins—The Promise Kept”
Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer, Enfield, CT
December 6, 2020

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our text is the Gospel reading for the day recorded in Mark 1:

¹The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, ²just as it stands written in Isaiah the prophet, “Behold! I am going to send my messenger before you, who will prepare your way.”
³“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight his paths.”
⁴John came, the one baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And all the Judean region and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem were going out to him and they were baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. ⁶And John was clothed with camel hair and with a leather belt around his waist, and he was eating grasshoppers and wild honey. ⁷And he would proclaim, saying, “The one stronger than I is coming after me, whose sandal strap I am not up to the task to stoop down and untie. ⁸**I** have baptized you with water, but **he** will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Every *Star Wars* fan knows, along with many others, that each movie begins with the famous words, “A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away . . .” Enter at that moment the opening chords of John Williams’ theme and you’re on your way into the movie. Mark also could have begun his Gospel with the words, “a long time ago.” But the Holy Spirit inspired him to write using “the beginning” of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Yes, those words are reminiscent of Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning!” And in a sense, the Gospel of Jesus does go all the way back to the beginning of this creation when the Triune God made a perfect world, a perfect universe, with galaxies far, far away. And God created man and woman in His image, after His likeness of rightness and holiness. Adam and Eve enjoyed the very presence of God in the Garden. They beheld God face to face. But it all came crashing down. Under the allurements of the devil, the man and the woman ate of the fruit of the tree of which the Lord had commanded them not to eat. Death was the pronouncement, the punishment befitting the crime. And yet, there was Gospel in the

promise of God, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15 ESV). This *protoevangelium*, or "first Gospel," was given more details over the centuries. Gaps were filled in; more information about who this offspring of the woman would be and what He would do to save humanity from sin and death.

The "beginning" of the Gospel of Jesus Christ takes us all the way back to that first promise. But Mark quickly moves us to a moment a long time ago, but not as far back. The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, just as it stands written in Isaiah the prophet. God the Holy Spirit, through Mark's pen, wants us to see the continuity of His first Gospel promise. He wants us to understand that the Gospel is all about God keeping His promise. But it didn't look that way for the people of Israel, according to the words of Isaiah and the other prophets of the Lord.

Between Isaiah's call to ministry in 740 BC and the defeat of the Babylonians in 539 BC, a whole lot had changed for God's people. The Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrian Empire in 722 BC. The disastrous reign of King Manasseh of Judah hastened that nation's demise. King Josiah died at the battle of Megiddo in 609 BC. The rise of the Babylonian Empire brought with it near anarchy in the Kingdom of Judah. Isaiah's prophetic word announced that Jerusalem would be destroyed, and in the devastation of 587 BC, the prophetic word was fulfilled. Nebuchadnezzar's forces destroyed Jerusalem and brought its leaders captive back to Babylon.

Writing as if all these things had already taken place, Isaiah brought a word of comfort to the people of Israel. It's a word of Gospel, good news! The people would need

it after Nebuchadnezzar's victory and conquest of Judah. To the Israelites, it looked as if the Babylonian god Marduk had triumphed over the God of Israel. It seemed to them that Yahweh was important and no match for these foreign gods. Or maybe things were even worse than that! Maybe Yahweh chose not to defend His people because He had rejected forevermore those who had rejected Him?

No, far from it! Yahweh is the God who keeps His promises. Into Israel's pain He commands, "Comfort, comfort my people." God takes the initiative, as He always does, and speaks Gospel promises which are comforting Good News. He did this with Adam and Eve in the garden. He gives comfort to the fallen Kingdom of Judah. And He speaks that word of Gospel and comfort those who first read and continue today to hear the words of St. Mark.

The Gospel of Jesus that began with God's promises continued with the proclamation of John in the wilderness. John is the appointed messenger of Yahweh who announces, "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight his paths." This is Good News of great joy that will be for all the people, to borrow the phrase. Yahweh is coming. "The glory of Yahweh shall be revealed!" God is coming to His people, to His fallen creation. He is coming to meet His people in the middle of their exile, and He invites all to join Him. The people, then, need to be ready to receive Him when He comes.

That's a pretty tall order. "Yahweh's glory" is His real presence. He is the "holy, holy, holy" God, unapproachable, concealed from the eyes of unclean humanity. Sinners cannot look upon God and live. His holiness would consume us in the rightful destruction that we and all humanity deserve. "All of us like sheep have wandered away" (Is. 53:6). We have

sinned in thought, word, and deed. We have rebelled against God and His Word by our own disobedience. We have lived as if the Lord doesn't matter and as if we matter most. So had Israel.

How is it possible, then, for people who are exiled from God because of our sinfulness to receive the God who is coming in His glory? Does He come to punish? To destroy? To kill? Neither Israel nor we can pay for our own sins. Attempts to justify ourselves before God will only compound our guilt. How is this coming of God possibly Good News? It sounds like a sentence of condemnation, death, and hell. Where is the comfort in this?

"Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight his paths.' John came, the one baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. . . . 'The one stronger than I is coming after me, whose sandal strap I am not up to the task to stoop down and untie. **I** have baptized you with water, but **he** will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'" Iniquity can only be pardoned. Sin can only be forgiven. And this comes through the God who will pay for the sins of all so that all iniquity is forgiven solely because of His atoning sacrifice. He will then wash His people clean the blood of His Son, applying the gift of salvation and forgiveness to people in the water of Baptism where they also receive the Holy Spirit who creates saving faith to receive the glory of God in the person of Jesus.

By grace through faith we see the glory of God in Jesus Christ who manifested that glory in human flesh. God the Son came in human flesh not to destroy us because of our sins, but in order to be the sin-bearer of Israel and of the nations. Jesus came to save us

from the exile of sin, death, and hell by atoning for our sins with His own blood shed for all people on a cross. We see the true glory of Christ at the cross. We see His glory in His resurrection from the dead. At His Second Coming, we will see that glory in all its divine fullness when He will raise us from the dead and usher us into a new creation where “the glory of God” will be our light and our lamp is the Lamb of God who has taken away the sins of the world.

A long time ago, the Triune God promised to send the seed of the woman to crush the head of that snake, the devil. In the fullness of time, God kept that promise. God the Son took upon Himself human flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary. The Seed of the woman had come. Indeed, God had come to save His people from their sins. The name Jesus means “Yahweh saves.” John was the last prophet. He was the one privileged to be the voice of one calling in the wilderness, “Prepare the way!” His message was a word of repentance, a change of heart and mind, where people confess their sins and admit that they have fallen short of God’s glory. And then John would point them to the One who comes after Him—God Himself in the person of Jesus Christ. This Lamb of God would take away the sins of the world, bring new life and resurrection life to all people by grace through faith in Him. He promised to give us His Holy Spirit through water and the Word in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And so He has. It was with those words that you literally received the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in your life, the new birth of water and of the Spirit. In Baptism, you were made God’s child, an heir of salvation. Your sins are forgiven. You have eternal life. God’s promise has been kept. Amen.