

Sermon Prepared by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes for Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Second Sunday of Advent, December 6, 2020

(Mark 1:1-8)

Today, on the Second Sunday of Advent, our Gospel reading begins with *good news*. Before anything else takes place ... before we get to any sort of narrative ... there is a *proclamation of good news*. The NRSV translation we used this morning starts with “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.”¹ Another more recent translation that I looked at says “This is where the good news starts.”² Regardless of the words used, though, the meaning ... *the message* ... is quite clear.

There’s also something else to consider about these first few words: they are words of *creation*. They are words that transport us back to the very beginning of all that is and was and ever will be. The theologian Leah McKell Horton writes, “In the beginning,’ says Genesis, God created all that is, on earth and in the heavens. Here Mark declares another ‘beginning,’ a new creation.”³

We certainly don’t find an elaborate buildup to this pronouncement of good news. There’s no lengthy back story or genealogy similar to those we find in other Gospels. In fact, the immediacy with which we arrive at this opening is quite indicative of Mark. Written likely between 68 and 70 CE – just a few decades removed from the time of Jesus here on earth – this Gospel is the shortest of the four (just 16 chapters) and also the one with the fastest pace. As John Goldingay and Tom Wright said in the introduction to their translation of Mark, “It has a breathless, eager sense, with things happening ‘at once’, and one dramatic incident following another ... Mark gets straight to the point and pretty much stays there.”⁴

From the announcement of good news we then move (quickly) to the moment when we discover that what is unfolding is a fulfillment of prophecy. In these first few verses we find that this good news – the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ – was predicted in words uttered by the prophets Malachi and Isaiah.⁵

Here for instance are the words of Malachi, from the late-6th and early-5th centuries BCE: “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight – indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.”⁶ Then there are the words of Isaiah, from two centuries further back: “A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’”⁷

So in just three verses we already have learned a great deal. We know that we are about to read and hear something good, and we understand that what is about to take place is in

¹ Mark 1:1 (NRSV).

² Mark 1:1 (*The Bible for Everyone*).

³ Leah McKell Horton, “Mark 1:1-8 – Homiletical Perspective.” *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark* (Kindle edition).

⁴ John Goldingay and Tom Wright. *The Bible for Everyone*, p. 971.

⁵ Raymond E. Brown. *An Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 128.

⁶ Malachi 3:1 (NRSV).

⁷ Isaiah 40:3 (NRSV).

accordance with what was foretold by prophets revered by the Jewish people. It is a reminder that both their present and their future are rooted in their past.

A third important aspect to share about this morning's Gospel reading is the significance of *the wilderness*. In verses three and four that location is used twice ... and as we know from our familiarity with the Gospels the wilderness figures prominently in several moments in the life of Jesus. How we picture a wilderness depends I'd wager on the location that comes to mind when we hear the word. If we think about the wilderness here in the United States, for instance, we may picture in our minds the grassy stretches of land, the snow capped mountains, the clear lakes and the pine forests of Oregon or Washington State or Northern California. In a biblical context, we'd likely imagine the Judean Wilderness – which truthfully is a bleak desert much more than a grassy wilderness.

But rather than viewing the wilderness as a specific *place*, though, I invite you to consider wilderness instead as a *source* ... a location from which *things are given*. “[W]hile the Biblical wilderness is a place of danger, temptation and chaos, it is also a place for solitude, nourishment, and revelation from God.”⁸ At the outset of this Gospel, the wilderness is the source of revelation. The wilderness is the place from which the voice of the prophet John calls forth. The wilderness is the place where we begin to see the words of Malachi and Isaiah come to life. The wilderness is the place where in Mark *everything begins*.

For the past nine months many of us and many of those we know and love have felt like life is playing out in a wilderness. We can at least say that we are physically living in the wilderness of this part of the Shenandoah Valley, an area of great beauty. Spiritually and emotionally, however, it may feel deep inside like we are wandering the Judean desert ... walking through an unforgiving, desolate existence that seems to stretch far beyond the horizon.

In the midst of all of this, therefore, what might good news look like – either as a continuation or as yet another moment of creation? In thinking about this, I would offer that before answering that question we have to shift our mindset or understanding of wilderness. Repeating what I said just a moment ago, perhaps we should stop seeing wilderness as a *place* and instead see and experience it as a *source*. Rather than focusing on what is being kept from us – and even what we may feel we are being kept from – perhaps we are called to look at what is being given to us. Maybe the challenge before us in this Advent season of waiting is to shift our focus *from existence and toward revelation*.

What is God revealing to us in this wilderness time ... and what are we being challenged to proclaim? Consider how we might be the new messengers ... the new Malachis and Isaiahs and Johns – sent to prepare a new or creative or imaginative way. What will we say to others out of the depths of the wilderness?

Creation began in Genesis. The good news began in Mark. *What is beginning in us?*

Amen.

⁸ Jenny Phillips, “Jesus and Wilderness.” American Bible Society: Resources website, <https://bibleresources.americanbible.org/resource/jesus-and-wilderness>.