

2nd Sunday of Advent – December 10, 2017

Mark 1:1-8

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Last week, you may remember, we began the new church year at the end, looking forward to Christ's return at the culmination of all things. This week we get to start at the beginning. The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. That is the title of Mark's Gospel, which we will be making our way through this church year. And the first thing to understand from our readings this morning is that the entire story of Jesus life, death, and resurrection that Mark's Gospel recounts is only the beginning of God's good news for the world, only the beginning of God's coming reign. When we get to the end of the Gospel, the end of the beginning, which we will do on Easter morning, we will learn that the good news continues with us, you and me, the hearers of the good news, in other words that we are a part of the story, and a vital one at that.

The second thing to understand from our readings today is that this is the beginning of *good news*. And not just any old good news. The Greek word here is *euangelion*, from which we get the words evangelical, evangelism, and even angel. It also gets translated as "gospel" (small "g"). This is a technical term used in the ancient world for particularly important news like the news of victory in a battle or the news of a new emperor – news that really is news, news that will make a big difference in people's lives. The real "breaking news," if you will.

I think this is particularly difficult for us in our time and place to appreciate. The coming of the 24-hour news business model has sensationalized and commodified the whole idea of news. News has become an entertainment product designed to grab and hold our attention for the purpose of selling advertisement. The more sensational, the more outrageous, the better. I started to become aware of this as it was developing, back in the early 90s. In fact, I can pinpoint it to mid-January of 1991, when the U.S. and coalition forces invaded Iraq for the first time. It just so happened that I came down with the flu just at the invasion started, and I spent several days lying on the couch watching the war as it unfolded. I still remember the live reports from Bagdad as cruise missiles were coming in. It was all very exciting. Maybe some of you watched it too. In retrospect, though, I began to wonder just how much of that I really needed to see, or even how much that entire war impacted my life. It probably helped keep the price of gas down. But I'm hard pressed to think of another lasting outcome.

The first Gulf War was good for cable news, and it showed just how much money could be made in attracting viewers on a continual basis. Once that war was over, they tried to keep us watching. Today, there seems to be "breaking news" every hour. And it can be something as innocuous as "the president's plane has just landed." I'm not even sure that qualifies as news, much less "breaking news." Breaking news used to mean that something important happened that everyone needed to know: you know, those iconic moments that we all remember with unusual clarity. We remember where we were when they happened, and who we were with. The attack on Pearl harbor was one of those. We just observed the 76 anniversary of that event this past week and there are some among us who remember hearing that news when it was news. There have been other events like that since then, the assassination of President Kennedy, the moon landing, the Challenger disaster, and of course the 9/11 attacks 16 years ago. Breaking news, all of them. News worth interrupting regularly scheduled broadcasting for. News worth stopping the presses for. News worth stopping whatever you're doing and paying attention to. Of all of these examples it seems certain in retrospect that for Americans the attack on Pearl Harbor was the most consequential. It's what drew us into World War II. It sent 16 million young men

off to fight, more than 400,000 of whom did not return. It sent women to work outside of the home in unprecedented numbers. It sowed the seeds of the civil rights movement. In short the news of Pearl Harbor was news that the world as we knew it was about to change. What I want us to appreciate this morning is that *that* is the magnitude of the word ‘good news’ in Mark’s Gospel. This is not just an idle tale, not just an interesting story. It is world-changing news, news that will change the lives of those who hear it. Only this time in a good way.

The third thing to understand in today’s readings is that the life-changing good news that Mark begins has been in the works for a long time. It is something that God promised long ago even as the world of God’s chosen people was falling apart and it seemed that God was giving up on them as they were conquered first by the Assyrians and then by the Babylonians. What was certainly a disaster for God’s people, which led to decades of suffering and exile, followed by centuries of subjugation by a succession of foreign powers, was still, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, not yet the end of the story. Mark is telling us that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the one they’ve been waiting for, the one Isaiah promised and the one Elijah prepared the way for.

The fourth thing to understand in today’s readings is that God’s life-changing good news comes to us when we least expect it, and when we least deserve it. This is what that well-known reading from Isaiah is getting at. It is well known, but, I think, not well understood. Grab your bulletin and have a look at that again. This is a dialog between God and a reluctant prophet. The first five verses are pretty clearly God speaking, though of course speaking through the prophet. Then in verse 6 the dialog begins. A voice says, “Cry out!” And I said, “What shall I cry?” – or it could be “why shall I cry?”: All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades... etc.” In other words, the prophet is saying, “what’s the point? Why should I bother prophesying to this people. It won’t do any good. What difference will it make to tell them *again* to be faithful. You’ve been trying that, over and over, and it doesn’t matter. They can’t do it.

Verse 8 then is God’s response, again, on the lips of the prophet. To someone watching from the outside this might have seemed something like the dialog between Smeagol and Gollum in the Lord of the Rings movie: a single person talking to himself. God’s response is, “yes, the people are grass. Yes, they are unfaithful. Yes they seem incapable of being true to their side of the covenant. But my promise is my promise. My word endures even when grass fades. So get to work, prophet. Proclaim my promise. Announce my good news. I will do for them what they cannot do for themselves. And my word, my word that *you* will speak, will make it happen.

We get all kinds of news in our personal lives on a regular basis, both good news and bad news, news that changes the course of our lives. We get hired. We get fired. We discover that we are pregnant. We hear that our adoption has gone through. We discover that we have cancer. We discover that our cancer is in remission, or the tumor is benign. We learn of the death of a loved one, we receive a proposal of marriage. And who knows what news might be around the corner, either personally or globally, in the days and weeks to come? Mark wants us to hear in and amongst all of these life-changing messages, real and potential, the enduring word of God that really is the best news of all, the news that God does not give up on us even when it seems all else is lost, and even when we give up on God. God has come among us as one of us and claimed us as God’s own beloved children so that we might have the good life that God has intended for us from the creation of the world. May we take that good news to heart. May God grant us grace by the power of the Holy Spirit to trust its promise. And may it truly change our lives. Amen.