

“The Beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ”

December 7, 2014

Advent 2B

Mark 1:1-8

The sermon was preached by Pastor Kurt Jacobson at Trinity Lutheran Church, Eau Claire, WI.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, in this Advent season, may the hope of the One who has come among us as grace and peace, fill you with every good. Amen.

Today’s reading from the Gospel of Mark brings us right to the start of Jesus’ ministry. Mark doesn’t provide his readers with any stories about the virgin Mary, shepherds, angels, a baby Jesus or wise men. There’s only this: “*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*” Then, using words from the Old Testament prophet named Isaiah, Mark tells us something very important – a promise made by God long ago is about to be fulfilled: “*See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare the way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord.’*”

It’s big news. More on that in a bit.

In recent days, as I was digging my brain and soul into this passage of scripture, I thought of my 10th grade English teacher, Mrs. Mercklien. She was the teacher I credit for teaching me how to write a complete sentence, a paragraph and then a theme. Every week she made her students write a one page theme. The theme was corrected by an aide for spelling, grammar and composition. Then Mrs. Maercklien would read and grade it for content, flow and theme development.

In the early weeks of the semester, writing the theme was to me, educational torture. I groaned and wrestled with paper and pencil. I wore off the eraser on hundreds of pencils. My classmates nearly staged a coup, trying to get Mrs. Maercklien off her stool and out the door. But as a veteran teacher, she was not at all swayed by the travails of teenagers tormented by theme writing.

By the end of the semester, the weekly writing assignment was a snap. Gone were incomplete sentences and dangling participles. What had emerged was an ability to develop an idea and communicate it through writing. But what I was prompted to recall this week, thanks to this bible reading, was the importance of introducing your main point in the first paragraph of the theme. Mrs. Maercklien taught me that principle of composition. I think Mark, the writer of this Gospel about Jesus, must have had a teacher like Mrs. Maercklien.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. There’s the point – something is beginning and its good news – good news about a promise people had been waiting for God to fulfill for centuries.

As Mark continues writing he recalls the prophet Isaiah and the promise he announced about God sending someone, a messenger, to prepare the way for the Lord. Mrs. Maercklien would be smiling as she read Mark’s theme so far. Neat, clean, grammatically correct and to the point.

Next, Mark's writing tell us this messenger that God promised to send is a guy named John. He's the one charged to begin the good news of Jesus Christ. Mrs. Maercklien would have given Mark an A on this theme.

As we read on, we learn that John is a "voice of one crying in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord" this good news about to arrive on the scene. The time is about 29 A.D. There are not the best of times for the people waiting on God. Rome ruled the known world. Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea. Pilate – we'll meet him again just before Easter when he's complicit in the conspiracy to kill Jesus. Like I said, there are not the best of times as this beginning of the good news of Jesus is announced.

As John is introduced as the voice of one in the wilderness, the people of God were in their own wilderness. They were in the wilderness of wondering where God was. It had been over 400 years since the word of God had been heard from the prophets. The people who longed for God to do something – to fulfill the promise of a Savior, had been oppressed and treated badly by one ruler after another. To the people of this time, it seemed to them that God had washed God's hands of them. They felt they had been handed over to people who were judgmental and without mercy.

So, the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ comes in a messenger named John. Out of the wilderness and full of hope, energy and with his head on straight, John emerges and the good news of Jesus Christ begins to take off – to change the world, even to us today.

Now, if you've been around Christian churches during Advent, you've heard preachers drone on about John. He dresses weird. He eats gross things like locusts and grasshoppers. He rants and raves and yells about repenting. I've heard those sermons, too. I've probably shared some of them with you over the years. But this week I realized something deeper, more revealing about this amazing man of faith named John. Beyond his attire or choice of foods, I discovered a personality that we would all be wise to emulate. The world would be a much better place with more people like John.

Let me introduce what I discovered by taking you to a fine restaurant. In the kitchens of the finer restaurants of the world there is a system of hierarchy. Known in the industry as the "kitchen brigade" the structure of this system delegates responsibilities to many individuals who specialize in certain tasks of the kitchen. In the larger restaurants there are individual cooks for grilling meats, for fish, for soup, for vegetables, pastries and so on.

But in the entire kitchen brigade there is one very important person in the hierarchy and that is the sous-chef, literally, the "under chef." As second in command to the Executive Chef, the sous-chef runs the day-to-day operations of the kitchen. The sous chef needs to have superior cooking skills, but he or she has to master a variety of responsibilities, which include: hiring and supervising staff; working with the head chef to research and develop menus; managing inventory and monitoring health and safety procedures.

Even with all those responsibilities, the sous chef position is middle-management, so it's not for the meek of heart. Key to the success of the sous chef is the unwavering dedication to the Executive

Chef's philosophy, cuisine, and style. Every day when the kitchen opens, the sous chef must be ready to prepare the way for the executive chef to do his or her work.

John the Baptist, according to Mark, is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. He's like the sous chef in God's kitchen brigade. Well, we all know he's not the right guy to run a kitchen because there is no good way to prepare a locust. But John knows his place and his does part in bringing the good news of Jesus to the world.

So, thinking of John in this way, he comes out of the wilderness to fulfill that ancient promise. With his audience being the people thinking God had abandoned them, John comes with a word from God. Can you imagine how he got people's attention? "What's that you say John, God hasn't forgotten us?" "What's that you say, John: God's promise to send us a Messiah is coming soon?" Just imagine how he sparked people's curiosity – and infused some hope into their hearts. Is this something people need still today?

I've been trying to imagine how John the Baptist would play in today's world? I imagine there are billions of people who would be turned off, tuned out and tone deaf to his message. But as I've been wondering how John would be received today, I have been struck almost every time I've slowed down to pay attention to the faces I see on TV of people fleeing from Syria or to the faces I see lined up in the hallway of this church awaiting their turn in the food pantry, I'm reminded there are people who are waiting for something – for at least a word or a deed of hope in a wilderness of life's despair.

A voice crying in the wilderness. *The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* And the people started flocking to John by the thousands.

Imagine how easy it would have been for John to start to think he's the reason for the crowds and accept the praises and take a place of honor. But like the sous-chef, John knew his role. He knew his purpose and he knew he wasn't the executive chef. *"The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals."*

John made sure the people knew he wasn't the One they were waiting for from God – he was just preparing the way. He didn't let his ego or any thirst for power or recognition get in the way of his mission of preparing the way for the good news of Jesus to get out into the world.

We live in world where people who've become famous in business rarely say about their success, *"Well, it wasn't all about me. You see there was a guy who came before me, and in fact prepared the way for me to be successful."* We live in a society where elected leaders make it sound as if no one had done anything good in state or federal government until they got there to turn around the incompetence of previous leaders. And to think that before arriving on the scene, even Jesus had some help with the prep work. Thanks to John.

Today, you and I are recipients, heirs of the work of John the Baptist and all sorts of people in our lives who have gone before us to prepare – prepare the way for us to know the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Good news to celebrate, isn't it? Even better news for us to share. Amen.