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## Can We Begin Again?

Mark 1:1-8

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Luke Powery, at Duke Chapel on December 7, 2014

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First lines are important. The first linguistic impressions of a story or speech may have lasting impact. To be honest, the first line of a sermon may be the only thing you remember from a sermon. First lines. First words. I'm not speaking of pick up lines such as this one: "I'm not a photographer, but I can picture you and me together." First lines. "Fourscore and seven years ago..." (Abraham Lincoln). "It was the best of times. It was the worst of times" (Charles Dickens). "It was a bright cold day in April and the clocks were striking thirteen"(George Orwell). "I am an invisible man" (Ralph Ellison). "Once upon a time.." "In the beginning, when God created..."(Genesis). A first line, the way you begin, is important. It can leave a lasting impression. Some of these first lines echo in the ears of our minds after many years; they are inescapable. They grab our attention. First lines. The beginning of something. It's not always about the end or ending, as we talk about in Christian theology—the end, the eschaton, as being our spiritual compass through life's journey. There is something about beginnings because without a beginning, we wouldn't be talking about an ending. Something has to begin in order to end.

But there are some beginnings that will never end. I know this is bad news for some; there are some things that you want to end as you soon they get started. Many of you know I grew up in a very musical family. My oldest brother played the trombone; second brother, the saxophone; third brother, drums; sister, played the piano; I followed everyone and looked handsome; my mother played the harmonica and my dad, who is a minister, thought he could sing. We urged my father to stick to his preaching prowess and give up his American Idol ambitions; but in later years, he now seems to have moved away from his perceived musical mastery and picked up a new notion that makes him declare seriously religiously, "I always thought I could be an interior decorator." If his singing wasn't bad enough, now dreams of being an interior designer? This may be a sign of the apocalypse. As soon as any mention of that begins, we, his children, want it to end. And you would too.

Yet there are some things, which God has begun and no one can stop. "The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, God's Son." This is a beginning like no other. And look at what it started with just a few words. It's the literal beginning of the Gospel of Mark, the good news of Mark about Jesus Christ. His beginning can serve as a title for this entire Gospel, a summation of what is to come in the rest of the book—the good news about Jesus Christ. Mark's first words are not deep doctrine nor highfalutin theory. No progressive or conservative agenda at work here. This is *kerygma*; this is proclamation. For you grammar experts, this beginning is not even a whole sentence and it doesn't have to be complete in order to be true, in order to be what we need, in order to make us whole. And Lord knows we need these first few words now. Some good news in the sea of bad news TV and reality. This beginning has "an angle of lean"(Stanley Fish), leaning forward, foreshadowing dimly what is to come. A beginning with Jesus. A beginning with good news.

That's what Mark gives us. But behind his assertion of the good news about Jesus Christ is the implication that there has been bad news in the land. Maybe he wrote his gospel, this good news, at a time when Nero was persecuting Christians or when the Jews revolted against imperial Rome. Maybe this is why he focused so much on the tribulations of Jesus, his suffering and death, throughout his entire Gospel. There was so much pain that he has to begin with good news as an antidote to his bad news reality; yet he knows that good news alone will not erase the presence of suffering. But isn't this a great way to begin his proclamation anyway, with a first line of good news, accentuating the positive?

Writers sometimes struggle with how to begin. Some of the best advice I've received on how to begin writing is, "put your derriere in a chair." Sit down and jot anything down. "Flannery O'Connor said that anyone who survived their childhood has enough material to write for the rest of his or her life" (Anne Lamott). Just begin and do it "bird by bird" (Lamott). It doesn't have to be fancy or eloquent. Just take the risk to begin. Take the risk to tell the truth.

It was a risk for Mark to start off like this. Jesus Christ was not a fan favorite in his day. Yet Mark preaches the good news about Jesus Christ. It was a risky beginning for him—a good strong beginning harkening back to Genesis where "in the beginning" God said it was good over and over again. Beginnings can often be good. But as we saw at Creation in the Garden of Eden, they do not always remain that way. They can fall-ter. Beginnings may be fire out of the gate with an early fervor but soon lose that fire as time goes on. Then you may find yourself in a strange land with only camel-hair-leather-belt wearing-wild honey-locust-with NC barbecue--eating characters like John the Baptist. And soon the beginning that was full of promise and good news has taken a turn for the worse or at least it's not what was expected.

How many things in life start off good—a job, a marriage, a leisurely drive on a fall day, a routine stop by a cop—beginning with such blissful symphonic joy but ending in the bluesy swamp of sorrow and bitterness? In the beginning, the good news about Jesus Christ, but near the end, we even hear Christ on the cross cry, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?"

That's a Good Friday question on an Advent day. It seems out a place but being mortal before God is never out of place, never out of time. For many, Good Friday is everyday. There are many during this Advent season asking similar questions because the first lines or first words of their living (auto)biography took a turn in unanticipated directions. Why do the nations rage and people plot vain things? How long, O Lord? Why are you downcast O my soul and why are you disquieted within me? Why did my loved one have to die? One Georgetown professor asks, "Where do we go after Ferguson?" Where do we go after Eric Garner? Where do you go after "die in" protests outside on the Chapel quad? Mark wrote, "The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ." But many are wondering, "where is the good news?" Good beginnings appear to be dashed against stones and shattered in the glass of despair. So I have my own question today in light of the state of the world—"Can we begin again?"

This is not a naïve question of ignorance. It is not one that is posed as a means to escape the historical and contemporary sociopolitical realities of our time. Too much of Christianity already specializes in that kind of discourse. Rushing to reconciliation without consideration of truth and justice and economic and social history. This question I raise is not one that supports historical amnesia. It doesn't mean to forget. Mark obviously doesn't. In his beginning, he draws on Isaiah, Exodus and Malachi. And John the Baptist looks a lot like the prophet Elijah so Mark remembers even as he begins. He draws on past resources and knowledge. To begin again does not mean you forget the past because the past impacts the present; remember Jacob comes away with a lifelong limp after wrestling with God and Jesus's wounds from the crucifixion are not erased by the resurrection. We can learn from the past without dwelling on it and getting stuck in a rut. To begin again implies that we remember what didn't go quite right before or what went wrong, our mistakes, our pathological patterns, our sin, and we search for a new beginning because what we experience and who we are in the present doesn't match with God's intentions and promises. And we recognize God's intentions because we remember the past and the future of God's mighty acts. And this is so deeply dug in the well of our hearts that we pray "let me have a new start," "let me try again." When we remember—Mark—we realize that there is a beginning, "the beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ."

Advent helps us remember this beginning every year. The liturgical season of Advent is the beginning of the Church year. It comes around annually without fail, ready or not. Each year is always a new year, a new beginning. Advent reminds us that Jesus keeps on coming to us because he is not only the eternal Word, he is our eternal beginning. Thus, Advent says, “you can always begin again” no matter who you are or what you’ve done. This season we remember backward but we can also begin again and remember forward, anticipating the work of the Spirit in the future.

But it may not be the beginning you imagine because the beginning occurs in the wilderness. As a metaphor, the wilderness is a location outside of civilization, on the fringes, untamed, outside of normal human structures. New Testament scholar Michael Brown says, “When God speaks, often it is outside of the noble confines of the stained-glass edifice...God's movement is often abrupt and unsettling rather than predictable and settling.” Our unpredictable God ushers in the beginning of good news in a wilderness. On the fringe, on the margins, on the periphery of privilege—there, the beginning of the good news happens, breaking out of normative theological paradigms to reveal that God cannot be confined to any theological construct or idea. If God was tamed by theology, there would be no good news in the wilderness, there would be no beginnings, only definitive closures and lifeless endings. God can’t be tamed thus “there is no place on earth God will not go or be for us”(K Lewis) in the face of any dominating power, including the wilderness.

Though we yearn for a new beginning what that beginning looks like may not be what we expect. We can’t circumscribe the move of God in our lives. To begin in a wilderness is not at the top of our Christmas wish list. Yet we may receive everything we really wish for—good news, finally. The primordial beginning of creation occurred amid darkness and a void. The children of Israel’s freedom from Egyptian bondage begins with wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. Jesus was driven into the wilderness for 40 days and tempted by Satan at the beginning of his ministry and it is the Spirit that leads him there. Beginning in the wilderness is not really new because this is how God has worked throughout history. There are hard lessons to be learned when you begin again. It can be difficult in the wilderness. Strange land. Strange people. Strange experiences. You can begin again but the wilderness shows us that you can’t begin as a means to escaping the dry pain of the world. Beginning again does not equal the erasure of tough realities. This beginning is a sober reminder that you still have to deal with life and even face the consequences of your past.

Yet, the beginning of good news is right where you are. Not away, around, or outside but in the wilderness. In the fallout from Ferguson, there was the hug shared around the world. During a Portland, Oregon protest over the grand jury’s decision not to indict Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson, a 12-year-old black young man, Devonte Hart, held a sign offering “Free Hugs.” Portland police sergeant Bret Barnum, who is white, approached Devonte, who was crying. Eventually, after casual conversation, the police officer asked Devonte for a hug. So right in the middle of a Ferguson-related protest, this young boy, with tears streaming down his face, and this cop, embraced. This hug has been shared all over the world because it is the beginning of good news in a wilderness of great despair and pain. A hug can be a beginning when there is so much hurt. It shows some good news as it leans toward hope.

And the good news may be right where you are, ready or not. It won’t wait for you. It won’t ask for permission. It may not be what you imagined but it is a beginning, no matter how unlikely, because the beginning of the good news is ultimately found in the unlikely face of God, known as Jesus Christ, who is the beginning and the end. He is in the wilderness and he is a wilderness God who makes a way out of no way and a way in the wilderness, walking our human steps, experiencing our lonesome valleys. He is there so you can begin again with him, the enfleshed good news of God, our Spiritual Beginning, our Word of good news who dwells among us (John 1). You may have to begin again in a wilderness but to talk about beginnings is to really talk about Jesus.

In the classic TV series M\*A\*S\*H, set in a mobile army hospital during the Korean War, doctors received a patient who believed he was Jesus Christ. Arnold Chandler had been a bombardier in an airplane and he had dropped so many bombs on other human beings he did not know. Because of the trauma of it all, one day his mind snapped and he decided that he was no longer a man named Arnold Chandler. He was Christ the Lord. This appeared to be a mental condition that needed lots of therapy. A psychiatrist eventually came to see him and said, “You say you are Christ, and yet here you are in an army hospital in the middle of a war. What would Jesus be doing here?” With tears streaming down his face, this supposed mentally ill man replied with these words: “I am Christ the Lord, Where else should I be? These are my children” (Scott Hoezee). Tear-stained Jesus was in the wilderness of war but you can find him in the places of cancer, relational dysfunction, poverty, or streets of protest, too, bringing good news to help others begin again.

You can begin again but it starts with Jesus. Be forewarned that beginning with him will land you in a wilderness, in tough and rough places, but it doesn’t mean that you will be in a wilderness forever. The advent of Jesus disrupts the world order and even the wilderness is disrupted by his presence because those in it have to change. The wilderness is never the same once Jesus enters it because it never knew good news like this before, such news that even foreshadows the demise of the wilderness.

Wilderness beginnings start in the wilderness but do not end there. Even the cross, Jesus’s own wilderness, eventually begins a revolution in a grave, because Jesus is always beginning something new. Thus, the wilderness should not define you because though the beginning is *in* the wilderness, the wilderness is not *the* beginning. *The* beginning is Jesus Christ. Good news is him, in him, from him, about him. We are defined by his good news—his beginning for us that knows no end. He began so that we may end in him.

The day we end is actually the day we begin. And just as God can say “do it again” to the sun every morning and “do it again” to the moon every evening, God is saying to you today, “begin again.” Everyday is a new beginning, a new creation. That’s good news for all of us.

First lines can be good but so can last lines, especially some of God’s last words in the Bible— “See, I make all things new.”