

Mark 1:1-8
February 14, 2021

Hope Mennonite Church
Sunday before Lent 1

The Beginning that is Only the Beginning

The room is **dark**. You sleep **heavily**. The window next to your bed faces **east**. Its curtain is **thick**. It blocks out **all** light. The room is **dark**. You sleep **heavily**.

Suddenly, without warning, the curtain **opens**. **Piercing** sunlight **floods** the room. It's **blinding** and **hot** and **invigorating**. You **yawn** and **squint** and **stretch**. And the **energy** stands you on your feet—like hearing “When the Saints Go Marching In.” The new day is **jump-started**. The **action begins**.

That's what the beginning of Mark's Gospel is like ... nothing **subtle** ... no **snooze alarm!** We are immediately **in motion**. No **prelude**. No **on-ramp**. No **Christmas story!** Mark opens with a **launch**. You're rolling down the ninety-meter ski jump ... one thrust of the knees and you're **airborne**. Mark **launches** us into **God's new world order**. The journey **begins** under way and we go with it. You look down and realize: You're still in your pajamas. Well, you didn't expect to be ski jumping ... but here we go.

That's how Mark tells the Good News of Jesus Christ. That's how he announces that **the reign of God** has drawn near. There is no warm-up, no safety check, no baton-passing zone, no tugboat escort, no gradual **anything**. John the Baptist is **not introduced**. Three verses into Mark and he **appears**. He's a **pop-up**. He **bursts** on the scene ... **unannounced** and ... **uncensored**.

And I mean **uncensored**. **John** is **not** user-friendly ... or even house-broken, from his camel coat to his locust enchiladas. **But** ... however **eccentric** he appears to **us**, the people of that time know **exactly** what he is. He's a **prophet**. **Odd** like Elijah of old ... who **also** came to **shake things up** ... who got scooped up when God's chariot swung low, but maybe it's more like a Ferris wheel because ... here he is back again.

John **appears** ... he is **uncensored** ... and he is immediately **in motion**. He does **not** set up an office. He **launches**. Four verses into Mark and John is splashing water on people and telling them God is turning the world upside-down ... **so get a helmet**. John is the **street sign** ... he's the **drop pin**. He points the way. Oh, and it's a **one-way** street. John is the wrecking crew, the re-po

guy. He's a steamroller. He's the **preparer** who levels the playing field ... in order to **clean house**. He speaks some words and gets straight to his work, faster than the Griswolds at the Grand Canyon. When Mark tells a story, you feel the **breeze**.

Now everybody's intrigued by John's **recipes**. It's easy to focus on the ***honey bunches of bugs***. But what's **really** important is John's **address**. He's not just splashing and preaching in any old place. He's at the **Jordan River**. That's important. Hundreds of years before, Israel **crossed** that river. It was after centuries of slavery and 40 years of wandering. ***But then***, Israel **crossed** the Jordan, and God's people were **finally home**. **Now**, John's working that same neighborhood, that same **address**, loaded with all that history and symbolism. What John is doing is inviting the Israel of **his day** to go **back** to the crossing, the transition point, the starting line ... the **homecoming** ... **back** to that fresh, new **beginning** ... **back** to the **launching pad**. It's like a circle, isn't it? John **baptizes** ... ***at the Jordan***, where God is like a groom ready to carry his bride over the threshold once more. **But** ... the ***going back*** is not just for **nostalgia**. It's so that God's people can come home **anew**. That's what **repentance** is all about. It's about **coming home**, back where you belong, making a new beginning. **Repentance** means God's people get a fresh start ... to turn their lives around ... to re-fix their compass on God's true north, to align themselves with ***the new world order*** ... that is burning like dawn through the morning glass.

And yes, the Good News **is** nothing less than a **new world order**. Make no mistake. Some years ago, archaeologists discovered an ***inscription***. It's dated to just before the time of Jesus [The *Priēnē Inscription*]. The inscription is a ***tribute*** to the Roman Emperor ***on his birthday***. It calls ***Caesar*** the **savior**. It calls ***Caesar*** the bringer of peace to the world. And then it says something else: The birth of Caesar was **the beginning of good news**. Sound familiar? What do you think? Did Mark know about Caesar's birthday card? Did he know about its exalted language? **And** is Mark **challenging** it, **challenging empire**, **challenging** the current world order, by saying, "**Not** Caesar, **but Jesus Christ** is the **savior** and bringer of **peace** and the **beginning** of Good News"? It really is God's **new world order**.

And John doesn't package it in **bubble wrap**. He flunked ***Subtlety 101***. John is an **alarm clock** on a sleepy morning. He's **abrupt**. He's **blinding** and **hot** and **invigorating** all at once.

And above all, John **doesn't** draw attention to **himself** ... which he easily could have. He's no self-promoter. He knows his place and stays in it. He's an **interim** pastor. He creates no dependency on himself. John is a **street sign** that points **beyond** himself. He **points** people to the **Ischuroteros**, the "***Stronger One*** who is coming." John **relativizes** himself. He says, "***I*** ... baptize you with water. **But** ... the ***Stronger One***—he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

The Holy Spirit, part of God's very **self**, now available to **all** God's people, the Holy Spirit is at the center of this **new world order**. And the Holy Spirit brings the biggest change of all: ***Relationship with God*** is about to be dramatically different. God will no longer be gliding over people like a pillar of cloud and fire. God will no longer sizzle and smoke and consume on the altar. The ***Holy Spirit*** brings a **new access to God** ... which will happen like air filling our lungs, like wind sweeping across the prairie. Through the Spirit, God **takes up residence** ... **within** us and **among** us ... pouring out forgiveness and transformation and gifts for ministry and humming with **energy** like a power station.

Well, what about the **people** John **addressed** and **splashed**. Were they **ready** for God's **new world order**? Had they applied enough sunscreen? Of course not! Like Monty Python taught us, nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition. Nobody's ready when the **alarm clock** goes off. Nobody's prepared for the curtain opening, and sunlight flooding the room. Nobody in pajamas is ready to ski jump. There are no courses on drinking from a fire hose. And nobody's ready when God breaks into the normal and the normal is ... **done**.

God's **new** normal is ... a **launch** ... an **immersion** program ... jump in and swim ... experimental ... lots of trial and error ... find your way by **living into it** ... making it up as you go ... a lot of two steps forward and one back. Well, of course it is. It's **apprenticeship**. That's what being a disciple is. Do your best, we'll caulk the rest ... It's learn as you **do**. It's a **square peg** in a **round**

hole. Well, the **master craftsman** didn't fit religion. And you won't either. This is **new** wine ... It's a **new** patch on a **new** garment. **God's new normal** isn't **comfortable news**. It's **Good** News ...

... **because** God knows ... the **last** thing we need is **more of the same**. If there's going to be **good**, things have to **change**. And to get to a place you've never been, you have to go by a path you've never walked. Jesus says, "Follow me," and it's **not** a way we know. **New** wine goes into **new** wineskins. And **Jesus** is our GPS.

And Mark is clear: This is only **the beginning**. **Mark 1:1** is a **title** for the **whole** Gospel of Mark. The **whole** Gospel of Mark is just "**The beginning** of the Good News of Jesus Christ." Well, if the whole Gospel of Mark is just **the beginning**, what's **the rest**?

To find out, we fast forward to the **end** of Mark. It's Easter. And the heavenly figure in the empty tomb speaks to the women: "Jesus is going ahead of you to **Galilee**. There you will see him, just as he told you" (**Mark 16:7**). **Galilee** is where Jesus started. Now, the **risen** Jesus **returns** to Galilee ... to meet his disciples back where it all **began**. It's a **circle**, isn't it? The Good News is **always beginning again**, wherever the risen Jesus meets **us** ... in every "Galilees" that lies ahead. The **beginning** is only the **beginning** that **launches** us towards an **ending** that is never an **ending!**

Dear friends, the risen Jesus meets **us**. And the Good News **begins anew** wherever **we** are. **We prepare the way** ... level the road, discern what fits and what doesn't. **We** let **new access** to God **flow**. And especially, **we** make **Jesus'** way **our** way ... in every respect. To follow him, totally **in**, baptized in his own Spirit ... through low cost and high cost, faithful, focused and expectant ... always holding on to **the Stronger One** who is **with us** from **the beginning** ... which is only **the beginning**.

Elements of Worship

Scripture Reading Mark 1:1-8

¹*This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God:*

²*As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,*

"Look, I am sending my messenger before you.

He will set your way in order.

*³The voice of one who is crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord!
Make his paths straight!’”*

⁴John the Baptizer came into the wilderness to proclaim a baptism of repentance leading to the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And the whole region of Judea and all the Jerusalemites were going out to him and being baptized by him in the Jordan River, while they confessed their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist. And he ate locusts and wild honey.

⁷And John proclaimed and said, “The one who is stronger than me is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸As for me, I have baptized you with water. But as for him, he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”