

The Beginning of the Good News

A sermon preached by Rev. Ginger E. Gaines-Cirelli for A Sermon Every Sunday

Text: Mark 1:1-8

“‘Once upon a time...’ ‘In the beginning was...’ That’s the way it always starts off. Every story, gospel, history, chronicle, myth, legend, folktale, or old wives’ tale blues riff begins with ‘Woke up this mornin’...’”ⁱ Rock legend Steven Tyler is the source of this little truth nugget. Stories have a beginning. And in the span of human time, every beginning means that something is ending or, at least, changing. If a new story is told, the existing story is amended or released.

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

The beginning of the gospel according to Mark begins with a fragment, a sentence with no ending. I guess I’d always known that, but it struck me in a peculiar way this year. I found myself puzzling over it—probably more than it warrants. Steven Tyler came to the rescue, reminding me that maybe this sentence fragment is simply the way stories begin, a signal of a new chapter in the human story.

And what a gift to receive a new chapter that begins with the promise of *good news!* // When bad news has been our daily bread, when we’ve had to labor to hold on to hope, when we’ve been bombarded with confusion and gaslighting and reports of violence and abuses of every kind, our bodies and spirits long for a good word, some good news. Bring on the εὐαγγελίου (*euangeliou*), the “gospel,” of

Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, the anointed one in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell!

Lest we get ahead of ourselves, notice that the most ancient account of the good news of Jesus begins in the wilderness. It doesn't begin in the party hall or throne room. It doesn't begin in a time of peace and plenty. It doesn't even begin in a bucolic and potentially sappified setting with a manger and glowing light. No. In Mark's version the beginning is in the wilderness. The wilderness is where Israel rebelled against God—not once, not twice, but again and again. The wilderness is also where God continued to show up with mercy, sustenance, and guidance bringing water from a rock, manna from heaven, and elemental signs to lead the people forward.

And the Jordan river where John does his baptizing runs through the wilderness and is a symbolic place of crossing over from one life to the next. Having visited that place for the first time in January of this year, I can tell you the Jordan is not a clear, sparkling river. My husband, Anthony accidentally drank some of the water I'd set aside to bring home and was afraid he was a goner. Just sayin. That place now as then is a place surrounded by violence and struggle and deep-seated enmity among people and nations.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ starts with a fragment, echoes of prophecy cried out by John, reverberating across the stark wilderness landscape of an occupied land filled with ancient enmities and alighting on the waters of a murky river. The good news begins right where it is needed—in places of struggle and uncertainty.

And then, as now, good news was a draw. We are told that “all the people of Jerusalem were going out” to receive John’s “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Would that be received by us as “good news” today? The words—“repentance”...“sins”—have become heavy with the baggage laid upon them, so heavy that they might sink to the bottom of the river once we have thrown them away. But I hope we won’t throw out the gospel truth with the bath water. And there *is* gospel—good news—to be found here.

To repent is to acknowledge something is wrong and turn away from it. It is being honest about our sin, about the things that we have done and left undone that separate us from God and other people, things that have done harm. Just imagine if you had to eternally drag around all that baggage...imagine if there was no facility available for clearing our conscience, writing a new chapter, making new choices and commitments about how to live?

A baptism with water, even iffy, murky water as found in today's Jordan River, is a washing, a cleansing. And that is a good feeling! Think about any time in your life when you've not been able to have a bath or shower for a time. Perhaps it was during a hospitalization or on a mission trip or work assignment without the kinds of facilities available to most of us; or perhaps for some of us, it was during a time lived on the street or in our car. Those moments help us understand what a privilege it is to get to take a shower! After many days or weeks, you emerge from the water, feeling like a new person!

And water baptism is, at its most elemental level, a washing facility. The water baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins is an opportunity to remove at least a layer of the gunk that clogs the arteries of our hearts so that love can't flow freely, the grime of resentment and regret that has built up on our being over the years making us—if we're being honest—small-minded and ashamed, the prejudicial gack that has been smeared over our proverbial eyes that keeps us from perceiving what is real, from perceiving every human as our family. A water baptism is very good news! Because it means that, should we so choose, we can present ourselves acknowledging we are in need of a scrub... and emerge from the waters lighter, free, and shining...maybe like a new person!

This baptism is not only found at the beginning of the good news but is, itself, the beginning of the good news. It is the necessary preparation for what comes next. Repentance and forgiveness of our sins, removes all that gunk that gets in the way and takes up space better filled with what Jesus comes to offer. John proclaims that Jesus comes to baptize us with Holy Spirit, the very breath of life and conscience and creativity and prophetic power. Prepare the way of the Lord! Take a bath! A repentance bath...forgiveness and mercy are in the water. And those beautiful, humbling gifts liberate us, open us, to receive and share the life that God promises in and through the one who is coming, Jesus.

What comes next in Jesus is more powerful than our most stubborn excuses and rationalizations, more powerful than empire and all its agents and effects, more powerful than bullies, more powerful than our neuroses and our addictions, more power than the voices in our head trying to convince us we can't be forgiven, more powerful than prejudices and bigotry encrusted in our psyches through centuries, more powerful than water, that elemental symbol of chaos and destruction, water that Jesus calms with a word, so that it drapes in gentle folds about his feet. //

Writer Kathleen Norris tells of how, in her work as an artist-in-residence at parochial schools, she uses the Psalms as examples of poetry. The children, she says, are often surprised about the Psalms—the way the poetic prayers of the Bible

don't mince words or leave out painful things in human life. And Norris says the children's writing captures much of that emotional directness and honesty. She goes on to share this:

“Once a little boy wrote a poem called ‘The Monster Who Was Sorry.’ He began by admitting that he hates it when his father yells at him; his response in the poem is to throw his sister down the stairs, and then to wreck his room, and finally to wreck the whole town. The poem concludes: ‘Then I sit in my messy house and say to myself, ‘I shouldn’t have done all that.’” ‘My messy house’ says it all: with more honesty than most adults could have mustered, the boy made a metaphor for himself that admitted the depth of his rage and also gave him a way out. If that boy had been a novice in the fourth-century monastic desert, his elders might have told him that he was well on the way toward repentance, not such a monster after all, but only human. If the house is messy, they might have said, why not clean it up, why not make it into a place where God might wish to dwell?”ⁱⁱ

And there it is. The beginning of the good news is a clean up job, it is a preparation of our “house” to receive Christ who fills us with new life in the power of Spirit. It doesn't just magically happen. We've got to show up and do our work. We've got to get into the water with John. Honesty and vulnerability are required of us. Fessing up and Self-love and open hearts are required of us. But even in the

wilderness, even in these days of pandemic, even in the swirl and churn of these difficult days in our nation and world, we can do something. We can do those things—honesty, vulnerability, fessing up, self-love, open heartedness—right? We are not powerless.

We can wake up each morning with our minds stayed on Jesus, proclaiming that new every morning is God’s love and mercy, new every morning is a new beginning... We can look around at the mess made after we’ve made it again and say “I shouldn’t have done all that.” And then get busy cleaning it up. And, by doing so... once again, in the wilderness, in the mess, the good news is proclaimed, a new chapter begins... and we prepare the way for Christ to be born again.

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ⁱ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/beginnings-and-endings>

ⁱⁱ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, New York: Riverhead Books, 1998, p. 69-70.