

2021 06 27 In the Beginning

Mark 1:1-13 - Jesus appears

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Mark, chapter one, the first thirteen verses. May these words be on our hearts.

This is the beginning of the Good News. Thanks be to God, for this deluge of biographical headlines, erupting from the pages of the ancient sages of old, now told by a new voice, a bold choice, this feral John, a fellow beyond the civilized bound, out appearing by the Jordan, gleaning people by the dozen, by the hundred, everyone storming out of the city, emptying neighbourhoods to go down, down to the river, down into the water, a dousing, a sousing to wake you up, to turn you around and for the forgiveness of sins. And from distant, backwater Galilee, down a windy dusty desert path, one solitary man comes out.

Down into the water. And on the way up, all Heaven breaks loose, and this man is harried off into the wilderness into the company of devil, and angel, and beast. What an opening act! Don't you want to know what happens next?

Let's resist the temptation to read ahead. Let's sit a while by the Jordan, in the echo of the voice.

This is the beginning of the Good News of Jesus. In the beginning, God says, 'You are my Child, whom I love. I am well pleased with you'. But who is this person? We know the crowds from Jerusalem, the people with cottages and connections. We know the Judeans, the academics, politicians, trendsetters. But who is Jesus? This Gospel, Mark's Gospel, does not give us a galactic poem, or a miraculous birth, or a valiant pedigree stretching back to Adam and Eve. This Gospel just gives us John, appearing in the wilderness, heralded by some misquoted lines from two ancient prophets, cosplaying Elijah, and talking about someone else who is coming next.

But Jesus – Jesus doesn't say a single word. Jesus barely acts. It is John who baptizes, it is Heaven that opens, it is the voice that speaks, and the Spirit that descends and then sends him into the wilderness where Satan tempts him and where he just... is. He is with the wild animals, and angels attend him. It's all there in the verbs. Jesus only does one thing - he comes out of Galilee. He sees heaven open, and he hears 'You are my child, whom I love. I am well pleased with you'.

This is the beginning. This is how God does beginnings – God says how it is. And then God says how good it is. God begins by acknowledging goodness.

I don't often begin by acknowledging goodness. I usually start a project by saying 'so there's this problem'. Something is wrong. Someone is wrong on the internet (<https://xkcd.com/386>). We have to do something! We have to make a plan, make a choice, make a move. But God starts things with loving affirmation of identity.

Why? It's so much easier to dismiss other people than affirm them. Perhaps you've been on the internet and had an opinion?

Whatever the concern, whatever the topic, whatever your personal knowledge and experience, there will always be someone ready to dismiss you. To shut you down and shut you out. Some of those ways of dismissing people are even formalized into laws, customs and routines. Women don't preach. Gays don't marry. Children don't speak. Prisoners don't vote. Some of these ways of dismissing people begin to operate inside of us. I'm not wise enough. I don't work hard enough. I don't speak well. I don't have anything to say. Shame and silence stalk the quiet wilds where our souls go searching for water.

And you will be assigned an identity. The world system where we dwell is abundant in its judgements. Are you a worker, a consumer, a user, a taxpayer? Are you an illegal, a thug, a deplorable? You might be undeserving, underserved, under suspicion or overlooked. If you stay too long in Jerusalem or in Galilee, you'll only ever be the child of the priest, or the carpenter.

So I think it matters that Mark begins his gospel with the fragmentary words and actions of individuals who have no pedigree, no training, no connections, and no anointing. In this Gospel, John's entire qualifications are that he dresses a bit like the prophet Elijah. Yet Mark's entire introduction of Jesus sinks into a single moment of naming. 'You are my child, whom I love. I am well pleased with you'.

Those words are for you, as well. God knows you as a beloved child. Those words are even for us as a congregation. But I am not sure we have always heard them, or always believed them. Where do you put us, as a church, in this story? We might be in Jerusalem among the powerful. We might be in Galilee, among the insignificant. We might be by the Jordan, seeking our transformation, our re-connection, seeking our beginning. We might be in the wilderness, in peril, in jeopardy.

I would like to suggest that our church is all over the place. We exist within the city wall, and we walk the desert road, and we dab our toes in the river. I think we are missing a uniting purpose, a clear vision of who we are and what God is calling us to do. We are trying to hear the voice that calls in the wilderness, ideally without going into the wilderness.

Pride is about coming out. It is about the acknowledgement that we are created good. Pride faces the risks of the wilderness and discovers a place of rest, safe shelter, and the ministrations of angels. Pride is a profoundly nonviolent movement focused on the survival, resilience, and a transformation of the whole. And it's messy, and uncomfortable, and riotously joyful.

As church, we seek to offer rest to those who labour long and endure much in order to be safe, to be known, to be whole. We seek to labour in the cause of the marginalized and the oppressed. Well, queer people know something about locating ourselves, scanning the room, testing the waters. And we know something about what it means to be fully known, and fully loved.

This scripture is a cataract of fact, a catalogue of God quickstepping towards - what? The revelation of Jesus, the presence of divine power in the unexpected person. And when that person comes out, is revealed in the full glory of who they are, beloved by God, acclaimed from on high - they are thrust into jeopardy, propelled into the wilderness.

The wilderness, with wild animals, hunger and deprivation, temptation and accusation. But there are also angels in the wilderness. There is rest in the wilderness, there is provision, there are ministering angels to guard you. You are God's beloved child.

The miracle is not that Jesus is named as God's beloved child. That miracle occurs every day if we have ears to hear it, and bodies and spirits to express it. The miracle is that Jesus goes into the wilderness and finds a place of life amid spiritual and material danger. There are angels there. Just as God sent ravens to feed Elijah, and manna to feed the nation, a plant to shade Jonah and a well to nourish Hagar.

When someone knows that they are God's beloved child, it doesn't matter where they were born, what they have endured, how they have failed, and what it has cost them. They know who they are. The world can't give that. The world can't take that away.

As God's beloved child you are freed to gift the truth that you know, that God has lit within you, the fire of your soul to warm those around you and light new fires.

When you know that God claims you, you will know, as John did, that there is someone coming into this world, coming after you. His name is Jesus, and in defiance of all good taste, in loving affirmation of your identity as God's beloved child, he will stoop to care for your feet. Because he has opened the door and beckoned you to come out and know who you are.

And this is the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God.

See also Spencer Britten - Comfort Ye, Every Valley -
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9uZR7f6oyOk>