

Sermon Preached December 7, 2014 – 8am service only
Year B, Advent 2
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury

Oh Come, Oh Come, Emmanuel. Amen.

Have you ever paid attention to the opening lines of a book? They usually tell us something about what is to come. I'm going to give you some examples. Tell me if you recognize them!

Midway on our life's journey, I found myself in dark woods, the right road lost.

- [*The Divine Comedy, The Inferno*](#) by [Dante Alighieri](#).

Scarlett O'Hara was not beautiful, but men seldom realized it when caught by her charm as the Tarleton twins were.

- [*Gone With The Wind*](#) by [Margaret Mitchell](#)

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

- [*Pride and Prejudice*](#) by [Jane Austen](#).

Two households, both alike in dignity,
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.

- [*Romeo and Juliet*](#) by [William Shakespeare](#)

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.

- [*The Catcher in the Rye*](#) by [J. D. Salinger](#). (Holden Caulfield)

That's why it's interesting to note that our gospel reading today are the opening lines to the gospel of Mark. They give us a foretaste of what is to come. And the opening words are:

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

- 1) This book is about Good news
- 2) Jesus Christ is part of that good news
- 3) Jesus is the Son of God.

Powerful stuff! This book is about good news! Not a random story, but something meaningful and transcendent. Good news, Gospel, is at the heart of who God is.

The remainder of these opening lines go on to back up this statement by showing how some of the promises of God are now being fulfilled.

Many of these promises come from our Isaiah reading. At the time of Isaiah, the people have suffered, but now God is coming to make things right. As is described in Isaiah, “Comfort, oh comfort my people.” At that time Israel had been conquered by the Babylonians and were suffering captives in Babylon. This passage in Isaiah is God speaking to them and promising comfort and rescue. God wants to heal us and the world. God is coming as Isaiah promised, but now it is happening in the time of John. So Mark is making a direct parallel that what God promised in the time of Isaiah is now beginning with the preaching and ministry of John the Baptist.

John the Baptist is the start of this good news. He is wearing weird clothes, which the people listening to this reading would understand as a reference to Elijah. John is Elijah returned. In 2 Kings Elijah was described as being “A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist.” The Old Testament prophecies are being fulfilled in the person of John!

People are also repenting of their sins and being forgiven. John’s baptism is relieving them of their guilt and shame. He is preparing them for the coming of God. Bear in mind that repentance is not about beating yourself up. “Repentance” literally means “to turn.” It is not a looking backward, but looking forward. In the words of the theologian Frederick Buechner, “True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, ‘I’m sorry’ than to the future and saying, ‘Wow!’” There is a new direction ahead and it’s beautiful! To those at the River Jordan, this is GREAT news!

Another piece of good news is this new Elijah’s proclaiming of the coming of Jesus, the Messiah, the one who was promised long ago in Isaiah. God loves us and wants to comfort us, the sheep of his pasture. The Christ is coming who will “feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom” Again, we learn the scriptures will be fulfilled.

And the final piece of good news in these few opening lines is when John says, “I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” So not only will the Messiah come, but so too will the Holy Spirit. And this Spirit will enter into us, God’s people.

So in these 8 short lines, the opening lines of the Gospel of Mark, we learn that this book is about good news, and it begins by laying out the fundamentals of the good news: God's promises will be fulfilled. God is coming. Jesus is God's son. Our sins will be forgiven. We will be comforted and righteousness will prevail. And The Holy Spirit will enter into us personally.... Whew! That practically sums up the whole book!

With Advent we have entered a new liturgical season and the gospel readings over the next year will be primarily from Mark. Our reading today sets the stage for the year ahead.

This season of Advent is where we wait with John the Baptist and the people by the Jordan River. We look at the challenge of life around us: Racism, violence, the economy, or our personal challenges of poor health, broken relationships, lost jobs, or fear, and take comfort in knowing that it won't always be like this; God will help us. And in the meantime, we are to get our own house in order as best we can. Repent of sins, turn to the new life that is possible for us, be comforted to know that God loves us, and recognize that the story is not yet over.

Because while the gospel begins the story of Jesus, that story continues with all of us who are the Body of Christ. Our lives are part of the working out of the story of this good news. We are part of the story. And we are told at the very beginning that the end of story is good news. And we lived happily ever after. Amen.