“New Beginnings”
Advent 2b
Mark 1:1-8

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In Jesus’ Name.

I can’t read the first verse of Mark without thinking of the very first verse in the Bible, Genesis chapter 1, verse 1, “In the beginning the Spirit of God swept over the face of the deep and God said, ‘Let there be,’” and there was. If Genesis 1:1 marks the beginning then Mark 1:1 signals a new beginning.

Actually, there are several new things here. The first is the way Mark uses the term “good news.” When we hear it in church we don’t mean just any good news. It is a technical term for Jesus, the Son of God, crucified and raised for our salvation. That’s the good news. We have another technical word for it, gospel, from the old English *godspel*, meaning good news. In time gospel came also to identify the New Testament’s first four books, the gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Good news was a technical term also in the first century but it had nothing to do with Jesus. It was a term from the same arena from which we learned the technical term “collateral damage.” That is from the world of warfare, not a video game. Collateral damage refers to unintended casualties and destruction. “Good news” was a technical term referring to a military victory. Here is how the ancients described it. “The messenger appears, raises his right hand in greeting and calls out with a loud voice; Rejoice! We conquered. By his appearance it is known already that he brings good news. His face shines, his spear is decked with laurel, his head is crowned, he swings a branch of palms, joy fills the city. Good news sacrifices are offered, the temples are garlanded….”[1]

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[1] Gerhard Friedrich, “Euangellion,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. II* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 772.

Can you picture this messenger alongside John the baptizer, the messenger of Mark 1? This is the first sign that something new is afoot and some redefinition of the term. John doesn't appear in a temple wrapped in garland but in the wilderness. He doesn't cry out "Rejoice." Rather, he cries out "Repent." He has no spear. His head is not decked with a crown of laurel. He is dressed like some cave man not a warrior. His diet is not the stuff of a victory banquet.

Yet, we make much of John the Baptist in our Advent run up to Christmas. Why don't they let him in the shopping malls? I've never seen him in the windows at Marshall Fields downtown. You know the store I mean. I took a field trip the other day, out gathering evidence. I went by a yard with life-sized camels headed toward a stable with Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, shepherds, angels, and Wise Men. Added to the pantheon are Frosty the Snowman, two life-size Santa Clauses, one of which is in what looks to be a bullet-proof, plexi-glass box, and one Mrs. Claus. I think she goes with the one in the box because the other one is driving a sleigh with eight reindeer. There is a Ferris wheel stocked with big teddy bears, and a small army of elves. I looked high and low but could not find John the Baptist. Why not? He wasn't dressed any worse nor did he smell any worse than those shepherds.

In the beginning of Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick* we accompany Ishmael, the narrator of the tale, to the seaman's chapel. Father Mapple, himself once a seaman and a whaler, comes in and approaches the pulpit, which is built in the old style, high overhead. It is a small chapel with no room for a flight of stairs to climb into such a pulpit. The cleric climbs a rope ladder as if climbing aboard ship from a small boat. Once aboard the pulpit Father Mapple pulls the rope ladder in after him. Melville concludes his short chapter about the pulpit saying, "Yes, the world's a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow."

In a lecture some years ago, Richard Lischer, who teaches preaching at Duke, said, “All too often in these days the pulpit is more like a dingy tied to the back of the ship, picking up the flotsam and jetsam of the culture.” It is not just the pulpit that has become the dingy, but the church itself, tied to the back, picking up cultural debris.

So, back to the question: Why no John the Baptist in the shopping mall or in the display on the lawn? It could be that whole beheading thing. But Jesus grew up to be crucified. There is the point. He grew up. The Christmas culture of the mall and the front yard keeps him an infant. In fact it makes and keeps the whole story childish. By the time Jesus grows up he is pushed out of sight in favor of bunnies and baby chickens.

All the others characters in the story: Wise Men, shepherds, Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, even the angels have been domesticated and harnessed to the new meaning of the season. If the world is a ship on its passage out, then the word called out by the one standing watch is “shop.” It is all about those figures showing an increase over last year. According to one study of 500 retailers, online Black Friday sales were up 24.3% over last year. Good news, the overall increase was 6%. That has become the new technical meaning of the term. Please don’t think I’m placing myself in a superior position to this. When the Dow went up almost 500 points one day last week the first words out of my mouth were “good news.” And what the Dow giveth, the Dow taketh away.

John the Baptist is not included in the tableau in the run up to Christmas because he cannot be domesticated. He is the one dressed like Elijah of old, standing on the wilderness side of the Jordan River. No one can coax the word “shop” out of his mouth. What he says is “repent,” which means “turn around.” That is the last thing the merchants of Black Friday want us to do. Last week the word called out by the one standing watch here in the prow of this ship

was, “Wait for the one who is coming.” This week the watchword is “Repent for the stronger one is at hand.” That message, Mark tells us, is good news. This is not the only thing new.

Did you notice there is no verb in Mark 1, verse 1? It reads more like a title: The Beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. So, now we have to decide if the beginning refers to the appearance of John the Baptist. If that is the case we would find other subtitles along the way, giving headings to other subsections. But we don’t. If the title for the whole book is “The Beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” then it makes perfect sense that Mark’s gospel has no ending. The last verse in Mark’s gospel says of the women who found the tomb empty, “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” That’s no ending. Precisely. That’s no ending because the whole book is but the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. We are the latest chapter. We don’t know how many more chapters there will be, but we do know the ending.

The ending for which we are headed is announced by the prophet of the first reading today. “Comfort, comfort, ye my people. Speak ye peace thus says our God,” the prophet sings out. The psalmist says we are headed toward a land where God’s glory dwells, where mercy and truth meet together, and righteousness and peace kiss each other. Peter says, “…we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness and peace are at home.” The ending for which we are headed is a place where and a time in which righteousness and peace welcome each other home with a kiss.

The door to that home swings on the hinges or repentance and forgiveness. There is one more problem and it is a big one. The door is nailed shut. We have done the nailing. We stand there daily with hammer and nails in hand. In fact, we have forged those nails, nail by bitter nail,

pride linked to smugness linked to cynicism linked to self-hatred linked to self-pity linked to presumption linked to pride linked to the hurtful things we do to one another linked on and on. The only way that door can swing on those hinges is for someone to crowbar the door open. The pastor who led chapel this past week ministers in the deaf community. He taught us the sign for dead. It is right palm up, left palm down and then you reverse them. The pastor said, "Think of the saying 'he rolled over in his grave." Well, that's what Jesus did. He rolled over in his grave, rose to new life, and broke open that door.

We are joined to Jesus by our baptism into his death and resurrection. We live by repentance and forgiveness. By repentance we hand over to him all those nails. He wants them. He can have them. In their place he gives us forgiveness and the blessings of life lived in the power of his resurrection. So living, the doors of our homes and the doorways of our lives swing on those twin hinges of repentance and forgiveness. That door opens the way for us to be messengers of comfort, way preparers for the Lord, and practitioners of love and faithfulness. Imperfect as our efforts may be, we give witness to the time and place when righteousness and peace welcome each other home with a kiss. May our lives and our homes be such places.