



PREPARE THE WAY FOR PEACE

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

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Where does something begin? How would you trace the roots of the age-old conflict in Israel and Palestine so that you could point your finger to a particular place and say, “Yes, this is where it all began”? If you could trace the factors that have shaped your life to some definite starting point, where would you say everything that has made you who you are began? I suspect you would need to talk about quite a few generations before you could say, “Yes, this is where it all began.” Every writer has to make a choice about where and how to begin a story. Where does a life, a history of a people in conflict, or even a story, really begin?

Mark opens the story of the gospel of Jesus Christ with a strange wilderness prophet named John. Long before the first Christmas parade, God sent John as the herald of salvation. John was no jolly shopping center Santa; he did not wear a red fur coat and a patent leather belt. He wore a tunic of roughly woven camel hair and a girdle of animal skin. He did not feed on sugar plums and candy canes, but on locust and wild honey. John came to the wilderness of Judea preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He came to prepare the world for the gift of peace – peace with God, peace with one another, and peace within ourselves.

Each of the four gospels begins in a different way. You could say, at least from Mark's perspective, that John the Baptist is the beginning of the gospel. Mark is the first gospel to be written. In Mark's gospel, the story of the coming of Jesus does not begin with John's eloquent and exalted theology; it does not include Luke's domestic scenes with Mary; it does not speak of Matthew's story of courageous Joseph who defies convention. In Mark's gospel, there are no angels singing in the night sky. In Mark's gospel, we do not hear of the visit of the wise men or Herod's cruelty against the baby boys of Bethlehem. In Mark's gospel, the story of Jesus begins with this wilderness prophet named John.

In Mark's gospel there is no time to warm-up or to get ready. This prophet's cry in the wilderness awakens us to something new and unexpected. If we are not careful, we will miss the key that Mark gives us to understand the whole life of Jesus. Before we rush to follow John into Mark's story of Jesus, look again at the opening words. The gospel does not really begin with a wild-eyed, anti-social prophet named John, but with a word about Jesus: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Mark's gospel begins with two words about Jesus.

You may have heard me speak recently about these two words. The first word is that Jesus is the Christ. Christ is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word, Messiah, which means “the anointed one.” The gospel begins with a word about Jesus' relationship to all humankind through Israel. Jesus is a human being, made of flesh and bone, who is anointed by God to save the people. He is more than a great teacher, humanitarian, or prophet. He is the Savior who has come to deliver us from bondage, sin, and oppression. The Jewish people expected a king like David to restore the fortunes of the people. No king had ever risen from the people to fulfill their hopes and dreams.

Now, the words of the prophet Isaiah are true: “Comfort, comfort, my people, says your God, speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid.” God is sending the One who will bring everlasting comfort to the people, who will deliver them once and for all from sin, and who will begin the eternal reign of God's peace. As flesh and blood, Jesus is one with his people. The deliverance comes from one who shares their humanity.

The second word is that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is connected to God as no one else has ever been or will ever be. Mark wants us to understand, right from the beginning, that the gospel is the good news of Jesus, the Son of God. At the baptism of Jesus, a voice from heaven echoes the truth that Jesus is God's Son. Yet, the irony of Mark's gospel is that no one, except you and the demons, really understands that Jesus is God's son. The first person in the gospel to glimpse the truth is not a disciple, but the Roman centurion who looks at the dying form of Jesus on the cross and cries out, “Truly, this man is the Son of God.” It is only after the crucifixion and the resurrection that the church begins to see what Mark tells us at the beginning of the gospel – Jesus is the Son of God. In other words, when you and I read the gospel, we know something that the participants in the story do not know. We know it from the beginning.

By telling us from the very beginning that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God, Mark is telling us that the coming of Jesus is not an accident of history or a last-minute plan. By placing these words about Jesus at the beginning, Mark tells us that God took the first step for us and for our salvation. Before the first human heart turned to God, God had already turned to us in Christ. Before the first person lifted a hand in violence against another, God's hands were lifted toward us in love. Before Abraham told a lie to pass Sarah off as his sister, or Moses ever knew he had a temper, or Ruth had to scratch out a living to support her mother-in-law, or David's heart skipped a beat when he saw Bathsheba in her tub, or Herod made killing babies public policy, God's love was turned toward Abraham, Moses, Ruth, David, and even Herod. Before Palestinians and Jews began their bitter struggle, or heroin ruined a young girl's life, or husbands and wives broke each other's hearts, and even before parents and children didn't understand each other, there was God's love for us in Jesus Christ. We hear in Mark's opening words an echo of the words that open the whole Bible, “In the beginning, God...” The gospel begins in the being of God before there was time or space, or a garden called Eden so fresh and green you could taste the morning. We have in Mark's opening a foretaste of the words with which John will begin his gospel: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God... The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” When there was nothing but the infinitely loving being of God, there is the gospel of peace.

At Christmas we celebrate not a myth, but a historical reality. God acts in human history to save and redeem. Salvation is not some immaterial philosophical idea or some unformed mystical experience. Our peace with God and one another flows from an event in time when God meets us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We claim that the birth of Jesus Christ is the focal point of human history. In Jesus, God invades our world and our lives with saving power. When Jesus calls Peter and Andrew to follow him, heals a woman possessed with evil spirits, feeds the hungry, gives sight to blind Bartimaeus, forgives the sinner, and raises the dead, we know that the salvation of God touches the lives of ordinary people like you and me.

Jesus gives hope to the family that has lost a child, heals the troubled spirits of a despairing man, rebuilds trust in a divided community, and brings peace to the nations. The meaning and value of my life and of all history is found in Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God.

A young woman grew up in a difficult home. She struggled for years with self-doubt and a sense of unworthiness. She felt unloved and unlovable. She seemed to have a gift for making choices that only increased her isolation and self-contempt. She began to see a counselor who helped her unravel the threads of her life story. After a long time, she followed the last thread of the last story to what seemed to be the end. There, she found another story. She found the story of God's love for her in Jesus Christ. God had loved her from the beginning. Christ was with her in a way no one else had ever been. In discovering that she was loved, she began to be able to love. Some time ago, I received an email from her. Something at the bottom of the email caught my eye. At first glance it seemed unconnected with the subject of the email. On second glance, it was the foundation of everything. She wrote, "Jesus loves me (and a lot of other people who don't even care), this (and maybe only this) I know."

I do not believe that the conflicts that plague the earth, that disrupt our homes, that divide our communities will ever be resolved until we discover that there is a peace that is deeper and more powerful than all the hurt, murder, injustice, greed, addiction, and hatred in the world. God's love for the entire world in Jesus Christ is the one thing that is big enough to overcome the pain, deceptions, and tragedies of life. God's love and peace in Jesus Christ have been here from the beginning. Even now, this peace is there for you, for me, and for all people.