

A NEW BEGINNING

Mark 1:1-8

*Advent begins with a call
to repentance and faith.*

A sermon preached by
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I have an announcement... See how you're all paying attention?

Our lives are ruled by announcements. Some of the announcements are good: There's an announcement of a new job, an engagement, or a pregnancy. Something parents are doing now that we didn't used to do is "gender-reveal" parties. Even when my children were born, often you didn't know what gender the child would be until he or she was born. Now they have 3-D body scans of the fetus, so at the appropriate time, there is a big, dramatic announcement—so everyone will know what color to get the baby gifts, right?

Other announcements are not so good: a tornado siren going off, the announcement of layoffs at a business, or a bad diagnosis from the doctor. I'll never forget walking through Wal-Mart in Stuttgart, Arkansas, on a summer day in 1977 and hearing a tearful manager break in over the Muzak to announce: "Elvis is dead!"

Advent is a time for announcements. The story of the birth of Jesus begins with a series of announcements: the birth of John, the annunciation by Gabriel to Mary, the announcement by Gabriel to Joseph, the angels to the shepherds. Lots of announcements. It was a very newsworthy time.

Today's announcement is often proclaimed at the beginning of Advent, but unlike the other announcements that came prior to the birth of Jesus, this one came 30 years or so after he was born. Why is that important? Aren't we a little behind the curve there? No, I think this announcement by John the baptizer just prior to the beginning of the ministry of Jesus is interesting because, one, it contains some very important information about Jesus, and two, it communicates, in a subtle way, that as important as the original story is, what really matters is what God is doing now. What is God announcing for our lives today?

This is what Mark calls "*the beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, God's Son.*"¹ Essentially this is a title for the whole book, but it's also a title for the Coming One. He is Jesus, the man from Nazareth. He is Christ, the Greek word *christos* related to the

Hebrew Messiah, the one promised by the prophets and hoped for by the Jewish people to come and redeem Israel. He is God's Son, a common term from the Hebrew tradition for the King, and from the Greek culture for a divinity in human form. We have heard these words so much that we forget how they sounded when they were all put together new for the first time: Jesus. Christ. Son of God. Wow.

The ministry of John the baptizer was a ministry of announcement. He had authority to make this announcement because he was the one predicted by the prophet Isaiah: "*Look, I am sending my messenger before you. He will prepare your way, a voice shouting in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight.'*"² We read those words from the prophet a few minutes ago.

John was announcing that the One foreseen by the prophets was coming right away, in their midst almost. In fact, read one more verse past our text, and there he is! John said, "*One stronger than I am is coming after me. I'm not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*"³

The reference to the Holy Spirit excited the listeners' ears; the Holy Spirit was a sign of the end times, a sign of the Kingdom of God. Another prophet, Joel, had said, "*I will pour out my spirit upon everyone; your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions.*" And "*everyone who calls on the Lord's name will be saved.*"⁴ Could it be that the day had finally arrived?

This announcement caused a reaction among the people. Mark says everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem were coming out to hear John, "*calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins.*"⁵ John was dressed in camel's hair clothes, held together by a leather belt. He ate the food of the desert—locusts and wild honey. The people immediately recognized the outfit; it was like the great prophet Elijah was back among them. That's what Elijah looked like.

And lo and behold, the prophet Malachi said that before the Messiah arrived, Elijah would show up. It was all coming together. The words, the signs, John baptizing people in the Jordan River hand over fist: there was a revival going on! Something big was about to happen.

So that's how Mark sets the stage for the appearance of Jesus. Pretty effective, don't you think? We can see how this was "the beginning to the good news." It was clear that the way had been prepared. The Law and the Prophets were all leading up to this point. The people had been waiting. Now the time was upon them, and they were living to see it.

We can approach Advent with a sense that the way has been prepared for us. 2017 is not the first time Advent has been celebrated. We go back to the words of the prophets and the stories of Scripture, and this paves the way for us to experience Christmas. The church puts on all its finery; the ancient hymns touch our hearts; the traditions of the season spring from our memory into our practice every year. The saints that went before us taught us how to do Advent, and we want to leave this legacy to our children and grandchildren, because this is meaningful, deep, faith stuff. It brings joy and peace and awe and wonder into our lives. It's a great gift.

The Gift is the Son of God. This is good news. God is not sending down a new set of rules, another Law to follow. God is sending God's own Son. The Kingdom is coming in person, in the Messiah, in Jesus. He came, he lived, he died, he rose again, and he is alive in the world today. This is good news, because we don't have to follow new regulations. We have to enter into a relationship with the Gift, the Coming One, Jesus the Christ.

This relationship is not like anything that came before. There was already a baptism for purification and cleansing, confession and repentance. But the new baptism of Jesus was an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, not just an outward washing (although Christians continued doing that), but an inward cleansing, a radical re-orientation

of the soul—away from Law and into Grace, away from self and toward God, away from the world and looking toward heaven. That’s what repentance means—literally “turning your mind around.” This Holy Spirit baptism brings with it all the emotions we associate with Advent: excitement, anticipation, expectation of something wonderful on its way.

So what can be our response be? How do we react to the beginning of the good news in Advent?

We have to **GET READY**. When John was preaching, people were getting ready for the long-awaited Messiah. They repented of their sins; they confessed their sins; they got baptized. Then one day, in the middle of the revival, Jesus showed up. Those who had paid attention to the announcement were ready.

We get ready by **GETTING OUR HOUSE IN ORDER**. Do you have company coming to your house for the holidays? How do you prepare? You clean the place up, make sure everything is in its place, decorate for Christmas, cook the food, make sure everything is just right. You want your family or your guests to be welcomed, to be impressed, to have a good time while they are in your house.

What if the guest coming to your house were Jesus? How would you prepare? Any differently? A little more deep cleaning perhaps? A little more getting your life in order and not just fluffing up the couch pillows? A little more “making the paths straight?” The Good News is Jesus is coming. In fact, Jesus is here. It’s time for you to get your house in order.

We get ready by **GETTING FOCUSED ON THE FUTURE**. Sin looks backward; faith looks forward. The darkness of the past is past. There is a new day dawning. The Messiah is on the horizon. With Christ, our best days are always ahead of us. One of my favorite statements from Paul in my favorite letter of Philippians is, *“It’s not that I have already reached this goal or have already been perfected, but I pursue it, so that I may grab hold of it because Christ grabbed hold of me for just this purpose. Brothers and sisters, I myself don’t*

*think I've reached it, but I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus."*⁶

When you know you have a future by faith in Jesus, you can live life differently every day right now. I was reading another pastor's blog this week, and he was telling about two young men in his youth group, Wayne and Dave. They were seniors in high school, taking the same classes, and best friends. Both of them were very anxious about what college they were going to attend. (We're already experiencing a little of that at our house.) When December rolled around Wayne got accepted at the college he wanted to go to, but Dave did not. That changed everything.

The spring semester, Wayne had a great time. He still had all the same classes as Dave, but he took time to do some other things. He joined a band. He started a rock-climbing activity for underprivileged kids. He wrote his papers on topics that interested him, not on what he thought would get him the best grade. Ironically, in his last semester, Wayne had the best grades of his high school career.

Dave, on the other hand, went into high-anxiety mode. He sweated every test and every grade. He joined some extra-curricular activities that he thought would look good on his transcript. He kept his grades up, but by the time he got his acceptance to college in April, he was exhausted.⁷

It makes all the difference if you know you're in, if you have been accepted, if you know where you're going—in college, and in Christ. We have a future with the Messiah, and that frees us from anxiety. That frees us to be creative and courageous. That frees us to live life abundantly.

Finally, we can get ready by **CELEBRATING A NEW BEGINNING**. That's what the announcement of John was all about. The long-awaited Messiah was at hand. The long-expected Jesus had arrived. God was doing a new thing, and it was time for all the people to make a new beginning.

That's the point of Advent for us today. It's a new year for Christians. We can start over. Reboot. Refresh. Reset. Re-orient. Do-over. We can leave the past behind. We can be forgiven of our sins. We can dedicate ourselves anew to follow Jesus.

N. T. Wright, the Bible scholar, told about a friend who became a Christian as a young teenager. He announced his faith to his mother. Alarmed, she thought he'd joined some kind of cult. "They've brainwashed you!" she said. He was ready with the right answer. "If you'd seen what was in my brain," he replied, "you'd realize it needed washing!"

Wright commented, "Of course, he hadn't been brainwashed. In fact, again and again—and this was certainly the case with my friend—when people bring their lives, their outer lives and inner lives, into the light of Jesus the Messiah, things begin to come clear. If anything, it's our surrounding culture that brainwashes us, persuading us in a thousand subtle ways that the present world is the only one there is. This is seldom argued. Rather, a mood is created in which it seems so much easier to go with the flow. That's what happens in brainwashing. What the gospel does is to administer a sharp jolt, to shine a bright light, to kick-start the brain, and the moral sensibility, into working properly for the first time."⁸

If you're ready for that kick-start today, if you want your life to work properly, maybe for the first time ever or for the first time in a long time, then come to the Lord's Table. Make a new beginning. Start or start again to get your house in order right here. Christ has come; Christ is here; Christ is coming. Focus on your faith and your future, and you will live abundantly. This is the announcement of good news today.

¹ Mark 1:1.

² Mark 1:2-3.

³ Mark 1:7-8.

⁴ Joel 2:28, 32.

⁵ Mark 1:4.

⁶ Philippians 3:12-14.

⁷ Tullian Tchividjian, "Grace and the Summer of George," Liberate: Tullian Tchividjian blog (4-19-13).

⁸ N. T. Wright, *John for Everyone, Part 1* (WJK, 2004), pp. 43-44.