

120411 ADVENT TWO
MARK 1: 1-8 ... BEGINNING...

One of the perennial Christmas songs heard in shopping malls is “It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas,” its well-worn lyrics listing things that we associate with Christmastime. Not surprisingly there is no mention of John the Baptist, yet Christmas is coming and on this Sunday John shows up, as if on cue!

Mark’s gospel starts with these words; “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ”. Unlike Matthew and Luke, there is no mention of Bethlehem or any genealogical listing to prove Jesus’ Messiah credentials. Instead, we are greeted by a wild man in the desert, whose wardrobe and diet are questionable. Mark’s beginning describes a God who is on the fringe and in the margins of life; a God who is not interested in what society thinks is respectable and perfect.

Mark’s John the Baptist calls people out of the routine, the normal, out into the wilderness in order to make a new beginning in their lives. Their titles and possessions, career path and relationships, are all pushed to the side. All that is left is the harsh wind of the desert, and the muddy water of the Jordan River. John invites them to look honestly into the mirror of their own hearts, to fully claim their compromised integrity, secret pasts, and disjointed present.

People like John the Baptist make us uncomfortable. Vernon Jordan was a black preacher in Alabama during the 1940’s and 50’s. He spoke about new beginnings with an honesty that made his church members squirm. The elders of the church finally asked him to leave, and feeling relieved once he did, they got ready to call a new preacher so that things in the church could get back to normal. The new preacher that they called was Martin Luther King!

Truth be told, we don't like people like John the Baptist because they have a way of making us realize who we are and who we aren't. Who was like John the Baptist in your life; the parent who didn't let you get away with much, the teacher who didn't buy your excuses, the boss who expected an honest day's work, the friend bold enough to tell you that you were making a mistake? They were people who pushed you to new beginnings, who wouldn't let you stay where you were, showing you the value of living with integrity.

New beginnings are always hard because they are inherently risky, exciting, difficult and scary. Sometimes new beginnings are forced on us; living with cancer, losing a job, preparing for college, adjusting to retirement. Other new beginnings are chosen; getting out of a toxic relationship, quitting a job that is more burden than delight, moving to a new area, going back to school. All beginnings look different on the outside but they force us to think differently on the inside. They make us ask new questions about who we are as people.

Society and our own little comfort zone keep rebelling at new beginnings. The message we hear and repeat is, "You are fine just the way you are, it's the world around you and the people in it who need to change." For the people in Mark's gospel and the voice deep within our own heart, however, there is a restlessness that knows we need new beginnings, that we should be a work in progress rather than thinking we are a finished product. The courage to seek new beginnings begins when we realize we need it.

Driving the van to the work site in Appalachia, we saw a group of people in the river below and some of them were being baptized. These were adults who were fully

aware of what they were doing and why. They sensed, just as the people who heard John's message 20 centuries ago, that they needed a new beginning. They understood that the heart of new beginnings is spiritual, and always starts in our relationship to God.

The courage to seek new beginnings each morning comes from the heart of the gospel itself. It comes when we admit that there are parts of our life that are not so great, that some of our choices are questionable, and that some of our words and actions have been not so charitable. It comes when we take the risk of opening our heart to God, asking for help and insight, strength and courage. The great news of the gospel is that when we do, we sense a God who is present in the margins of our life, and willing to love us through anything.

The novelist C.S. Lewis once wrote, "Christianity is a thing of great comfort, but it doesn't begin that way." Christianity in our life begins with a restless heart, honest enough with its own hurting, and seeking a change. It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas, and John invites us to prepare our heart for hearing the best news the world has ever heard; about a God whose advent into our world brings new life and peace to those who will accept it.

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