

“And so it begins, A Sermon in Five Parts:  
Part Two, “Time Fulfilled”  
Preached at Knox United Church (Parksville, B.C.)  
on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2012 (Third Sunday after Epiphany)  
by Foster Freed

Mark 1: 14-20

Beginnings are important...beginnings are of vital importance: especially to those of us formed by a *faith*-tradition...a tradition whose opening words speak of what God was doing *in the beginning*...a faith-tradition which later goes on to speak of a Word that was with God *from the beginning*. Beginnings are important...important, in part, because a beginning often defines the nature of that which will follow. Beginnings are important...beginnings matter.

In the case of Mark’s Gospel—in the case of the Gospel generally believed to hold pride of place as the first Biblical Gospel—in the case of Mark’s Gospel, *its* beginning (like much that is found in Mark) engages the reader with dramatic abruptness. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark lacks the charm of an opening Christmas story. Unlike John, Mark lacks the majestic poetry of an elegant 18 verse prologue, a prologue famous for its opening cadences: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*. What Mark lacks by way of elegance and charm, however, he more than makes up by way of directness and drama. Launching into his narrative with an almost palpable relish...

...Mark’s opening words simply announce *the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*...

...launching into his narrative, leaping into his story with an almost child-like abandon, Mark—awkward though his Greek may have been, unsophisticated though his gifts as a writer may have been—Mark is a marvellous story-teller. And so it is to the first-chapter—the very first chapter of Mark’s Gospel—that we turn (not only this morning but for the next three Sundays as well)—turn in order to ponder the beginnings of Mark’s Gospel and the beginnings (at least from Mark’s perspective) of Jesus’ ministry, doing so in the knowledge that beginnings *are* important: that beginnings can and often do tell us a great deal about that which will follow. And there are two features...two perhaps not entirely aligned features of this morning’s scripture passage...to which I wish to call your attention. They are important...more than important. These two features are basic...in many ways foundational...to everything else Mark is going to tell us in his Gospel: on the one hand....

...on the one hand the proclamation...the proclamation...with which Jesus launches his public ministry. On the other hand...on the other hand...the call he immediately is then said to direct toward two sets of brothers: Simon and Andrew, James and John. Consider...consider in turn, each of those initiatives.

First the proclamation...the proclamation from which this sermon takes its title. Having gone into the wilderness, having been baptized by John, having seen the heavens torn asunder at his own baptism, having heard God's voice confirming him in his identity as God's own beloved child, and having faced down the devil in the desert, Jesus begins his public ministry. How?

*Now after John was arrested...John the Baptist...after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the Gospel, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the Gospel, repent and believe in the good news."* In short, having completed his apprenticeship, Jesus launches his ministry by proclaiming the momentousness of the time that God has initiated in and through his ministry. God is on the move...and with God history too is on the move. God's Kingdom has drawn near: not a place, but a state: a state in which the promise made to humanity in the beginning is about to be realized through the power and love of the Holy One. In the presence of the Christ...and in the power of Christ's creative Word...God is doing a new thing: doing that thing here, doing that thing now! Turn to God, not tomorrow but today! Trust in God, not tomorrow but today! Prepare to receive the Kingdom in all of its power...in all of its goodness, in all of its vibrant presence. Here! Now! Today! That magnificent news...that magnificent proclamation...comes at the head, comes at the beginning, of the story of Jesus that Mark is eager to share with us. But, of course, there is more.

Linked to that proclamation...linked to that annunciation of good news...that annunciation of the power and goodness of God...

...linked to that proclamation in Mark is a call issued to four individuals...four persons...two sets of brothers. First Simon...Simon who comes to be known as Peter...and then his brother Andrew are told to drop everything, so that they might follow Christ. And then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, also fisherman: told to drop everything and follow. And while no shortage of ink has been spilled pondering the puzzling immediacy of their response to so dramatic an invitation...

...did they have prior knowledge of Jesus that made them willing to drop everything and follow? Had they witnessed him performing a miracle or two? Or was there simply a gravity about this Jesus that convinced the four of them to act in a way that likely took even them by surprise?...

...while such questions are unavoidable as part of our response to the call of Simon and Andrew, James and John...my hope, this morning, is that we will not get so hung up on such questions as to miss what is, from my perspective, the far more basic miracle: namely...namely the fact that Jesus, having begun his ministry with the proclamation of God's Holy power and goodness, immediately proceeds to issue a call to a quartet of individuals who prove themselves, over the course of the remainder of Mark's Gospel, almost entirely unworthy—in many ways embarrassingly unworthy—of the One who has issued that call. Far from presenting a rosy picture of those to whom Jesus turns "in the beginning", Mark's

Gospel makes it clear that they will disappoint him, misunderstand him, and eventually desert him at his time of greatest need. Then again...then again, for anyone...anyone who is part of the Christian faith community—anyone who is part of the institution we call the Church—none of that, none of that ought to come as a surprise.

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I am reminded...reminded of a famous quote from the French theologian and historian, Alfred Loisy, whose long life bridged the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Loisy started out as a Catholic Priest, but eventually managed not only to get himself defrocked, but also excommunicated. The quote I have in mind—most certainly Loisy's most well-known quote—gives a hint of the mischievous scepticism with which he approached the life of the Church. "Jesus came preaching the Kingdom," wrote Loisy...."Jesus came preaching the Kingdom, [but] what arrived was the Church". It's clear, from countless other things Loisy wrote, that he considered that trade-off—the Church for the Kingdom—to be a less than ideal one.

Living when we do, in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are certainly well positioned to understand the full challenge embodied for us in Loisy's shrewd observation. Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom, magnificent in its beauty, truth and goodness...but we've had to settle, God help us, for an institution...the one we call the church: an institution that appears to be on its last breath in many parts of the world. Without denying the impressive growth—the impressive *renewal*—that the church is experiencing in places distant from our shores...

...in parts of Asia, Africa, Latin America...

...the fact remains that the Church in most of Western Europe and much of North America—especially Canada, within Canada especially British Columbia—is living through a time that appears to hold few prospects beyond that of continued decline, a decline that owes a great deal to the perception that the Church has rarely lived up to the ideals of the Christ it purports to follow. And the temptation, of course, is to counter that bum rap with a more balanced assessment of the Church: one that recognizes not only its manifold failures but also the impressive positive contributions followers of Jesus...

...working in and through the established Christian institution, namely the church...

...the impressive positive contributions followers of Jesus have made over the centuries. That project...that project of presenting a more accurate—a more balanced—view of Christian history is one for which I personally have a great deal of sympathy. And yet...and yet: on a morning such as this, I'm not convinced it doesn't miss the real point...the real poignancy...and the real *opportunity* of the situation in which we find ourselves...a situation fully illuminated by the opening chapter of Mark's Gospel. Because the fact remains...the fact remains that Alfred Loisy's shrewd remark

cuts both ways. Yes...Jesus did proclaim the Kingdom. And yes...what we ended up with is the Church. But if we take Mark at his word...if we view the oldest of the Gospels with any measure of the seriousness with which it cries out to be viewed...that really ought not to surprise us. Because Mark reveals, right at the beginning...right at the beginning of its depiction of Jesus' ministry...it reveals Jesus, yes, proclaiming the Kingdom...proclaiming the Kingdom in one breath...and then, in the very next breath...calling followers, disciples, companions. And surely there's a connection between those two actions: that of proclaiming Good News...and that of creating a body of followers—a faithful community—to take up the work of living and sharing that Good News in all of its grit...in all of its grandeur.

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Beginnings *are* important...beginnings *do* matter. As I noted at the very start of these reflections, the very first words we find in Mark's Gospel explain that Mark's book is about to narrate "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Notice that those opening words can be understood in two distinct but not contradictory ways. On the one hand, Mark is saying that he is going to begin at the beginning of the good news, with the advent of John the Baptist, John's baptism of Jesus, Jesus' temptation in the desert and Jesus' initial proclamation of the Gospel. In other words: the first half chapter of his Gospel will narrate the "beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ." That's one way of understanding what Mark is getting at here. But there's another equally valid possibility, namely this:

That when Mark says that he is going to give us the "beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," that he's not referring to the first 15 verses of his narrative but to the entire narrative. That Mark's entire book (!) represents merely the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: a Gospel that will continue to be written through the active presence of the risen Christ in the midst of His people. And the fact that Jesus could not possibly have foreseen the diverse shape the Church would take over the past 2000 years is, quite frankly, irrelevant. What's clear as day, as soon as he calls Simon and Andrew, James and John, Levi and Bartholomew and yes, even Judas what's clear as day is that Jesus was attempting, right from the get-go, to embody his words and deeds in a gathered people; seeking to imprint his words and deeds in the life of a faith community. Nor did he select a hand-picked group of spiritual athletes to kick-start said community. On the contrary: the very fact that Mark never hesitates to depict that first gaggle of disciples at their most obtuse, makes it plain as the nose on your face that it is Christ at work in our midst (just as it was Christ at work in *their* midst) when we and they manage to get at least a few things right.

And, you know: it may well be the case...it may well be the case...that the challenge that will confront the next generation of Christians in places such as Canada, will be that of deciding whether it is worthwhile being disciples—which is to say being members of the Christian movement in a public way—in the event that Christianity does find itself relegated to minority status within the wider culture. What if the Church—for say the next 2000 years—carries roughly the same cultural clout that Judaism has

carried for the past 2000 years: in other words, as a minority report rather than as the majority perspective in our wider culture. Many of us would find that a depressing prospect...but that's not the question. The question is whether we would sign up to be part of that sort of Church: one that occupied the same place on the landscape that the Synagogue has tended to occupy. Tolerated, but on the margins. Pretty much ignored by the majority of the culture's movers and shakers. Would we sign up for such an institution? Would we want to be part of such an endeavour?

Well: before you answer that questions, ponder the fact that such an endeavour was precisely what Simon Peter and his brother Andrew...precisely what the Zebedee boys James and John were signing on for some 2000 years ago. When a wandering Galilean preacher strode into their lives, spoke their names, and told them to leave their nets...to leave their familiar ways of life...that they might—guided and governed by the power of the Spirit—learn what it means to follow him. And the good news for us—the Gospel for us—is that he continues to issue just such an invitation: an invitation to join Him on the journey. **The time is indeed fulfilled! God's Kingdom has drawn near! Turn! Turn! And embrace the Gospel!**

And so it begins. In Jesus' name! Amen!!

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