

Title: Where the Gospel Begins

Subtitle: Preparing to hear a word that brings change

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/8xrd9CC3ovU>

The first verse of Mark's Gospel seems to be a title for the book. It reads, "The beginning of the Gospel (The Good News) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."¹ As I read the words "In the beginning," I noticed that Mark imitated the opening verse of Genesis chapter one in the Bible. By using that phrase, Mark wants his readers to realize that God is creating something new. As I pondered what this means, I was struck with the question: Where does the Gospel begin, and how is it developed?

That question caused me to do some personal reflection. Looking back over my life, I believe the Gospel began when I was a child. I was probably six years old when I remember stealing a piece of gum displayed in a box below the cash register when no one was looking. During that time, I was going through a first communion class at the Catholic school I attended. As part of that class, we recited the Ten Commandments. After reading them over, the one that stood out above all the rest was, "Thou shall not steal." My conscience was struck, and I confessed what I had done to the priest. Then, I determined to make it right, and restitution soon followed.

Astronaut Neil Armstrong said when he first set foot on the moon in 1969, "One small step for a man, a giant leap for mankind." My actions that day in a Catholic confessional booth were also one small step in the direction of a life of repentance, which ended up being one giant leap into the loving arms of my heavenly Father.

¹ Mark 1:1

The Kingdom of God usually begins with little things. In my case, it was small, but it had a massive effect on my life. I learned from that small act that having a clean conscience before God felt good and having boundaries to live by was something I needed.

In Mark's Gospel, the "beginning of the Gospel" refers to what comes first and has priority. It is a stirring invitation into the divine mysteries that are about to unfold. And it begins with "a voice of one crying in the wilderness,"² as Isaiah the prophet foretold. John's message represented a prophetic voice that appeals to that still, small voice in each of us that convicts us of sin and calls us to repent. It is a voice that calls us to change and draws us to the one who can save us from our sins. When we pay attention to that voice, the world may not sit up and take notice, but God does.

John's prophetic voice roused sinners from spiritual slumber and taught them to believe in the one who John said was "more powerful than I."³ John could only help people begin the preparation, but the one coming after John would finish what John had started. John said, "I baptize you with water, but (the one following me) will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."⁴

Later, Jesus described the Holy Spirit as "a fountain of life that springs up into eternal life."⁵ The water from this fountain quenches our spiritual thirst and gives us the power to do what we could not do on our own.

When Jesus lived among us, he also needed this power. Therefore, Mark notes the starting point of Jesus' ministry occurred when "John baptized Jesus in the Jordan. And when he comes up out of the water, he immediately saw the heavens torn apart," and the Spirit of God descending on Jesus like a dove. This verse described the heavens as being more than just opened. Mark

² Mark 1:3

³ Mark 1:7

⁴ Mark 1:8

⁵ John 4:14

declares that the heavens were “torn open.” The original word Mark used was “schizó (skhid'-zo),”⁶ and it literally means “to split asunder.” It is a visceral and violent disruption in the status quo as God’s voice disrupts what is humanly possible. The Psalm appointed for today eloquently describes the powerful effects of God’s voice, which shook things up and broke things open. Usually, it takes an ordeal of some kind before I wake up to what God has in store for me. But when I surrendered and placed my will into the hands of God, the promise the Psalmist speaks of was realized: “The Lord shall give strength to his people; the Lord shall give his people the blessing of peace.”⁷ The same voice that came from heaven and said to Jesus at his baptism, “You are my beloved Son. In You, I am well pleased,”⁸ is the same voice that claims us as his adopted children. For in him, “God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’”⁹

The voice that spoke from heaven still speaks to us today. That voice assures us that the darkness surrounding us cannot overcome the light of life God imparts. The battle within and without is, at times, discouraging. But God promises to “give strength to the weak and those who have no might he increases strength.”¹⁰

The endurance that the Christian race requires reminds me of a story about a young girl who thought she was late for a 5K run (a race that is just over 3 miles). Her anxiousness led her to take off with a group of runners fifteen minutes earlier than her start time with participants in the half-marathon (a race that was more than 13 miles)! At mile four, with the finish line nowhere in sight, she realized she was in a longer and more challenging race. Instead of

⁶ Strong’s Concordance, # 4977

⁷ Psalm 29:11

⁸ Mark 1:10-11

⁹ Galatians 4:6

¹⁰ Isaiah 40:29

dropping out, she kept running and, to her surprise, finished the race.

Some days, the Christian race feels like it's not the one we signed up for—it's something longer and more difficult than we ever expected. But God has promised to provide the strength we need. We can persevere if we put one foot in front of the other and keep going.

The Apostle Paul encouraged believers who were at the point of quitting by reminding them that our best efforts alone are not enough. Rhetorically, he asked, “Having begun in the Spirit, are you now made perfect by the flesh.”¹¹ Paul knew the importance of faith that connects us to the one ready to “tear the heavens open” and give us the power to do what we cannot do in our own strength.

Therefore, baptism is not just about repentance but also about transformation. The Christian life is not meant to be a life of only stopping, fleeing, and resisting temptation. The Christian life is meant to be about running, pursuing, and seeking first the kingdom of God. It is about being filled with “heavenly grace” and “increasing in the Holy Spirit more and more”¹² as we press on towards “...the goal to win the prize for which God has called (us) heavenward in Christ Jesus.”¹³

Our baptismal covenant calls each of us to change the way we think and the way we live, for it declares, in a nutshell, what we believe, what we will renounce, and what we will do “...with God’s help.”¹⁴

This heavenly call is our epiphany—our showing forth the God who lives in us and is ready “to show himself strong on behalf of those whose hearts are fully committed to him.”¹⁵ Amen.

¹¹ Galatians 3:3 paraphrased

¹² BCP p. 309 Quote taken from the Bishop’s prayer over those being confirmed.

¹³ Philippians 3:14

¹⁴ BCP p. 304-305; Affirmations and renunciations in the Baptismal Covenant

¹⁵ 2 Chronicles 16:9