

On your mark: Mark 1:1-8

by [John K. Stendahl](#) in the [December 2, 2008](#) issue

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Like a starter’s pistol, this brief first verse rings out and Mark’s narrative is off and running.

We may take the chain of phrases in this verbless sentence simply as an announcement of what is next—a title that is followed immediately by the headlong story.

As so often in Mark, though, we may pause, or go back to what went by so fast and wonder what it meant. Our first thought may be that this is simply a conventional way of saying that at just this point we are beginning the gospel story that follows, and that Mark’s little book is itself “the good news.” But might it instead be, as it seems when read in this day’s lesson, that the title properly superscribes just *this* portion of what follows? That the witness of the Baptist is the *beginning* of the good news, while its fullness is not to be revealed until later?

But if that is possible, then perhaps there’s more included under this rubric: maybe it’s the whole first half of the book that is “the beginning of the good news.” The whole Galilean ministry, the attempt of Jesus to make known the kingdom through his teaching, is, after all, just a start. Arguably too, it’s a sort of false start, as his message is repeatedly obscured by the cult of his person and power. Thwarted by the misunderstandings of both crowds and disciples, Jesus will resort to a more desperate measure and will make his turn toward the cross. But that will come later, in chapter 8.

Then again, maybe it is the whole of Mark’s book, or rather what it recounts, that is being described in verse one. It may *all* be a beginning, the inception of a gospel not so much contained in these pages as intended to be alive in the hearers’ present and future. Do we perhaps go to this story not to look at the past but to think about how it could or should unfold in our own lives?

As I consider these possibilities, I think about how abrupt the ending of Mark is. The white-clad figure at the tomb tells the women that the risen Jesus has gone ahead to Galilee and that his disciples will see him there, but we’re not told what happened

next. Did the disciples even get the message? Did they stay in Jerusalem playing church, rather than go back on the dusty campaign trail with Jesus? Did they not understand that he had gone back to renew his mission? He was afoot again in Galilee, the servant of the liberating kingdom. He had gone ahead.

There is ample reason to think that Mark believes that the disciples got it wrong once again. But the rough ending of Mark is not really about whether *they* got the message or not, or what they did or did not do. It's about those of us who get the message, and who can now continue, if not quite finish, the unfinished gospel. Suddenly the story is in our hands.

How do we begin to complete it? Remember the words at the tomb: we go back to Galilee, back to the place where Jesus began his mission. We go back to the beginning of the gospel, to announcement, hope and repentance. Maybe this time, knowing what we do now, we will better understand what John the Baptist and Jesus were talking about, and we'll repent and believe the good news. We return to reread the story, to start again with fresh ears and a new heart. The title at the beginning of Mark welcomes back those who come again from the empty tomb, seeking Jesus alive and anew.

The signature text and image of Advent in my Swedish childhood was the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. The crowds, the palms and the hosannas didn't belong only to Holy Week's darkening narrative; in a lighter, more hopeful key they were also part of the outset of a new church year. We too were welcoming Jesus, and he was coming to us again on his borrowed donkey. We were glad to greet him, and God was giving us a new chance to receive him aright. The story began again for us and we rose to it with hope.

Though the Advent use of that entry text has disappeared from our current lectionaries, it lingers here and there in our hymnody. It is also not far from the themes of the lessons that we do read. It connects to the stirring excitement of hope in the prophet's words and in the promises of the psalm. In the second lesson, the apostle describes our waiting for the Lord's coming not as cause for fatigued despair but as a gracious forbearance, a gift of time to ready ourselves. And at last the voice calls out in the wilderness, preparing the way for the One who comes. A new age begins with cleansing and promise, the gift of a Holy Spirit after the flames.

We find that we are not prisoners of the past. We and our blessed and foolish land need not be bound to our idolatries or regrets, our greeds or fears. We can begin again. That's not just a prelude; it is already part of what it anticipates. The "good news of Jesus" was already at work in this expectancy and preparation, the beginning of the beginning. Is it not still so?

*This article first appeared in the Century's November 20-December 3, 2002, issue.*