

Mark 1:4-11  
January 8, '12

"A WORLD TORN APART"

A COUPLE WEEKS AGO, WHILE DRIVING SOMEWHERE CLOSE TO HOME, I NOTICED AN ODD SIGN BY THE SIDE OF THE ROAD.

IT WAS AN OFFICIAL HIGHWAY SIGN & IT HAD JUST ONE WORD ON IT – "BEGIN."

NOW, I'M NOT UNACCUSTOMED TO SEEING SIGNS THAT SAY THAT BECAUSE THEY SEEM TO BE LOCATED ON THE HIGHWAY REGULARLY.

BUT MY EXPERIENCE HAS ALWAYS BEEN THAT BELOW THAT WORD "BEGIN," THERE IS ALWAYS A DIRECTIVE OF SOME SORT – "BEGIN – 45 MILES PER HOUR SPEED LIMIT."

BUT THE SINGLE WORD "BEGIN" WITH NOTHING ELSE ATTACHED SEEMED RATHER ODD.

I THOUGHT ABOUT IT AS I PASSED IT & I THOUGHT ABOUT IT FOR A FEW MORE MINUTES AS I DROVE.

I THOUGHT ABOUT THAT SPECIFIC SPOT WHERE THE SIGN WAS LOCATED & I THOUGHT ABOUT THAT SPOT BEING SOME SORT OF BARRIER, BEYOND WHICH SOMETHING WAS NEW.

SOMETHING WAS STARTING AT THAT EXACT LOCATION.

I DIDN'T NOTICE ANYTHING BEING DIFFERENT BUT THE HIGHWAY DEPARTMENT WAS TELLING ME THAT SOMETHING WAS DIFFERENT & I WAS SEARCHING TO DISCOVER IT.

I NEVER DID & BEFORE LONG I FORGOT ABOUT IT – UNTIL ABOUT A WEEK LATER.

ANOTHER DRIVE, ANOTHER ROAD, ANOTHER SIGN.

ONCE AGAIN, A HIGHWAY SIGN BY THE SIDE OF THE ROAD BEARING ONE SINGLE WORD – "BEGIN."

NOW, IT WAS GETTING A BIT CREEPY!

I WENT THROUGH THE SAME MENTAL THOUGHT PROCESS.

WHAT IS IT THAT BEGINS RIGHT HERE & RIGHT NOW?

AND THEN I WONDERED IF THAT SIGN WAS REALLY THERE?

I MEAN, WAS EVERYONE ELSE TRAVELLING DOWN THAT ROAD SEEING THE SAME THING I WAS SEEING OR WAS IT THERE JUST FOR ME WITH A CRYPTIC MESSAGE FOR LIFE?

I KNOW THAT'S PREPOSTEROUS BUT IT WAS MORE PREPOSTEROUS WHEN I HAD ONLY SEEN IT THE FIRST TIME.

BUT WHEN I SAW IT AGAIN, I THOUGHT MAYBE I WAS A RAY KINSELLA-TYPE IN SEARCH OF MOONLIGHT GRAHAM AFTER SEEING A MESSAGE ON A SCOREBOARD.

THOSE WHO HAVE SEEN "FIELD OF DREAMS" KNOW WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT!

WE'VE BEEN DEALING WITH "BEGINNINGS" QUITE A BIT LATELY – THE BEGINNING OF SCROOGE'S TRANSFORMATION, THE BEGINNING OF THE STORY OF THE BIRTH OF JESUS, THE BEGINNING OF A NEW YEAR.

HERE WE FIND OURSELVES AT THE BEGINNING OF THE MINISTRY OF JESUS.

IT ALL BEGINS SO QUICKLY IN MARK'S GOSPEL.

WE HAVE NO SHEPHERDS, NO ANGELS, NO WISE MEN, NOT A SINGLE WORD HERE ABOUT MARY & JOSEPH.

WE'RE GIVEN NO GENEALOGY – NO LIST OF ANCESTORS OF JESUS.

WE DON'T EVEN GET THAT DELIGHTFUL LITTLE STORY ABOUT JESUS IN THE TEMPLE AT THE AGE OF 12 WHEN HIS PARENTS ARE IN A PANIC BECAUSE THEY CAN'T FIND HIM ON THEIR TRIP TO THE BIG CITY.

MARK GIVES US NONE OF THAT.

HE JUST STARTS OFF WITH A BANG & THEN KEEPS RIGHT ON GOING.

MARK'S FAVORITE TRANSITIONAL VERB IS OBVIOUSLY "IMMEDIATELY."

HE USES IT MORE THAN 40 TIMES IN JUST 16 CHAPTERS AND 11 TIMES IN THIS FIRST CHAPTER ALONE!

WE'RE LEFT TRYING TO CATCH OUR BREATH TO STAY UP WITH HIM AS HE ABRUPTLY & SWIFTLY MOVES US FROM ONE PLACE TO ANOTHER & ONE SCENE TO THE NEXT.

MARK APPROPRIATELY OPENS HIS GOSPEL WITH THAT VERY WORD WE'VE BEEN TALKING ABOUT.

HIS VERY FIRST WORDS – JUST PRIOR TO THE ONES WE READ THIS MORNING – ARE "*THE BEGINNING OF THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST.*"

IT SOUNDS – NOT COINCIDENTALLY – EXACTLY THE WAY ANOTHER BOOK OF THE BIBLE OPENS – "*IN THE BEGINNING, GOD CREATED THE HEAVENS & THE EARTH.*"

NOW, A LOGICAL QUESTION ONE MIGHT ASK REGARDING MARK'S OPENING IS – "*DOES HE MEAN THAT THE FIRST STORY HE TELLS IS THE BEGINNING OF THE GOSPEL OR IS EVERYTHING HE TELLS US IN ALL 16 CHAPTERS THE BEGINNING OF THE GOSPEL?*"

I TEND TO THINK IT'S THE LATTER.

I'M INCLINED TO THINK THAT MARK IS SUGGESTING THAT WHAT HE WRITES – ALL 16 CHAPTERS OF HIS BOOK – IS MERELY THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS.

ONE REASON I BELIEVE THAT'S THE CASE IS THAT, AS YOU RECALL, HIS GOSPEL ENDS VERY ABRUPTLY.

THE CLOSING VERSE SAYS, "*SO THEY WENT OUT AND FLED FROM THE TOMB, FOR TERROR AND AMAZEMENT HAD SEIZED THEM; AND THEY SAID NOTHING TO ANYONE, FOR THEY WERE AFRAID.*"

THAT'S NO WAY TO END A BOOK – NOT UNLESS YOU EXPECT YOUR READERS TO PICK THE STORY UP & COMPLETE IT THEMSELVES – TO FINISH THE STORY IN THEIR OWN LIVES.

THAT'S CLEARLY WHAT MARK INTENDS FOR US TO DO.

HE EXPECTS US TO CLIMB INSIDE THIS STORY & BECOME A PART OF IT.

WE CAN DO THAT RIGHT HERE IN THE STORY OF THE BAPTISM OF JESUS FOR IT'S NOT ONLY AN ACCOUNT OF *HIS* BAPTISM BUT OF OTHERS WHO COME TO JOHN – THEY, IN SEARCH OF NEW LIFE & FORGIVENESS OF SINS.

ALL FOUR GOSPELS INCLUDE THE STORY OF THE BAPTISM OF JESUS.

THERE IS AN INTERESTING DIFFERENCE, THOUGH, IN MARK'S ACCOUNT & THAT OF THE OTHERS – ESPECIALLY MATTHEW & LUKE THAT SO CLOSELY PARALLEL MARK'S GOSPEL.

WHEN JESUS COMES OUT OF THE WATER, WE'RE TOLD BY BOTH MATTHEW & LUKE THAT THE HEAVENS WERE "*OPENED.*"

MARK, ON THE OTHER HAND, SAYS THAT THE HEAVENS WERE "*TORN APART.*"

THERE'S AN ENORMOUS DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE TWO.

IF YOU OPEN A BOOK, YOU CAN ALSO CLOSE IT.

LIKEWISE, IF YOU OPEN A DOOR, YOU CAN CLOSE IT WHENEVER YOU WISH.

BUT A BOOK OR A DOOR THAT IS TORN APART IS TORN APART FOREVER.

NOTHING ABOUT THAT BOOK – NOTHING ABOUT THAT DOOR – WILL EVER BE THE SAME AGAIN!

THE GREEK WORD MARK USES HERE FOR “TEAR APART” IS *SCHITZO* AS IN “SCHISM” OR

“SCHIZOPHRENIA” – THE TEARING APART OF A RELATIONSHIP OR THE TEARING APART OF A MIND.

MARK CAREFULLY CHOSE THAT PARTICULAR WORD.

HE KNEW OF THE PROPHET ISAIAH'S PLEA HUNDREDS OF YEARS BEFORE WHEN HE CRIED OUT TO GOD:

*“OH, THAT YOU WOULD TEAR OPEN THE HEAVENS AND COME DOWN TO MAKE YOUR NAME KNOWN TO YOUR ENEMIES AND MAKE THE NATIONS TREMBLE AT YOUR PRESENCE.”*

HERE AT THE JORDAN RIVER THAT CRY FROM ISAIAH - THAT CENTURIES-OLD PLEA - IS FULFILLED.

IN THE BAPTISM OF JESUS, THE HEAVENS WERE TORN APART & THINGS WOULD NEVER BE THE SAME AGAIN!

THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING!

THIS MARKS THE BEGINNING OF THE MINISTRY OF JESUS AND IN THAT MINISTRY GOD IS PRESENT & IN OUR MIDST AS NEVER BEFORE!

THERE'S ONE MORE FASCINATING ASPECT ABOUT THIS “TEARING APART” IMAGERY.

MARK USES THE SAME WORD ONE OTHER TIME IN HIS GOSPEL.

AT THE END OF HIS LIFE, JESUS HUNG ON A CROSS BETWEEN HEAVEN & EARTH, AND WHEN HE BREATHED HIS LAST, THE CURTAIN OF THE TEMPLE WAS TORN IN TWO FROM TOP TO BOTTOM – TORN APART AS THE HEAVENS HAD BEEN TORN APART AT HIS BAPTISM.

THE CURTAIN COULD NEVER BE REPAIRED.

YOU MAY RECALL THAT, WITH THE TEARING OF THAT TEMPLE CURTAIN, A ROMAN CENTURION MADE THE PRONOUNCEMENT, *“SURELY THIS WAS THE SON OF GOD.”*

HERE, IT'S A PERSON MAKING PRECISELY THE SAME PRONOUNCEMENT THAT GOD MADE AT THE MOMENT OF JESUS' BAPTISM.

THAT ROMAN SOLDIER HAD SOMEHOW HEARD FOR HIMSELF THE WORDS WHISPERED TO JESUS ALONE AT THE JORDAN.

THE WORD CAME THROUGH THE TORN PLACE IN THE SKY, THROUGH THE TORN CURTAIN: *“THIS IS MY SON, THE BELOVED. WITH WHOM I AM WELL PLEASED.”*

IN THE VERY BEGINNING – IN THE MOMENT HIS MINISTRY STARTED AS HE EMERGED FROM THE WATERS OF THE JORDAN – AND IN THE INSTANT THAT HE TOOK IN HIS LAST BREATH ON THE CROSS – WE ARE TOLD OF THE TEARING APART OF EVERYTHING THAT WOULD SEPARATE US FROM GOD.

IRONICALLY, IT IS IN THE VERY TEARING APART THAT GOD'S PRESENCE IS REVEALED.

IT'S IN THE TEARING APART THAT WE CAN FEEL HIM MOST VIVIDLY.

IT'S IN THE TEARING APART THAT WE MOST CLEARLY KNOW THAT GOD IS WITH US.

DO YOU REMEMBER THE PASSAGE WE READ LAST WEEK FROM THE PROPHET ISAIAH?

*“DO NOT REMEMBER THE FORMER THINGS, OR CONSIDER THE THINGS OF OLD. I AM ABOUT TO DO A NEW THING; NOW IT SPRINGS FORTH, DO YOU NOT PERCEIVE IT? I WILL MAKE A WAY IN THE WILDERNESS AND RIVERS IN THE DESERT.”*

IT'S A WONDERFUL & COMFORTING PROMISE OF GOD ABOUT BEGINNINGS.

BUT NOTICE WHAT GOD *DOESN'T* PROMISE HERE.

GOD DOESN'T PROMISE TO TAKE US OUT OF THE WILDERNESS OR OUT OF THE DESERT.

HE SAYS, *“I WILL MAKE A WAY IN THE WILDERNESS & RIVERS IN THE DESERT.”*

WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT IT, ISN'T THAT A MORE COMFORTING PROMISE?

ISN'T THE VERY PRESENCE OF GOD FAR MORE IMPORTANT THAN BEING TAKEN OUT OF THE WILDERNESS OR DELIVERED FROM THE DESERT?

WE EXPERIENCE THOSE THINGS.

WE ALL DO.

NONE OF US IS EXEMPT FROM THEM.

WE EXPERIENCE THE TORN APART PLACES OF LIFE – THE PLACES WHERE THINGS HAVEN'T JUST BEEN OPENED – THEY'VE BEEN TORN APART & THEY'LL NEVER BE THE SAME AGAIN.

YOU KNOW WHAT THOSE “TORN APART” PLACES ARE FOR YOU.

YOU ALSO KNOW WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO WALK IN THE WILDERNESS WHEN IT SEEMS AS IF THERE'S NO WAY OUT.

YOU KNOW THE DARKNESS OF THOSE TIMES – HOURS THAT BECOME DAYS & DAYS THAT TURN INTO WEEKS OF WANDERING, WITH NO END IN SIGHT.

YOU KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE TO SHUFFLE ALONG IN THE DESERT, WITH YOUR FEET SINKING IN THE SANDS THAT THREATEN TO SWALLOW YOU, WHERE THE SCORCHING HEAT OF LIFE SAPS YOU OF ENERGY & MAKES YOU THIRST FOR THE LIVING WATER TO SOOTHE YOUR PARCHED SOUL.

FIRST, IT WAS THE PROPHET ISAIAH.

NOW IT'S MARK.

IN BOTH THE BAPTISM & THE DEATH OF JESUS, HE GIVES YOU THE ASSURANCE THAT YOU WON'T GO THROUGH THAT WILDERNESS ALONE.

YOU WON'T CROSS THE DESERT ON YOUR OWN.

WHEN YOUR WORLD IS TORN APART & WHEN IT FEELS LIKE EVERYTHING IS CAVING IN AROUND YOU, IT'S THEN – IN THOSE MOMENTS OF HOPELESSNESS & DESPAIR - THAT GOD IS MOST CLEARLY IN YOUR VERY MIDST.

SO WHAT *DOES* THAT SIGN BY THE SIDE OF THE ROAD REALLY MEAN?

A SINGLE WORD – “BEGIN.”

MAYBE IT MEANS THAT, NO MATTER HOW HARD THINGS MAY SEEM, NO MATTER HOW HOPELESS THINGS MAY LOOK RIGHT NOW, NO MATTER HOW ENDLESS THE JOURNEY THROUGH THE WILDERNESS AND ACROSS THE DESERT, NO MATTER HOW TORN APART LIFE MAY BE – PERHAPS IT’S TIME TO BEGIN.

PERHAPS IT’S TIME TO BEGIN TO LIVE AGAIN WITH THE ABSOLUTE ASSURANCE THAT GOD IS RIGHT THERE BY YOUR SIDE IN ALL THE WILDERNESSES, ALL THE DESERTS AND ALL THE TORN APART PLACES IN YOUR LIFE. AMEN.

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