



You are important to God and to us.
Feel free to share your thoughts, your
comments and your questions at:

alane.miller@att.net

New Beginnings

Mark 1:1-14

January 4, 2004

It's a new year. What do you expect to happen in the new year. There is much that we don't know. Yet I am sure that this new year will have it's own unique set of new opportunities and new challenges. Some of us are ready for a new year . . . very ready. For some of us 2003 was a very difficult year for any of a number of different reasons. We are glad to see it over and gone. We want the new beginning that the new year has to offer. Some of us expect the events of the new year to be very similar to what we have already experienced in previous years.

As we face this new year, let me ask, "What are your hopes? What are your plans? What are your dreams for this year? . . . for yourself . . . for your family . . . for our church? As we think about new beginnings, let me invite you to think about the God of new beginnings, especially the new beginning that is possible for each of us because of Jesus. Jesus is the central figure in all of human history. History itself is dated by his birth. He is worshipped by about a third of the people alive today on planet earth. His name is used both to bless and to curse. He continues to be the subject of countless books, articles, movies, plays and pictures.

But if I were to ask you, "Who is Jesus?" What would you say? Son of God . . . Savior . . . Messiah . . . Lord . . . rabbi . . . There are many titles that we could use. Do any of us . . . can any of us really know . . . completely . . . who Jesus is? Who Jesus was?

Several weeks ago, Brent and I along with about thirty other pastors of the District met with Jim Hardenbrook. Jim is the moderator-elect of Annual Conference. (That means that Jim will be the Moderator for the 2005 Conference with is scheduled to be held in Peoria, IL.) Jim is also the pastor of the Nampa, ID congregation. He was in the east for some meetings and asked for the chance to meet and visit with Brethren pastors.

In the course of the discussion that morning, Jim told us that his congregation had recently spent a year together studying the gospel of Mark. One of the commitments he had made to his congregation was that once a week, he would read through the gospel. He encouraged his congregation to do the same thing.

Why? Jim said that too often we want to begin our conversations about faith with the question, "What would Jesus do?" The problem is, said Jim, "that we attempt to answer the question 'what would Jesus do' without first understanding what Jesus did. And so, not knowing what Jesus did, we all too quickly answer the question, "What would Jesus do?", with the question, "What do I want Jesus to do?" That question leads us not to Jesus, but to ourselves.

This is not a new problem. Over the course of the last 2000 years, many have written about the life of Jesus. The results should not surprise us. Writers have come up with widely different pictures of what they think Jesus said and did. Some depict Jesus as the revolutionary; others see him as the social activist. Some see him as the supporter of the status quo, or a feminist, or a radical.

Let me just give three recent examples. About 8 months ago a novel was released written by Dan Brown entitled *The Da Vinci Code*. That novel has now been number one on the *New York Times* best seller list for about 36 weeks. It was the subject of a special report by ABC. According to Brown, Jesus married Mary Magdalen and they had children, and that a secret cult of Jesus' descendants has existed for almost. In spite of the exposure given by ABC, while the book may take a prize for wild speculation, it hardly qualifies for sound scholarship.

2) From time to time we hear of the work of the Jesus Seminar. This is a group of scholars

who have concluded that Jesus did not say 82% of what the gospels say that he did. That 16 % is questionable and only about 2% is undoubtedly the words of Jesus. Of course in arriving at those percentages, they also use some very questionable assumptions about what Jesus would have said and about what was added later by the early Christian church.

3) Let me comment on yet one more that occasionally gets mentioned, *The Secret Gospel of Mark*. Back in 1958, a scholar named Morton Smith said he discovered a copy of an ancient letter buried in the back of a Greek manuscript that referred to and supposed quoted several passages from a writing known as *The Secret Gospel of Mark*. From that letter Smith deduced that “Jesus was a magician, perhaps even homosexual.” Incidentally, while there are some pictures of that letter, the original seems to have disappeared.

What's the point? The point is, that either we believe the earliest writings, taken from four writers named Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, or we don't. If we don't then we can invent whatever stories about Jesus we want to invent.

Jesus remains very, very popular, but I think I would agree with Jim Hardenbrook. The popularity of Jesus is often because people refuse to take seriously what he said and what he did. And so, we find people who argue that Jesus didn't mean what he said; didn't say what he meant; or didn't know what he was talking about.

I for one continue to believe that Jesus meant what he said, said what he meant and yes, Jesus did know what he was talking about. Who is Jesus? If we really want to know the answer to that question, we cannot do any better than to read the accounts of his life written by those who knew him. Read the gospels. Read Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. See what Jesus said. See what he did.

This year, from January through Easter, I would like to look with you at the life of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of Mark. I plan to do so using the theme, *Seeing Jesus again . . . for the first time!* Why this theme? I fear we sometimes become so familiar with those we know . . . and those we love that we no longer see them for who they are. The same is true for Jesus. We think we have him all figured out. But do we?

And so, in these coming months, I would encourage you to read the gospel of Mark. Read it carefully. Read it prayerfully. Read it with an open mind and an open heart. Who is this person? Read it looking at what Jesus said. Read it again, looking at what Jesus did. Read it again looking at the prayers of Jesus. Read it again looking at the miracles of Jesus. Read it again looking at the people who met Jesus (What were their names? What were their reactions to Jesus).

I will guarantee you that if we read it openly and honestly, some of what Jesus said and did will surprise us. Some of what he said or did will puzzle us. Some of what he said and did will shock us.

Now, having said that, in the next few minutes we have, I would invite you to look at the scripture passage that Kathy just read. Mark writes: (1:1)

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God.

For those of us who remember our grammar lessons, some will recognize that this is not a complete sentence. In almost every Bible at the beginning of each book we typically find something like The Gospel of Mark, The Gospel of John, the Epistle (or the Letter) of Paul to the Romans . . . or to the Corinthians, etc. However, the oldest manuscripts we have do not give the titles we commonly use. So some have suggested that this may in fact be the title that Mark used as he began his letter. In any event, the scriptures tell us that at a specific time, in a specific place God chose to enter our world. That he grew to be a man and began a public ministry.

The word *gospel* is the English word that usually translates a greek word *euangelion*.

Literally *euangelion* was the good news of victory in battle and so, some translations read *the beginning of the good news of Jesus*. With the coming of Jesus, the world changes. It was a new beginning. It was the beginning of *good news!*

This past week, we observed New Year's Day. For many of us, a significant part of the new year is the making of a new year's resolution. What kinds of resolutions do some people make? Lose weight . . . spend more time with family . . . exercise more . . . start back to church . . . the new year is a good time to make new changes. Many of us feel the need for a new beginning . . . for many different reasons.

Mark tells us that this book, is *the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God*. In setting the stage, Mark points to the past, to the prophet Isaiah and to the promise God made through Isaiah that one would come who would prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. Yes, that was John the Baptist. John came preaching and baptising and pointed others to the 'one who was to come.'

Jesus came, and Jesus was baptised. Incidentally, by his actions, it seems apparent that Jesus thought baptism was significant enough that he wanted to begin his public ministry with this event. Does baptism save anyone? Of course not. And yet baptism is the public profession of intent. Jesus was baptised by John.

And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Then we read the words:

Immediately the Spirit drove him into the wilderness and there he was tempted by Satan.

Let me make two comments – Mark likes that word *immediately*. He uses it twenty-seven times in fourteen chapters. It reminds me of tagline for KYW News Radio – All News. All the Time. Mark has an immediacy that we just don't find in the other gospels. Then . . . *the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness.*

If you want more details about that temptations that Jesus faced, you can look at the story as recorded in Matthew or Luke. That is a message for another time. Suffice it to say for now, that making a profession of faith, faithfully following Jesus is not a prescription for a smooth easy life. Jesus faced significant testing following his baptism. We would be foolish to expect anything less. And then, Jesus began his public ministry.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

We stand at the beginning of a new year. A year complete with new possibilities and new challenges. What new beginnings do we need in this year. A new commitment to Jesus? A new commitment to Christ's church? A new commitment to our families. As we begin this year together, I would invite you to walk with God. It might not be easy, but it will be good!

1) <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0904108.html>