



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Let's Start at The Beginning

SCRIPTURE:
Mark 1:1-8

January 2, 2022 – Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

We are ordaining and installing officers today. These are our neighbors whom you have elected and have agreed to serve as leaders for a season. I am grateful for all of them.

Today they are beginning a new season of service. And it is my hope that it will also be a new chapter in their faith journey—that serving, as they have agreed to do, will be a means of spiritual growth for them. As you know, the ordination service includes a lot of questions. They are big questions. In essence, we ask if they will seek to live life seeing the world through the lens of faith, living life as Christ describes and reveals real life to be. It is not a small thing.

To let the teaching of Christ shape every aspect of life... that was a reality that was on the heart and mind of the person we call Mark.

Beginning today and continuing to Easter Sunday, I want to preach us through the gospel of Mark. We will sit with some of the most important moments in the ministry of Jesus, as Mark describes them. Mark was the first person to write a gospel. He did so a generation after the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Matthew and Luke, and in a lesser way, perhaps John, benefitted from Mark's testimony.

We begin at the beginning. Of course, that means a decision needs to be made. If you were going to tell the story of Jesus' life, where would you begin? Luke begins in the temple where the angel comes to Zechariah, the first visit of an angel who is very busy during the Christmas season.

Matthew begins with Abraham, sharing Jesus' genealogy, making it very clear that the God we know in Jesus is the God of Abraham, Isaac, Ruth and David, Bathsheba and Hezekiah, among others.

But Mark skips over all of that. Mark begins with John the Baptist in the wilderness, that preacher of

repentance. As we said a few weeks ago, repentance is a very hopeful word because repentance means we can change—go in a new direction. Or as Mark says, to begin.

The first word on Mark's page is the Greek word: *arche*. It translates "beginning." It may sound like a throw-away word. The beginning. But the readers in Mark's congregation would have heard an echo of Genesis' "in the beginning." That beginning which was creation, when from the chaos of the world, life is made possible.

It's not a bad way to understand Mark's gospel. He says, in the midst of the chaos of the world, life is possible. There's a beginning, or perhaps more clearly stated, a new beginning—even a new creation. Mark believes Jesus means we all have a chance for a new beginning. That is a gracious thing.

There was a time in my life when I played golf, or played *at* golf. Actually, I just took my clubs for a walk. One thing that kept me at it was that beautiful word "mulligan." A mulligan is not allowed in real golf, but among friends, when you hit your tee shot into the woods or into the lake or into someone's yard (and they are not likely to want you to take a divot out of their lawn), if those with you are in a kind mood, they will say, "take a mulligan." That means you hit another ball without penalty. It's not a rule of golf. As a matter of fact, it is a violation of the rules of golf, I am sure. It's just grace.

More than that, it is an act of hope. A mulligan suggests that even though recent history gives you no reason to expect things to be better this time, still we try. That's repentance. We try again to get it right. It's a new beginning.

Mark says the grace of God revealed in Jesus' life means we can begin again. I suppose this is a good word for New Year's weekend. We tend to think of

new beginnings when the calendar turns.

Last year I shared with you a practice that Carol and I have adopted in recent years. Or better said, we engage in a practice that lots of folks have been doing for a long time but for us, it's new. We get up New Year's Day and get our coffee and a piece of toast. We sit by the fire and we talk about what we want to do in the year to come. We set some goals. There are always goals about exercise and diet. Also goals about experiences we would like to share and maybe a vacation we would like to take. Because I'm part of the discussion, the goals always include how many books we want to read. Because Carol is part of the conversation, the goals always include repairs we will make to our 100-year-old house. But before we set these goals, we pull up what we planned last year and review.

I didn't do so good. I had several goals that I only partially reached and others that I completely missed. And I thought I had made a reasonable plan.

I don't think I'm unique here. Particularly when the conversation is not just about what we want to do, but more importantly, who we want to be—the way we want our lives to reveal that we are a people who trust that Jesus' teaching is the way of life. We don't always do very well with that.

But Mark's first word is "beginning." We can have a new beginning. Mark promises that we do not have to be defined by the failures of our yesterdays; we can begin again. I've seen change like that.

In my first few years of ministry, I was meeting with a young woman preparing for her wedding. She was excited. I asked what I thought was an innocent question. I asked, "Will your father be walking you down the aisle?" She began to cry. I could tell it caught her by surprise.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't expect this. My father won't be at the wedding." "Why not?" I asked.

"Well, he wasn't at my 16th birthday party. He said he would be at graduation but evidently, something else came up. When I had surgery on my back, he wasn't there. The truth is: He hasn't been part of

my life for 12 years now. He won't be there."

"Have you asked him?" I said. As soon as I asked, I wished I hadn't. It seemed insensitive.

"No. I know what he will say. If I have learned anything, it is that I can't fix this."

Several months later, I stood with her in the narthex of the church. She was crying again. It was her wedding day and standing in the sanctuary was the man who would promise to love her in plenty and want, in joy and sorrow, in sickness and in health.

Standing next to her was another man who, truth be told, gave her every reason to believe she didn't matter to him at all. But he was there, for the first time in a long time, he was there. I was glad he chose to come but I was more impressed by her.

She could have let her disappointment control her. She could have let her injury define all that he could be because neither of them could fix all that had gone wrong. But she risked it one more time. "Daddy, I want you to be there. I need you to be there."

And he was there. Now, I can't tell you that everything was all better after that. You know these matters are more complex. But it was a sign of grace. It was a new beginning. It's the kind of thing that God makes possible in our lives.

In a few moments, we will ask our new officers some questions. They are big questions. They include:

Will you serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination and love? Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry? Will you work for the reconciliation of the world? Do you trust in Jesus Christ and acknowledge him Lord of all?

And they will say, "Yes." We never say "Yes" because we look at our past and have confidence that we have been the kind of people who have always lived like this. No, every one of us needs a mulligan at times.

We say "Yes" because we trust that new beginnings are something God is good at bringing about in us. That promise is the very first word in Mark's gospel.