

The opening verse of Mark's Gospel is probably the author's title for this work: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." And so the next verse in our reading is the intended opening verse: "As it is written in the prophet Isaiah..." It is both an opening promise and an opening premise that sets the rest of the book as though it were the opening of a play.

Mark didn't title the book, "The Gospel of Mark" or even "The Good News of Jesus." Mark's title is "The *Beginning* of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." The title offers two essential points. First, to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God is to borrow and redefine a phrase used to describe an earthly king or emperor. What follows promises to be a direct challenge to the Roman Empire.

Throughout the book, Jesus enhances that challenge by promising the inbreaking of God's heavenly realm. Not a geopolitical domain nor a peace maintained by force or even a peace defined as a lack of conflict. The realm of heaven that Mark's Jesus brings is deep, abiding peace that is both internal and external wholeness, harmony and universal flourishing.

Mark doesn't refer to this work as "The History of the Son of God" or "The Story of Jesus, the Son of God," but "The *beginning* of the good news..." And so the second point is that everything that follows the opening premise – the gathering of people, the healings and teachings all the way to the crucifixion and resurrection – all these stories are only the beginning. By the end of Mark's Gospel, Jesus has touched the lives of men, women and children in all walks of life. And still, this is just the beginning. There's a great deal more to come.

Maybe that's why the most ancient versions of this book end so abruptly with such an unsettling conclusion. The earliest manuscripts stop after an angel meets Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome at the empty tomb. The angel tells the women not to be alarmed, that Jesus has been raised, and then the angel sends them to Galilee, but they run away terrified and amazed, and say nothing to anyone. That's how the beginning ends.

Now, obviously at some point, the women *did* tell the story or it would have been lost. Many years later, editors added what must have felt like more satisfying endings, but most scholars contend that this book actually concluded with an open-ending because it was, as the title assures us, just the beginning.

And the story *still* isn't over. We are all invited to continue the story of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as God continues to bring the realm of heaven into our lives and through us into the world around us. Mark's gospel is full of people *doing* things more so than people *saying* things, which is what compels us to get into action.

Rather than waiting for some horrific battle of Armageddon in the hopes that we'll come out on the good-guys' side, we can participate with the Risen Christ right now. We can re-evaluate how we are spending our God-given time, energy and resources and choose to make even a small difference in the lives of people around us.

God's good news came not just to Jerusalem but beyond that holy city to the wilderness where the whole countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to meet John the Baptizer. But John is not the only one preparing the way. You and I can still do that too.

Why sit and wait for the Second Coming when the realm of heaven is already at hand? We can wait in hope and trust for the fullness of the coming of God's realm, but there's no need to wait passively. We can wait actively, if you will, by making a difference in the lives of the people God has put all around us.

That's how we join with God in continuing the story of the good news of Jesus Christ. God offers each and every of us countless opportunities to add our words and actions to Mark's sacred story; to add our lives to the life of the Gospel. There is no life and no place on earth God where God is not present. God's grace bursts the boundaries of our expectations.

Our actions won't save the planet or establish God's justice forever or bring all nations into harmony. Those are God's to do and God will handle these in the fullness of time. Still, we must act. Because even in the smallest of our gestures, God does God's work. Ours is to prepare and nurture openings for the inbreaking realm of God, living right now as though we trusted God's promises.

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near.” Turn, then. Give your heart and mind and soul to that truth, and act on it. God is depending on it.