

# *The Place of Faith's Starting*

Peter JB Carman

Emmanuel Friedens Church, Schenectady New York

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Reading: Mark 1: 1-8

## I.

For some it begins with Christmas. The place of faith's starting at this time of year is most often linked with the coming of the infant Jesus, and the decorations with which we adorn our homes and church attest to the exciting arrival of the infant king. Small matter that Christmas trees go back to the sacred (LIVE) trees of the ancient druids and, back in the day, the festival was re-set to December 25<sup>th</sup> to coincide with the Roman year-end holidays. Yet for us it is all about the coming of the Christ, and the way we remember it is with a birth...only....

Two of the gospel writers never even mention the birth of Jesus. Mark's gospel, the earliest of the four, starts with an adult Jesus, finding his way out to the edge of the wilderness to receive a cleansing for the forgiveness of sins—and the start of a whole new mindset, a new life, a new way of being and seeing. But before we even meet Jesus we meet the baptizer, and what a character he is! Mark's gospel clothes him in camel's hair, a mysterious teacher who appears out of nowhere and who survives by the grace of God on the edge of the wilderness, eating locusts and wild honey.

This oldest of the gospel stories tells us nothing about Christ's birth! In fact it doesn't quote John, or even mention any dialogue between Jesus and John: the passage that follows right after what we read this morning tells us only that Jesus was baptized in the waters of the sacred river, the Jordan. And then without stopping to take a breath it does tell us two more things. As he comes out of the water, a voice tells him he is the Son, the appointed heir, the beloved. And then immediately he is possessed by a sacred Spirit, a holy power, that drives him like the wind, drives him out into the desert, where he must begin his own journey alone with the elements, with the most dangerous and tempting thoughts of his heart, and with the wild things. In Mark this is where the angels show up... It is messengers from God who tend to Jesus, at his most vulnerable, there in the wilderness, just after his baptism, his rebirth.

## II

His name was John. Not THAT John, but another John, a wild man in his own right. I met him only once, in the year two thousand, up in Pinkham Notch, New Hampshire. For our own reasons we were both staying one night at the Mountain Club lodge there on the Appalachian Trail. And we happened to be put in the same room. About six four or five, skin and bone and beard, and the clear look in his eye that testified to a long time outdoors on the trail—also the smell. You see, this is a true story, not made up. It was outside that we spoke, that clear cold summer night, and this quiet man, who obviously kept to himself mostly, chose to speak to me, told me how he got there. “I’m originally from Virginia,” he told me, “I grew up near where the trail goes through. A year ago, I lost everything. It was the drinking. My wife finally left me, my children left me, I lost my job. This winter was terrible. No reason left to stay. I spent my last few hundred dollars in the bank on a pack and a pair of boots, and I started to walk. I had to walk, I had nothing else left to do. I started north.” He stopped for a moment and looked me in the eye. “I guess you could say I have faced my demons,” he told me. He had walked the Appalachian Trail in the same pair of boots all the way from Virginia to New Hampshire. Somewhere along the way his thirst faded into oblivion.

“I don’t know what my life will be like after this,” he said. He was going back to where he had previously lived. “I don’t know whether my children will speak to me, or my wife will either. I hope so, but if they don’t, I guess I can live with that. I’m not the same man no more, no how. I’m not going back to that.”

I never saw him again. And in the years since I have seen a lot of heartache, and failed intentions: enough to raise the question as to whether the dreams of a person on the trail will hold up when they get home. But something in that man’s tone of voice makes me think he is doing exactly what he said, a whole new thing, no going back. Sort of like baptism, in the winds of God.

## III

There are many ways and times to start the story of faith. What we find in the first few verses of Mark’s gospel is a powerful story about the beginnings of the Son of God, you might even say an adoption; not a conception and delivery. For those of us who started our family life, as we know it, through an adoption, or those of us whose children came to us that way, I say to you, at least in Mark’s

gospel, the God relationship also begins with something more like an adoption than a birth. And for those of us who come to faith late in life and feel a little self-conscious about it, let the record note that in the earliest of the gospels, the story of Jesus himself begins in adulthood with a change of life and a new clarity about direction!

Where did you begin the story of faith? Was it always there from infancy? A decision in your youth? Or did it catch you by surprise, catch you upside the head even, sometime much later? Christianity honors all kinds of starts in the life of faith. Some of our leading lights over the centuries started as criminals. Others always knew from birth that they were called. I affirmed my faith when I was twelve. My little sister Tineke was forty before she got baptized—in a UCC church by the way. What’s your story? Is it just beginning, or are you starting over? Or like my friend John do you need a good trip to the river and through it and up into the wild, to get your head straight, and get your life right with God and your neighbor?

#### IV

Today we have lit the advent candle of Peace. With the Peace testimony of Christianity, as with faith itself, our journeys take different twists and turns along the way. But in this world at war, let us remember that the One who was baptized in the river that day came to point us to a different way. This is a very personal matter for each of us, because so much of the world around us tells us that violence is necessary and unavoidable; that killing is the price of freedom; that fear is an acceptable reason to take a life, or many lives. Pre-emptive violence is become the order of the day. And so yes, some of us come to the conviction early on that to walk with Jesus means a radical departure from business as usual. But for others it takes much longer... and for some of us it is one of those start all over again experiences. It’s ok. God takes us as we are, and from where we come. But there is a figure on the river bank inviting us to start over, and embrace a new way of justice and reconciliation, simplicity and love: a lifestyle of peace toward every neighbor. That’s what this table we are about to share at symbolizes—a new table for all of humanity, where enemies at last can sit down and work it out, where the meek get the best seats and the powerful get up to serve the smallest children with love. Come to it by Christmas or come to it by the river’s edge or come to it blown by the strong winds of Grace. Once we start to walk the way of Christ, the path of Christ’s peace, nothing stays the same. It’s a new life, even when we go back to the same old places.