

Mark 1:1-8
December 10, '17

“IT’S BEGINNING TO LOOK...”

PHILLIPS BROOKS IS A NAME THAT MANY OF YOU KNOW, BUT YOU PROBABLY KNOW HIM FOR ONLY ONE REASON.

YOU KNOW PHILLIPS BROOKS BECAUSE HE WROTE THE HYMN “*O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM.*”

IN THE 19TH CENTURY, PHILLIPS BROOKS WAS ONE OF THE MOST WELL-KNOWN PREACHERS AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS OF THE DAY.

HE DELIVERED A SERIES OF LECTURES ON PREACHING THAT ARE CONSIDERED CLASSICS - LECTURES IN WHICH HE OFFERED ONE OF THE MOST WELL-KNOWN, SINGLE SENTENCE DEFINITIONS OF PREACHING EVER OFFERED.

HE CALLED PREACHING THE ACT OF “*PROCLAIMING TRUTH THROUGH PERSONALITY.*”

WHAT HE MEANT BY THAT DEFINITION IS THAT A SERMON MUST BE PERSONAL.

IT CAN’T SIMPLY BE A REGURGITATION OF FACTS.

THE ONE DELIVERING THE MESSAGE IS REQUIRED TO REVEAL SOMETHING ABOUT THEMSELVES IN PREACHING TO MAKE A SERMON PERSONAL SO THAT IT CAN BE APPLICABLE TO THE LIVES OF THE HEARERS.

OVER THE YEARS, YOU HAVE LEARNED A GREAT DEAL ABOUT ME FROM SERMONS.

IT’S A MATTER OF LETTING DOWN YOUR GUARD AND ALLOWING PEOPLE TO SEE INSIDE TO CONNECT THEIR OWN LIVES TO YOURS AND, THEREFORE, CONNECT ALL LIVES TO THE GOSPEL MESSAGE.

HAVING SHARED THINGS ABOUT MY OWN LIFE IN THE PAST, HERE’S ANOTHER ONE - ONE THAT IS A *RISKY* SHARE - ONE THAT I

PROBABLY WOULDN'T ADMIT IF ANY OF OUR THREE SONS WERE WORSHIPPING HERE THIS MORNING.

JUST LAST WEEK, I WAS TALKING TO OUR SON, DEREK, AND GETTING A BIT SENTIMENTAL ABOUT CHRISTMAS.

WHILE WE MAY HAVE HAD DIFFERENCES OF OPINION ABOUT SOME ASPECTS OF WHAT MAKES CHRISTMAS "CHRISTMAS," WE BOTH AGREED THAT - BEYOND A DOUBT - THE GREATEST CHRISTMAS MOVIE EVER MADE IS THE BRUCE WILLIS CLASSIC "*DIE HARD.*"

THAT'S A POINT FOR A DIFFERENT DISCUSSION, BUT ALSO THE REASON THAT I WOULDN'T SHARE WHAT I'M ABOUT TO SHARE IF EITHER DEREK, DREW OR DAVID WERE HERE THIS MORNING!

WHAT I WILL TELL YOU TODAY ABOUT MYSELF IS THAT I REALLY ENJOY HALLMARK CHRISTMAS MOVIES.

I WATCH THEM ALL - AND NOT JUST BECAUSE EMMA SUE WANTS TO WATCH THEM!

I'LL RECORD FOOTBALL AND HOCKEY GAMES WHILE WATCHING A HALLMARK MOVIE.

ONE OF THE THINGS I LIKE ABOUT HALLMARK MOVIES IS THE GAME YOU CAN PLAY WITH THEM AS THEY BEGIN.

THE GAME IS THIS - HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE TO BE ABLE TO EXPLAIN THE ENTIRE PLOT OF THE MOVIE?

IT'S USUALLY SOMEWHERE BETWEEN 3 AND 5 MINUTES.

IF IT TAKES YOU LONGER THAN 7 MINUTES TO BE ABLE TO KNOW EVERYTHING THAT WILL HAPPEN IN THE MOVIE, YOU SIMPLY HAVEN'T WATCHED ENOUGH HALLMARK MOVIES!

THEREIN, THOUGH, LIES THE APPEAL!

YOU KNOW HOW EVERYTHING IS GOING TO TURN OUT - AND YOU KNOW IT'S ALL GOING TO TURN OUT GOOD.

THERE'S A PREDICTABLE BEGINNING, A PREDICTABLE MIDDLE AND A PREDICTABLE ENDING.

THE CONCLUSION IS ALWAYS HAPPY WITH ALL THE LOOSE ENDS TIED TOGETHER.

I WANTED TO START WITH THAT, NOT BECAUSE OF THE WAY IN WHICH OUR SCRIPTURE READING THIS MORNING CORRESPONDS TO A HALLMARK MOVIE, BUT RATHER THE WAY IN WHICH IT IS PRECISELY THE OPPOSITE - WITH ONE EXCEPTION THAT WE'LL GET TO LATER.

AS WE LOOK AT THE BEGINNING OF MARK'S GOSPEL, THIS IS NO HALLMARK MOVIE!

IN THE FIRST VERSE, WHEN HE TALKS ABOUT THE GOOD NEWS - THE GOOD NEWS CAN REALLY BE USED AS A TERM THAT'S TAKEN FROM THE BATTLEFIELD.

THIS IS NO HUNKY-DORY, HAPPY-GO-LUCKY HALLMARK STORY WE'RE ABOUT TO HEAR!

THIS IS REAL LIFE AND IT BEGINS - NOT IN A WARM & FUZZY, COZY LITTLE LOVE-FILLED VILLAGE -BUT OUT ON CROOKED PATHS IN THE WILDERNESS WITH A GUY EATING BUGS AND WEARING ANIMAL SKINS.

NO - THIS ISN'T A HALLMARK MOVIE WE'RE ABOUT TO BEGIN! BUT HALLMARK MOVIES ARE THE WAY WE WANT TO PICTURE CHRISTMAS, AREN'T THEY?

WE WANT EVERYTHING NEAT & TIDY & CHEERFUL & HAPPY. A MAN NAMED ROBERT WILSON COULD RELATE TO THAT DESIRE. ROBERT WAS AT A TIME IN HIS LIFE WHEN HE HAD RE-JOINED THE CHURCH OF HIS CHILDHOOD.

HE'D MOVED FROM IOWA TO CALIFORNIA & ONCE AGAIN BECAME ACTIVE IN A MAINLINE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH.

IT WAS HIS TIME IN THAT CHURCH THAT WOULD PROVIDE ROBERT A FIRM FOUNDATION THAT WOULD REMAIN HIS ANCHOR THROUGHOUT THE REMAINDER OF HIS LIFE.

ROBERT WAS A MUSICIAN AND PLAYED THE FLUTE.

FOR SEVERAL YEARS, HE HAD EVEN PLAYED WITH JOHN PHILIPS SOUSA'S BAND.

IN HIS NEW CHURCH HOME IN CALIFORNIA, HE BECAME SO INVOLVED THAT HE WAS WRITING HYMNS TO BE SUNG IN WORSHIP.

WITHIN A COUPLE YEARS OF JOINING THE CHURCH, ROBERT WAS ELECTED TO SERVE ON ITS GOVERNING BODY.

IT WAS ABOUT THIS TIME THAT HE WROTE A SONG ABOUT THAT FEELING WE GET EVERY YEAR AS WE MOVE CLOSER & CLOSER TO OUR CELEBRATION OF THE BIRTH OF CHRIST.

ROBERT LOOKED AROUND HIM AND REALIZED THAT "IT'S BEGINNING TO LOOK A LOT LIKE CHRISTMAS" AND SO HE WROTE A SONG ABOUT IT.

IT'S BEGINNING TO LOOK A LOT LIKE CHRISTMAS

EV'RYWHERE YOU GO;

TAKE A LOOK IN THE FIVE-AND-TEN, GLISTENING ONCE AGAIN WITH CANDY CANES AND SILVER LANES AGLOW.

IT'S BEGINNING TO LOOK A LOT LIKE CHRISTMAS,

TOYS IN EV'RY STORE,

BUT THE PRETTIEST SIGHT TO SEE IS THE HOLLY THAT WILL BE ON YOUR OWN FRONT DOOR.

YOU KNOW THAT SONG BUT ROBERT WILSON IS KNOWN EVEN MORE FOR SOMETHING ELSE.

HE DIDN'T GO BY HIS FIRST NAME BUT RATHER HIS MIDDLE NAME
- MEREDITH.

ROBERT WILSON IS MEREDITH WILSON AND SHORTLY AFTER
WRITING *"IT'S BEGINNING TO LOOK A LOT LIKE CHRISTMAS,"* HE BEGAN
A PROJECT THAT TOOK HIM EIGHT YEARS & 30 REVISIONS TO
COMPLETE.

ROBERT MEREDITH WILSON WROTE THE BOOK, MUSIC & LYRICS
FOR THE BROADWAY HIT "THE MUSIC MAN."

BUT IT ALL REALLY BEGAN WITH MEREDITH WILSON'S RETURN
TO HIS CHILDHOOD FAITH.

THAT STORY & THAT KIND OF BEGINNING – AT LEAST SOME OF IT -
MAY BE SURPRISING TO YOU.

AS WE LOOK AT OUR SCRIPTURE READING THIS MORNING, WE
FIND A BEGINNING THAT IS EQUALLY SURPRISING.

LOOK AT THAT FIRST VERSE.

MARK TALKS ABOUT *"THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST, THE SON
OF GOD."*

DOES ANYTHING STRIKE YOU AS ODD ABOUT THAT OPENING?

WELL, FIRST OF ALL, THAT'S NOT THE ENTIRE VERSE.

I LEFT OUT THE FIRST THREE WORDS – "THE BEGINNING OF THE
GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD."

WHERE'S THE VERB IN THAT SENTENCE?

THERE ISN'T ONE.

THIS ISN'T REALLY EVEN A SENTENCE!

BECAUSE OF THAT, THERE HAS BEEN SPECULATION ABOUT HOW
WE'RE TO UNDERSTAND THESE OPENING WORDS OF MARK'S GOSPEL.

DO THOSE FIRST THREE WORDS “THE BEGINNING OF...” REFER SPECIFICALLY TO THE STORY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST WHICH IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWS?

OR ARE THEY, PERHAPS, AN OPENING INTRODUCTION TO THE ENTIRE FIRST CHAPTER WHICH INCLUDES THE BEGINNING OF THE MINISTRY OF JESUS, WHICH FOLLOWS BOTH HIS BAPTISM & HIS TEMPTATION IN THE WILDERNESS AS WELL?

I’D LIKE TO SUGGEST THAT THERE’S A THIRD OPTION – ONE THAT IS MUCH MORE LIKELY THAN THE OTHER TWO.

I’D LIKE TO SUGGEST THAT THESE OPENING WORDS – “*THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD*” – ARE INTENDED AS A SUBTITLE FOR THE ENTIRE BOOK.

WHAT MARK WANTS US TO KNOW ABOUT ALL 16 CHAPTERS OF HIS GOSPEL IS THAT THIS IS “THE BEGINNING” AND ONLY THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD.

IF YOU’RE SKEPTICAL ABOUT THIS – IF YOU THINK THAT MARK WOULDN’T WRITE LIKE THAT – THAT HE’S NOT REALLY INTENDING US TO THINK OF HIS ENTIRE BOOK AS A MERE “BEGINNING,” LET ME SUGGEST WE TAKE A LOOK AT THE *END* OF HIS GOSPEL.

HERE’S HOW MARK ENDS – THE 8TH AND FINAL VERSE OF THE 16TH & FINAL CHAPTER MAKES REFERENCE TO THE WOMEN WHO HAD GONE TO THE TOMB.

HE 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.*”

IF YOU HAPPENED TO LOOK FOR THAT ENDING IN YOUR BIBLE & SAW OTHER ENDINGS SUGGESTED, THAT’S ALL THEY ARE – SUGGESTIONS – AND, I MIGHT ADD, POOR ONES CONCOCTED BY THOSE

WHO JUST COULDN'T ACCEPT THE FACT THAT MARK ENDED HIS GOSPEL SO ABRUPTLY.

BUT THEREIN LIES THE BRILLIANCE OF IT!

BUT WE DON'T LIKE THAT KIND OF AN ENDING, DO WE?

IT FEELS COMPLETELY UNSATISFACTORY, DOESN'T IT?

YOU'D MUCH RATHER HEAR MATTHEW'S ENDING.

YOU'D RATHER HEAR HIS STORY OF THE RESURRECTION, COMPLETE WITH EARTHQUAKE & THE MEETING OF JESUS BY THE WOMEN.

OR MAYBE YOU PREFER LUKE & THE STORY OF THE TWO DISCIPLES WHO MET JESUS ON THE ROAD TO EMMAUS.

AND WHAT ABOUT JOHN'S VERSION – WITH PETER & THE OTHER DISCIPLE RUNNING TO THE TOMB & THE APPEARANCES IN THE UPPER ROOM & THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN THOMAS & JESUS & EVEN JESUS COOKING BREAKFAST FOR THE DISCIPLES ONE MORNING ON THE SEA OF GALILEE.

THOSE ARE FAR BETTER ENDINGS, AREN'T THEY?!

BUT MARK'S ENDING ISN'T EVEN AN ENDING!

NOR IS MARK'S BEGINNING REALLY A BEGINNING OR – MORE PRECISELY – HE'S TELLING US THAT HIS ENTIRE BOOK IS NOTHING MORE THAN A BEGINNING!

IN THE SAME WAY THAT WE HAVE WHAT SEEM TO BE MUCH BETTER ENDINGS IN MATTHEW, LUKE & JOHN – SO, TOO, DO THE OTHER THREE GOSPELS OFFER US MUCH BETTER BEGINNINGS THAN MARK DOES.

THINK ABOUT IT – IN MATTHEW, YOU'VE GOT THE VISIT OF THE ANGEL TO JOSEPH & THE LONG GENEALOGY, TRACING JESUS' BIRTH BACK TO ABRAHAM.

LUKE TELLS THE TENDER STORY OF MARY, THE SHEPHERDS & THE ANGELS.

AND THEN THERE'S JOHN WHO OFFERS HIS PROFOUND THEOLOGICAL STATEMENT REGARDING "*THE WORD BECOMING FLESH & DWELLING AMONG US.*"

YOU KNOW ALL OF THOSE OTHER GOSPEL BEGINNINGS, DON'T YOU?

YOU KNOW HOW MATTHEW, LUKE & JOHN BEGIN THEIR STORY OF JESUS.

BUT MARK'S *BEGINNING* IS EVERY BIT AS FORGETTABLE AS HIS *ENDING!*

"*THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD.*"

THAT'S IT.

THERE'S NO POETRY, NO DRAMA.

BUT, YOU SEE, THAT'S WHAT'S SO BRILLIANT ABOUT THE WAY MARK WRITES.

WITH MARK'S ENDING, HE LEAVES IT OPEN-ENDED SO THAT YOU CAN COMPLETE THE STORY.

HE WANTS *YOU* TO RESPOND TO THE RESURRECTION.

AND HERE IN HIS OPENING WORDS, HE'S TELLING US THAT WHAT HE'S GOING TO GIVE US IS MERELY THE BEGINNING OF THE STORY.

THERE'S MORE TO COME.

THAT HOLDS SO MUCH TRUTH FOR OUR OWN LIVES.

YOUR STORY ISN'T OVER.

THERE'S SO MUCH MORE TO COME!

GO BACK TO MEREDITH WILSON.

HE WAS IN HIS MID-FIFTIES WHEN HE FINALLY COMPLETED “THE MUSIC MAN.”

AND HE WROTE “THE UNSINKABLE MOLLY BROWN” AFTER THAT!

I DON’T THINK IT WAS SHEER COINCIDENCE THAT AT THE VERY TIME HE RETURNED TO THE FAITH OF HIS CHILDHOOD THAT HE FOUND A RENEWED SENSE OF PURPOSE & PASSION IN HIS LIFE.

AS MARK SHARES HIS GOSPEL, HE’S TELLING US THAT WE ARE A PART OF THE STORY – THE STORY OF JESUS THAT INCLUDES US.

WE ARE A SIGNIFICANT PART OF THAT STORY AS WE, TOO, FIND PURPOSE & PASSION IN ENTERING INTO THAT STORY OURSELVES.

BUT I THINK THERE IS PERHAPS SOMETHING THAT GOES EVEN FURTHER.

YOU SEE, MARK’S GOSPEL IS ONLY THE BEGINNING & HIS GOSPEL HAS NO ENDING.

SO, TOO, WITH OUR TIME ON EARTH.

THIS IS ONLY THE BEGINNING.

THERE IS SOMETHING FAR GREATER IN STORE FOR US – SOMETHING EVEN BEYOND THIS LIFE THAT WE EXPERIENCE NOW.

HERE’S WHERE WE CAN GO BACK TO THOSE HALLMARK MOVIES THAT I ADMIT I GENUINELY ENJOY.

I SAID MARK’S GOSPEL IS PRECISELY THE OPPOSITE OF A HALLMARK MOVIE – WITH ONE EXCEPTION.

THE EXCEPTION IS THIS – THE ONE PLACE WHERE MARK’S GOSPEL & A HALLMARK MOVIE ARE PRECISELY THE SAME.

WITH BOTH OF THEM, *“YOU KNOW HOW EVERYTHING’S GOING TO TURN OUT – AND IT’S ALL GOING TO TURN OUT GOOD.”*

THE SEASON OF ADVENT GIVES US THAT ASSURANCE BECAUSE WHILE YOU ENTER THE STORY OF JESUS, HE COMES TO EARTH TO ENTER YOURS.

MARK'S GOSPEL IS ONLY THE BEGINNING OF THE STORY OF JESUS, AND AS YOU ENTER IT, HE'S THERE TO MEET YOU, GIVING YOU THE PROMISE OF ABUNDANT & ETERNAL LIFE.

**WHEN YOU EXPERIENCE THAT PROMISE, YOU KNOW – WITHOUT A DOUBT – THAT “*IT'S BEGINNING TO LOOK A LOT LIKE CHRISTMAS.*”
AMEN.**

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