

Mid-Life

So here we are, at the beginning. Fresh calendar pages. A new decade. A new date to write and mess up writing for the next few months. In a few moments we will ordain and install new officers for the coming year. And we have begun our walk with the gospel of Mark, the gospel where we will spend our time through Easter. And Mark tells us right off the bat that this is a beginning, that his account begins at the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ with John's echoing Isaiah's promise of a voice in the wilderness.

Honestly, it seems like an odd place to begin. If you found yourself scratching your head and trying to see if you missed something by turning back a few pages, you're not alone. We're still in the midst of the 12 days of Christmas after all. Our crèche is still out at home, and our tree is still up. Penn Waste won't even be picking up the tree until next Saturday. So this is the beginning, Mark? Really? What about the baby, the shepherds, the angels, or the Magi? What about the star and Mary treasuring all these things in her heart? Mark does not include any of these details. It is almost as if the writer does not have time for such things. As we'll notice in the weeks ahead, Mark's gospel has a fierce urgency about it. Mark is concerned to get to the heart of things, as quickly as possible. And for Mark, the heart of things is Jesus the Christ, the Messiah and Christ's call to repentance and new life. So for Mark, this is the beginning.

But it is not a start-from-scratch, brand-new-calendar-page kind of beginning. While the language echoes the words from Genesis 1, Mark knows full well that there is a rich history and a complicated context into which Jesus walks. We have spent the past few months getting reacquainted with the God of Israel and the people this God lovingly creates, calls, reprimands, and redeems, over and over again. We have witnessed the love story up close, and we have sat with our ancestors who longed for a Savior who would not disappoint them, a Messiah who would not let them down. And then we ran with the shepherds and sang with the angels as we gathered with our ancestors in Bethlehem to celebrate this Savior's birth. He is not a match for Rome's emperor or Herod, the Roman puppet king; he is more. He is God with us, God with us in the thick of too-tight belts and budgets, God with us in the midst of gray January days, God with us in the face of broken hearts and empty promises. On this every gospel account agrees.

Over the past few weeks in between travels and laundry and gift buying and exchanging, Dave and I have been watching the latest season of *The Crown*. Throughout the seasons, I have reacted to different figures in different ways. Prince Philip is one of those figures. At times I have found myself disgusted by him, infuriated with him, pitying him, and even admiring him. Every time I want to place him or any of the royals in one box, they almost immediately blow that box to shreds. While the creators of the series take a fair amount of creative license with the story at times, the characters on the screen are compelling, whether their story strictly matches exact historical fact or not. One episode in particular knocked Philip way outside of the box I had built for him. The episode is entitled “Moondust” and links Philip’s admiration for the astronauts who first landed on the moon with his frustration with his own life which seems pointless and utterly without meaning. Early on in the episode, Philip all but writes off the new Dean of Windsor Chapel, Robin Woods and his retreat center for burned-out mid-career and mid-life priests. [This is where I should warn you about spoilers.] When invited to meet the first group gathered there, Philip hears them wonder aloud about “feeling useless, feeling like failures, losing the numbers in their congregation. That people are getting what they need from outside the church.”¹ In the late 1960s. Philip snidely dismisses them. He thinks they are wasting their time whining about and reflecting on life while taking no action. Action is where it’s at for Philip, which is why the astronauts are the ones he admires. *They* are the ones who have done things and seen things and who happen to be pilots, like him. And so when the astronauts come for a state visit, Philip requests a private audience with them. He thinks he will find the meaning of life in speaking with Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Michael Collins:

When [he] presses his fellow pilots for some grand, existential observation about their experience, and gets a banal anecdote about how their water-cooler was a piece of junk in return, he learns that these ‘giants, gods’ are just ‘three little men’ who were merely doing their jobs. ‘There wasn’t much time for [thoughts about the meaning of life],’ the astronauts inform him. Just as royal life is filled with ‘protocol and procedure,’ so is a lunar mission. ‘We pretty much spent our entire time with lists in our hands,’ says Collins.²

Philip is devastated. He has no interest in water coolers or lists. He has invested his hopes for something bigger, something deeper in these men from the moon, and yet they cannot offer him what he truly longs for.

¹ Nicole Cliff, <https://decider.com/2019/11/25/the-crown-recap-season-3-episode-7/>

² Sarene Leeds, <https://www.vulture.com/2019/11/the-crown-recap-season-3-episode-7-moondust.html>

Which brings the prince back to the Dean and the priests. Philip is not an astronaut; nor are they, and somehow through confession, reflection, and conversation he becomes ok with that, and with wrestling with where and with whom the meaning of life truly lies. The Dean is no Jesus, but I think his arrival on the scene offers the new beginning Philip is longing for. His mother had told him that she worried that his faith had dwindled if not vanished entirely when they reunited at the end of her life and in the middle of his. He cannot quite bring himself to admit that he is in the midst of a mid-life crisis, but he can now admit that she was right. It is not a beginning from scratch. It is a new chapter, one that calls him to a different kind of action, to pause, to listen, to invest himself in something larger than himself. In the dean's retreat, Philip finds a space to wrestle with faith and its role in his life which leads him to realize that meaning and purpose are not all about him and what he creates. This faith does not ask him to be something he is not. Instead it meets him where he is and invites him forward on a path he does not and cannot create on his own.

One scholar commented that she hears a midlife fantasy in this text from Mark, an escape hatch of sorts, a chance for the fishermen to begin again. She wonders aloud at how amazing it must be to be given an opportunity to take the skillset they already have and use those gifts for something grander and more meaningful.³ It's funny. I don't necessarily see these particular fishermen looking for a way out, but I do love that they are being called in mid-life, in the middle of their lives to use gifts and skills they already have to join in the call to serve something bigger, to invest in something larger than the only world they have known. "Come fish for people," Jesus says. "Come be a part of drawing others in and welcoming in to this new thing God is creating in me."

I think such a call comes to us in Jesus, too, regardless of our age or station or circumstance. Not one of us is truly standing at square one or staring at a completely empty page. We carry with us histories, experiences, joys, disappointments, successes, failures, secrets, and fears. And Jesus meets us here, in the thick of all of that, in the middle of our lives and all that those lives entail and invites us to move forward with him.

Today we are ordaining and installing new officers who have answered a call to use their gifts to serve in a new way, which is something to celebrate, but they are not the only ones welcoming a new beginning. The rest of us are being called to begin again, too. Yes, *called*. I use that language intentionally, because in our baptism we have answered a call to invest in something bigger, someone higher than ourselves. Jesus' first words spoken in Mark's

³ Dr. Amy Robertson, https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/nldr-the-narrative/episode-018-mark-11-20-jrBLa7NdU_F/

gospel set the stage: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”⁴ Repentance invites us to turn away from all that we do to break God’s heart and to turn toward all that God would have us do and be in God’s name in and for the world God so dearly loves. It is not necessarily about leaving behind what puts food on our tables. Rather it is about reconsidering what truly nourishes us and feeds the work of God’s kingdom. This call is an invitation to turn the page, to turn the corner and use the gifts God has given us to use for God’s work. And it is a blessed reprieve. It is a relief to know that it is not up to me to create my own path or to generate good news or positive outcomes on my own. *It does not all depend on me, thanks be to God!* Nor does this call depend on my being someone I am not and never can be. Jesus does not call the fishermen to be philosophers. He calls them to be disciples, learners, students, followers, to be *his* first and foremost. We are who we are because of whose we are. God does not expect me to be an astronaut or an Olympic runner or Mother Teresa. Nor does God call me to wipe my own slate clean. Instead God gives me a fresh start and carves out a new path beginning right where I stand. In Jesus the Christ, God calls me to turn and follow where he leads, to listen, to learn, to grow, and to use the gifts God has given me for the work of God’s kingdom come near in Jesus the Christ. Jesus is born in the midst of oppression and turmoil; he promises peace and hope in the face of all the death-dealing powers of his day and ours. And he wants all of us to join him. He calls doubters and zealots, princes and paupers, fishermen and florists, artists and accountants, teenagers and telecommuters to repent and believe, to turn the page, to trust him, and to follow where *he* leads. He does not ask us to get our acts together ahead of time. He does not insist that we start from scratch. Instead he invites us to begin again, right here and right now, in the thick of it all, in the middle of our lives, just as we are. And his coming brings on a crisis of the best kind, because it comes not in some faraway far off world, but right in the middle of things, right here in the midst of grocery lists and political campaigns, mortgage payments and doctors’ appointments, soccer practice and studying for exams. And it pushes us—*he* urges us—to follow him in the way of life, peace, courage, and compassion instead of clinging to an existence that depends solely on what we can produce or grab. This new beginning is not about perfectly kept resolutions or carefully curated lives. This new beginning does not start with us. This new beginning starts with Jesus the Christ who comes to us mid-life, right where we are, just as we are, and calls us to follow. How will we respond?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴ Mark 1:15, New Revised Standard Version