

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, Virginia
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Isaiah 40:1–11
Mark 1:1–8

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING... SOMETHING BORROWED, SOMETHING BLUE

The Bible seems to be filled with stories that interrupt the normal flow of life. And that is what is happening here this morning—new hope, new freedom, new life—liberation from loneliness and shattered dreams, broken promises.

Our lives are busy and yet there is a nagging emptiness within. Some confess often of being spiritually fatigued. And today, Mark interrupts all of that pain, all of the good news that is still happening in our midst and starts to tell, again, the story of Jesus. When we read Verse 1, we assume that Mark means, “Okay, here goes, I am going to tell you a story.” It’s what any good story teller does: “Get ready, because I am about to begin.” But in reality, Mark is saying so much more. He is saying that the whole of the Gospel, the entire story of Jesus’ life, is in fact the beginning. The story doesn’t end. And if you look at the end of Mark, you see the way he concludes his Gospel isn’t a very satisfying ending either. Sixteen chapters later, abruptly he stops, and that’s because the story of the Gospel of Jesus Christ still continues to this very day.

The truth be told, we have a hard time with stories that aren’t wrapped up for us in nice neat packages with pretty bows. We have a hard time starting over, living by faith and not by works. Living by grace and not by accomplishments sounds easy, but it is the hardest thing we do. Living by faith requires lots and lots of “new beginnings.” Did you hear it in the liturgy for the baptism this morning? And do you hear it now? I thought about changing that sentence after the ethos of this summer and the fall, of living through six weeks twice of studying where God is calling us, how God is calling us to be the church. But it’s good that our lives were interrupted. The new understanding pushed us to face the neglect of the most basic spiritual discipline in our midst—the renewal and regeneration that must come if we really read scripture and allow it to redefine us, if we pray, and truly say, “not my will, but thine, not my way but your way, not my agenda, but your agenda.”

Yes ... basic, remedial stuff for long-time, seasoned church goers. We claim that no one ever told us how important these spiritual disciplines are. No one told us how essential it was to take a break, to have Sabbath time. No one ever told us the truth about being disciples—about the practices that God invites us to share that often threaten us.

We get unnerved when we hear John the Baptist or anybody else tell us it’s time to learn something new. That’s why it’s so hard to open those instructions when you get that new piece of electronics, that new toy, that new tool. We know we are going to have to learn something new. We know we are going to have to make mistakes in order

to get beyond that learning curve. And after all, it's very natural, isn't it, for us to not want to make those mistakes. We are given our affirmation by the things we do well, the things we already know, not the things we have yet to experience. So much of our identity is tied up in our ability to demonstrate our competence. In fact, we derive much of our security from those areas where we are most competent. But when we read Isaiah and Mark, and they call us to start over and to learn something new—even our baptism, even the practice of faith that we take for granted, even the tradition and the celebration of Christmas—when we have learn something new, somehow we feel as vulnerable as Dempsey this morning. We wonder ... will Jesus be there? Will he be with my family? Will God give access to all the strength that I need?

God has clearly a plan to love us, to offer us everything that we lack in ourselves. And the more we know God, the more dependent we know we really are. So when God offers us hope, when we hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ coming to us, it's interesting that we are surprised. It's always associated with a committed, trusting relationship with someone else, like the one we celebrate with good wishes—you know, the blessing or the wish for prosperity, *something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue*. Do you know the rest of it ... *And a sixpence in her shoe*? That wish, after all—the final part of that for good fortune and wealth—really does help us understand, doesn't it, what the meaning of money really is? Sharing. Sharing—it's a gift that wealth brings with it.

As it turns out, the essentials for a good wedding or a baptism, the essentials for life in the faith, the essentials for your Christmas to have fresh meaning are all very similar. God begins something new for each of us in the story of Jesus Christ. No matter your past, your future can be regenerated in the image of Christ. No matter your past, you can share in the Gospel of Jesus Christ if you are willing to live in community and if you are willing to never stop giving as you have received. Mark says, "This is the beginning of the Gospel of the story of Jesus." But what he really means is ... the story of Jesus is the beginning of everything else. Amen.