True Confession: Other than high school football, I’m not a huge football fan…But, even I knew that the Super Bowl in February of this year featured two formidable teams: the Seattle Seahawks and the Denver Broncos. Many favored the Broncos to win the game, with their Hall of Fame-bound quarterback, Peyton Manning. Do you remember the opening snap on the first play from scrimmage for the Denver Broncos in that Super Bowl last winter? The center snapped the football over Peyton Manning’s head, which led to a safety, the first two points in Seattle’s resounding win over Denver. It was a poor start for the Broncos, and sadly, they never got their footing back. The Seahawks went on to win in a 43-8 blowout that no one saw coming. Maybe the Seahawks were the better team that day in Super Bowl 48, but it surely did not help the Broncos to have had such a rough beginning.

Have you ever had a rough start? Most of us have… when unpredictable turbulence upsets our carefully laid plans. Do you
remember the fender bender the first month you had your driver’s license? Or your social faux pas at the dinner table the first time you ate at your future in-law’s dinner table? Or the time you parked in the boss’s spot on your first day at work? Or the error you made trying to catch a routine fly ball during the first game after you made varsity? Yea, we all have some memories of rough beginnings that make us shudder to this very day.

A tenor soloist, at a performance of Handel’s Messiah began the opening aria, with the beautiful lyrical words of Isaiah the prophet, “Comfort ye, Comfort ye, my people.” But the tenor’s voice broke in the middle of the first line, and he never recovered…. throughout the rest of the night. The lines that were meant to be soaring and beautiful fell to the floor with split notes and raspy coughs. What a bad beginning.

Today, this Second Sunday of Advent, let’s pay attention to beginnings; to the way Mark begins his Gospel. The Gospel is taken from the opening verses, indeed the first word of Mark’s story is the
word, “The beginning . . . .” Mark tries to take the reader back to the
beginning of the story of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God. But what a
strange beginning Mark gives us!

He does not start with a genealogy, a family tree of “begets”
through the generations.

He does not tell the story of Christmas.

He has no angelic annunciation to Mary or Joseph, no stable in
Bethlehem, no shepherds or Magi.

No, Mark begins with the story of the scruffy preacher, John the
Baptist, heralding the ministry of Jesus, who shows up a few verses
later—and he was already 30 years old! Imagine how empty our
nativity scene would be if we had only Mark’s Gospel!—no angels or
animals, no holy family; just a scraggly wandering prophet in the desert
who dressed shabbily and ate grasshoppers.

Is that any way to begin a Gospel? Well to be fair, Mark wrote his
Gospel story first, so there were no models for him to follow.
Matthew and Luke had the opportunity to fill in the gaps later, to fill the prequel to the adult ministry of Jesus with their Christmas narratives. **Don’t** we love those infancy stories, especially at Christmas? Mark fits our Advent timing well, because his story does not allow us to rush to coo over the baby Jesus in a manger, even though it is hard to find a radio station that isn’t playing Christmas carols almost non-stop. Not to mention the stores that have been decked out with Christmas decorations since Halloween.

Talk about a rough beginning—was there ever a rougher looking, rougher sounding preacher than John the Baptist? He evoked memories of the rugged prophets of the Old Testament. His preaching thundered in the desert, full of fire and brimstone. He takes straight aim at the powerful and the pious, calling them “snakes” to their faces. This was not your typical “kept” preacher who learned to play the political game, stay out of trouble, and avoid ruffling feathers to keep his job. John’s preaching was fresh, dangerous, and strangely liberating; people
flocked to hear it. But for all his popularity with the masses, this desert prophet made enemies in high places. He was eventually imprisoned and beheaded by the local king, a tyrant with a history of killing all dissident voices who threatened his status quo. Yet one more martyr at the hands of the powerful who mistakenly think taking off someone’s head will also head off their voice.

It is sad and tragic to see such brutality and suffering woven into the beginnings of the story of Jesus! It seems so out of place, so jarring to our image of a Christmas season marked by peace of earth and goodwill among humans. But in truth, all four Gospel stories weave a strand of suffering and injustice into the fabric of their opening chapters. Mark has this rough desert prophet killed for his preaching, which provides the framework and background for Jesus to pick up the fallen flag of the Kingdom, and pick up where John the Baptist left off—only to become yet another martyr at the hands of these same political and religious leaders three years later.
Matthew tells of the slaughter of the innocent children by the King Herod.

Luke tells of the dark prophecy of Simeon who tells Mary “a sword will pierce your own soul” as she swaddles her infant son only days after his birth.

John’s opening paragraph foreshadows the rejection Jesus would face—“He came to his own, but his own did not receive him.” Truth is, according to all four Gospel accounts, one cannot tell the story of Jesus without hearing from the start that the dark forces of Calvary cast their shadow into the very manger itself.

A rough start indeed. So John the Baptist, both his preaching and his demeanor, his clothing and his diet, is the **perfect place** to begin telling the story of Jesus. He was human sandpaper, rubbed against the grain of most of his hearers, calling the powerful to lay down their power, and the pious to repentance. He is roughness personified. But here is the interesting thing about sandpaper. It may be unsettling to our senses, and upsetting to our preference for smooth and silky experiences,
but the rougher sandpaper is, the more it leaves behind a smooth and polished place on the surface that dares to embrace its abrasion. This Advent, let’s open ourselves even to the rough places, the suffering in ourselves or the world, the abrasive experiences and people around us, and see if the God of Advent is not drawing near to us, even there. Often, whether restoring furniture or souls, rough starts make for smooth finishes.