

Good News!
Isaiah 52:7-10 Mark 1:1-15

Happy New Year! We've turned the calendar to 2024, and wonder what this year will hold. As mentioned in early December, the *Christian* year, the *ecclesiastical* year, begins with the first Sunday of Advent. For us, this year, that was December 3rd. And each year, as we prepare for and celebrate the birth of Christ, the following winter has historically been a time to focus on the life of Christ in our worship and collective learning—starting with Jesus' baptism.

It's been a couple years since we've done that, so we will be following Jesus through the gospel of Mark this winter. This will take us through Easter Sunday, March 31st.

Mark is the earliest, or the first, of the gospels to be written. Probably around 70 AD. Matthew and Luke are thought to have been written around 85 AD, and John's gospel between 90-100 AD. The apostle Paul's letters are actually the earliest Christian documents contained in the New Testament, because he conducted his ministry from around 35 AD until about 60 AD. The gospels were written some 20-40 years later, as the early church decided they needed *written* accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus, and not just oral accounts/traditions.

Mark's gospel is the shortest, and most densely packed gospel. Kind of like the fruitcake you may have received as a gift at Christmas. There's a lot packed in there! And over the next 13 Sundays I'll be choosing representative passages from Mark that exemplify Jesus' life and ministry, from Mark's perspective. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus is portrayed as the great teacher, or the new Moses, the fulfillment of all of God's promises from the law and the prophets, and the promised Messiah *of the Jewish people*. In Luke's gospel, Jesus is portrayed as the savior *to people on the margins*—to the poor, to women, and outcasts. That is his mission in Luke. In Mark's gospel, Jesus is an *evangelist, to all*, calling everyone to turn and follow him, and live in the good news of God's kingdom. Which brings us to our text this morning.

Mark 1:1-15

1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight" ',

4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **5** And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan,

confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

¹² And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

This is the word of the Lord.

Let's do a little word association: What comes to your mind when you hear the word "gospel"? Or, what is your reflexive emotional response? Positive, or not so positive?

How about the word "evangel" or "evangelism"?

Now, how about the word "repent"? (do you get excited about repenting?)

This opening passage from Mark begins and ends with the proclamation of *good news*. Mark tells us, in the very first sentence, that this is the beginning of

the *good news*, and the passage concludes with Jesus inviting people to change their mind (that's what repent means) and believe *the good news*. The phrase "good news" in English is the Greek word "evangel" which is also translated as "gospel." It means "good news." Literally, "good message," or "good announcement."

So, a question before us this morning is: is the gospel good news to you, and to me? Or is it some other kind of news? For some, it's just boring. Ho hum. If you've heard it once, you've heard it a thousand times.

It's easy to miss, but all of the gospels of the New Testament begin this way, as an announcement of good news. And I wonder... how did it end up becoming such bad news to people?

In Mark's gospel, Jesus is making a strong statement, from the very start of his public ministry, that the gospel is going to be good news, for *anyone* who wishes to receive it. God's love is deep and wide (to quote an old Young Life song!).

This announcement of *good news for all* starts at Christmas (we rely on Luke and Matthew for this part of the life of Jesus). Who did God appear to when the good news of his birth was announced? Outsiders. You know the story from Luke 2: And there were in the region what? Preachers preparing their sermons by

night? Religious people attending services by night? No! There were shepherds watching their flocks by night. Outsiders.

And the angel of the Lord appeared to them, and they were sore afraid. But the angel said, fear not, for behold I bring you *good news* of *great joy* which shall be for who? A select few people? People who have it all together? No! For *all* people.

In each of the gospels, the good news that is proclaimed is good news for all. And it continues to be good news, and needs to be heard and lived out as good news for us, and for a weary world that is desperate to know that there is hope, and that they are loved.

So, what is the good news? Just from this morning's reading of Mark, here are two important things that make it clear that the gospel good news.

1. This may be me just talking to myself, so please bear with me if that's true.

I nerd out on ecological and environmental things, and care deeply about those issues, so I've been reading Scripture with an ecological lens and these things are now popping out from the pages like never before. And they really popped as I was reflecting on our passage this morning.

With that in mind, the good news is that the gospel is down to earth. Literally. It is grounded in a real, tactile, sensual, fleshy world. In these few verses from Mark

there are references to river water, clothing from camels, a leather belt, a diet of locusts and wild honey (Yum! Gotta have something to dip the locusts in, right? A little sweet and savory, soft *and* crunchy...), there is a bird analogy, there is wilderness, and this curious comment about Jesus among wild beasts. Did you catch that? I'd like to know, were those beasts dangerous, or were they there as a comfort? I tend to think that they are a sign of Jesus, as a flesh and blood human, being in harmony with creation. Neither a threat nor a comfort, but rather, beasts and humans simply existing together in an earthy environment. Like it says in our prayer of praise from Psalm 36: "You save humans and animals alike, O God."

Mark is telling us that the gospel is down to earth. And in addition to these earthy parts of our passage this morning, we celebrate communion with earthy elements: bread, and juice. Gifts from the earth.

This is good news because it means that *our* down-to-earth existence is sacred. The gospel, the good news, the Kingdom of God, or whatever we call it, is not ethereal, philosophical, exclusively invisible, and only other-worldly. There are those elements present, but not to the exclusion of the physical and the real. Spirit is always tied to the material. They are not separate.

A few weeks ago I spoke with a friend who grew up in a church tradition that scolded you if you didn't believe certain very specific doctrines, and

especially if you didn't show up to church every Sunday and Wednesday night. Because, church was understood as the only place where you learned about God and experienced God. And he remembered the preacher saying, in response to people who would say that they felt just as close to God in the woods and the mountains and whatnot, "Jesus didn't come to save the trees and the rivers and mountains; he came to save souls, and souls are saved at church." And my friend grew up believing that too, and he himself said that to people if they would tell him they met God in nature and found their spirituality there.

Then, over the years, he began to see how many places in Scripture it talked about God speaking *through the created order*, through trees and mountains and rivers and animals, and he changed his mind (he repented!) and he started saying, "Actually, Jesus *did* come to save the forests and rivers and mountains too." God desires to renew creation just as much as God wants to renew human life. It's all part of the same salvation work/plan. Read Romans 8, and Ephesians 1, and Colossians 1. And even in Revelation, at the end of the book, it says that there was a renewed heaven and... a renewed *earth*. Which includes all of the created order.

What this tells us is that our human existence matters, in all its materiality. And, our treatment of the wild beasts and the wilderness and the forests and the

oceans, and so forth, matters. But because Christians, largely, have built a theology that separates salvation and spirituality from the earth, the earth has been exploited and abused and, ironically, it's killing us, body and soul—along with a lot of other natural life. That isn't good news to me. Where the earth exists only as a storehouse of resources for humans to extract for our consumption, and Jesus' salvation only takes the soul to an ethereal heaven when we die.

Personally, I feel God's salvation when my hands are covered with dirt and I smell like outside, as my kids used to say. Because I think that's how Jesus looked and smelled. He sure smelled like outside at his birth, right?

So, this is the good news: God cares about every aspect of our down-to-earth existence, and we are created and redeemed to live in harmony with it.

2. The good news is the reminder that we are beloved. The good news, from the beginning, is hearing and knowing that we are God's beloveds, and living into that identity, that truth.

For some people, when we talk about being beloved it sounds like squishy sentimental let's-just-give-each-other-a-big-hug kind of love. Indeed, God's love *is*

gentle and kind; *and*, it's also strong, fierce, just, and an essential part of our identity.

It's so important that we know we're beloved, like Jesus needed to hear it and know it from the start, because God needs people in the world who will speak and act from a place of belovedness and peacefulness and joy, rather than from a place of cranky criticism. People aren't changed by outrage or angry activism. And people certainly *don't hear good news* from that type of speaking and acting. People are changed by kindness, by listening, by grace, and peacefulness, and an example that looks different from what they expect and experience. In other words, by love. We are called to be good news people ("how lovely on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news..." Not, who bring condemnation, etc.). And we become good news people by receiving the good news of our belovedness.

That's why there is a shift from John's baptism to Jesus' baptism—from a baptism solely focused on repentance, to a baptism of Spirit, where the love of God washes over people.

This is why, in Acts 19, as the early church is beginning to take shape and minister to the people, there is an important shift from the baptism of John—which was only a baptism of repentance—to baptism *in the name of Jesus*—a

baptism of belovedness, where it is affirmed that people are beloved children of God. Repentance—a change of mind—is still needed. But it isn't the last word.

Love is the universal language of the human being. That's why we are told about Jesus' baptism, and these words of blessing spoken over him, at the beginning of every gospel. Because Jesus stands there in the river, *in our stead*, as a representative human being, to hear these words on our behalf, so we may then claim them as our own: "You are my beloved daughter; with you I am well pleased." "You are my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased."

That's where we begin in our understanding of who we are. That we, with Jesus, are a beloved child. For years, decades, the message we received has been: "Original sin! You're a sinner." That's what we've been told is our identity, our baseline for existence. And I'd like to ask, how has that worked for us? And for the world? My Bible begins with Genesis 1, not Genesis 3. It begins with a creation that God called good, and human beings that God called *very good*.

It doesn't mean we don't have areas in our life where we struggle, where the image of God in us might have been shrouded or denied and we feel less than what we could be. It simply means that sin and struggle *do not define us*. That isn't who we ARE. Who we are, our baseline understanding of who we are, is: beloved child of God.

This is so important, I can't emphasize it enough: we can't start a spiritual journey on a negative foundation. If we just seek God out of fear or guilt or shame (which is often the legacy of we've called original sin), we won't go very far. If we start negative, we stay negative. We have to begin positive—by a wonderful experience, by something that's larger than life, by something that dips us into the depths of God's love, and of our own being. That's what the word baptism means, literally, "to be dipped into." So, we must begin as beloved; or begin *again* as beloved. If we begin with "I'm a wretch, a sinner," then even the words of affirmation and identity can fall on deaf ears because the negativity of God's apparent anger or displeasure, is difficult to get past.

This is why, historically, the given gospel reading after Christmas and Epiphany every year is about the baptism of Jesus, and the affirmation of God's love for the world. To begin, or begin again, as beloved in the new year. To be dipped into the depths of love and life.

Jesus was dipped in this mystery of life (a down-to-earth life) and love. That's where it all begins—even for him! The unique Son of God had to hear it with his own ears, and then... he couldn't be stopped! Then he has rich teachings

to give and loving work to do for the next three years, because he was grounded in his own identity, and his own life's purpose.

So, we begin as down-to-earth beloveds. Please take a few moments each day this week and rehearse this truth: I am God's son, I am God's daughter, God's beloved, with me God is well-pleased. I know this is hard to believe. It takes work to believe it. We work hard at being good, or being better, or being self-made, or being... something. But what we, and all people, need to put our energy into, primarily, is being beloved. The rest will then take care of itself. If we can begin, and begin again on a positive foundation, positive results will follow.

Communion: earthy elements for earthy people; sacred and beloved. Let's rejoice together! Let's sing, I Come with Joy.