

“Good News”

A sermon by

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Sunday, December 6, 2020

TEXTS: Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8

Isaiah 40:1-11 a

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,' " John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He 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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

We all want good news. We hate bad news. I recently found a good news-bad news site that was written for pastors. Here goes:

Good News: You baptized seven people today in the river.

Bad News: You lost two of them in the swift current.

Good News: The Women's Association voted to send you a get-well card.

Bad News: The vote passed by 31-30.

Good News: The Session accepted your job description the way you wrote it.

Bad News: They were so inspired by it, they also formed a search committee to find somebody capable of filling the position.

Good News: You finally found a choir director who approaches things exactly the way you do.

Bad News: The choir mutinied.

Good News: Mrs. Jones is wild about your sermons.

Bad News: Mrs. Jones is also wild about the "Real Housewives of Atlanta", "Pee Wee's Big Adventure" and "The Texas Chain Saw Massacre."

Good News: Your women's softball team finally won a game.

Bad News: They beat your men's softball team.

Good News: Church attendance rose dramatically the last three weeks.

Bad News: You were on vacation.

Bad News: Your elders want to send you to the Holy Land.

Bad News: They are stalling until the next war.

With the twenty-four-hour news cycle, we are used to getting good news, bad news, fake news, and real news in record time. It has not always been that way. When news was delivered in print form rather than via the air waves or digital media, it took a significant event to reset the presses. Newspapers would print extra editions, then send their newsboys to the street to sound the alarm. The classic example is Harry Truman holding the front page of the Chicago Daily Tribune aloft with the banner headline, "Dewey Defeats Truman."

Today we gather to consider just Good News. So acclimated are we to the Christmas narratives that come from the Gospels of Luke and Matthew that we miss the impact of Mark's opening verses. Shepherds, angels, grouchy inn keepers and Wise Men are such a part of our Christmas tableau that we miss the cosmic significance of Mark's opening lines.

Mark's is the first gospel. Mark is alone in this type of forth-telling. No other Gospel begins like this one. There is no genealogy as in Matthew. There is no lead-in of angel visits and prophetic utterances as in Luke.

Mark begins with a title or a declaration of what is to follow. The words that will follow are a declaration, they are news and the news is good. This is *"the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."*

Mark pulls no punches. Mark leaves nothing to doubt or interpretation. He is declaring that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, the Christ in the Greek language, and that this Jesus, this Messiah, is the Son of God.

"Gospel" is not a New Testament word. It comes with a lot of meaning and significance out of the Old Testament. In fact, you heard the word in the Old Testament reading from Isaiah 40 this morning. Those in the early church were reading the Septuagint, the Old Testament translated into the Greek language. This morning you heard the words from Isaiah 40:9, *"Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God.'"*

Everywhere that you heard the words "good tidings," substitute the words "gospel." Mark is well aware that when his readers heard the Greek word "gospel" or *euangelion* in the first sentence of his writings, they would hear as a subtext or underlying theme, the words of Isaiah announcing that God is coming to liberate, save and return the people of Israel to their home.

Now, those words of Mark's are meant to declare, like the words of Isaiah, good tidings of great joy. The arrival of Jesus Christ is the same kind of proclamation: *"Go up to a high mountain, people of God. Lift up your voice with strength, O people of God. Lift it up and do not fear. Proclaim to the world: "Behold, Jesus the Messiah is God."*

There is a popular saying that no news is good news. That is not always true. You see, there is a 400 year silence between the Old Testament and the New Testament. No prophet was heard in Israel within those four centuries. Imagine! The American Civil War began only 159 years ago. The American Revolution began 244 years ago. The only historical comparison for us is the founding of the Jamestown Colony in 1607. That was 413 years ago.

Imagine four hundred years of silence from God. Imagine that there is no one who speaks for God, no one who dares to say, "Thus says the Lord." Israel has entered a wilderness of silence. Religion goes on. The nation experiences its ups and downs, but there is no mouthpiece for God.

Silence! Total, deafening silence! The people pray. No one answers. Through Greek and Roman invasion, the people plead for Messiah to come. Nothing! It is as if a vacuum exists beyond the earthly realm that sucks their prayers into oblivion. Silence!

In verse 2, Mark's narrative begins. Mark connects the beginning of the Gospel in the present with Israel's prophetic past, *As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"*

We might have been happier with a Presbyterian, but God sent a Baptist . . . John the Baptist, specifically. The wilderness of silence is ended! God speaks again and the people willingly hear God's voice. The call is to repentance. The call is for forgiveness of sins. The call is to be baptized.

It is a call for a change of direction. It is the cry of one who wants people to be prepared to meet God. It is the voice of one crying in the wilderness where there are so many, varied voices crying, "Pay attention to me! Listen to me! Hear what I have to say!"

Yet only one thing is important.

John was not an attractive person. He lived on the fringes of society. He didn't come into the city to get converts or to declare his message. He dressed funny. He ate weird food. He likely had the smell of the desert and the Jordan River about him. Yet, his reputation drew people to him. They streamed from the Judean countryside. They came from the city of Jerusalem.

What drew them? What was the attraction? Why did they come? I believe they came because they were hungry for a fresh word from God. I believe they came because they craved good news. I trust that they came because there was a sense of expectation that had been birthed through those centuries of silence.

What would God say?

Do we have that same sense of expectation? Are we awaiting a word from God? Do we really wish to hear what God has to say to us?

And what would John the Baptist say to us if he were to speak to us today? He would probably say the same things he said then. John appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. We can all agree on that. That is what Scripture says.

The larger question, though, is what Scripture means when it says this. Some people read this and immediately read that repentance is required so that one may be forgiven . . . repentance and then baptism. However, there may be another possibility, one that fits well with our Reformed understanding of who God is and how God acts. It is the understanding I prefer and it all comes down to one little preposition and how you translate it.

The word is the Greek preposition *eis*. The New Revised Standard Version as well as most other translations read, “*John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance **for** the forgiveness of sins.*” Now imagine a “wanted” poster from the Old West. You see it tacked to the side of a building. It reads “Wanted---Jesse James for bank robbery.’

In reality, you could read that sign two ways. The first way, you could read it that Jesse James is wanted for bank robberies he has already committed. However, you could read it that Jesse James is wanted for the purpose of committing future bank robberies, almost as a job advertisement. The question is this: Are the bank robberies in the past or in the future?

The same is true of this passage. Does John mean that baptism is the *means* to God’s forgiveness? That is, if I repent and am baptized, then I am forgiven in the future. If that is so, then baptism is actually the condition for forgiveness. I cannot be forgiven unless I have been baptized.

However, there is another way of looking at this passage. You see, that little preposition *eis* can be translated as “for,” as in the following translation: “*a baptism of repentance **for** the forgiveness of sins.*” But the preposition *eis* can also be translated as “into,” as in the following translation: “*a baptism of repentance **into** the forgiveness of sins.*” Looked at side by side, the theologies underlying those two different translations are worlds apart.

Mark calls this the *Good News* of Jesus Christ. How can it be good news if we have to clean ourselves up in order to be forgiven? Where is the grace in that? Where does mercy reside in that message? If you read this passage about John the Baptist in the context of those opening lines of Mark’s prologue, it is only possible that John is calling people to turn from their disobedience and to be immersed as a sign of this new reality because God has already forgiven them.

They are being baptized into a forgiveness that is already there; and the One who is coming after John will make this abundantly and amazingly clear. The one who comes will not only be the ground of this forgiveness offered by God. He, Jesus, will immerse people in the Holy Spirit, the ongoing, eternal life of God!

When I give the Assurance of Pardon from the baptismal font, I often ask you to remember your baptism. For many of us, our baptism occurred beyond conscious memory. I was an infant when I was baptized. I cannot remember the event at all. However, I can remember the significance of the event. I can remember that this is a sign that God extends God’s forgiveness to me as a child of believing parents even before I know that there is a God.

John Calvin wrestled with the relationship between baptism, repentance and forgiveness as much as any of the Reformers. He writes, “Repentance is not placed first, as some ignorantly suppose, as if it were the ground of the forgiveness of sins, or as if it induced God to be gracious to us; but [we] are commanded to repent, that [we] may receive the reconciliation which is offered to [us].”

This is the beginning of Good News. Jesus the Christ, the Son of God has come. In Jesus we are offered and shown the forgiveness of God to which we must respond. Forgiveness comes first. Repentance should follow. Baptism seals God's disposition to us and is a sign for us that we may always remember God's grace, given before we ask, shown before we realize our need.

There is a Spanish story of a father and son who had become estranged. The son ran away, and the father set off to find him. He searched for months to no avail. Finally, in a last desperate effort to find him, the father put an ad in a Madrid newspaper. The ad read: "Dear Paco, meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Your Father." On Saturday 800 Pacos showed up, looking for forgiveness and love from their fathers. (*Bits & Pieces*, October 15, 1992, pp. 13)

This is the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.' The Lord is coming. He comes to make forgiveness possible by His death and resurrection. He comes to declare God's peace and reconciliation. He comes to say, "I love you. Your Father."

This is Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. This is where Good News begins.

Soli Deo Gloria. To God alone be the glory.

Amen.