

“Good News”

Introduction: As we have just heard, Mark begins his account of the life of Jesus with the phrase, “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah . . .” On the surface, this might seem like a pretty vanilla way to begin to document the life of this remarkable character Jesus, sort of on the order of “once upon a time in a land far away . . .” But in actual fact, with the use of the term “good news” (or “gospel,” as it can be translated), Mark was announcing a life changing, mind-bending event that had taken place in space and time and history.

“Good news,” in Mark’s first century world, meant “news that brings joy.” It was news of some significant event that changed things in a meaningful way. So, for instance, the term was used to describe the celebration of the birthday of the Roman emperor, who was considered to be a divine figure; many believed he would change the world. Such a celebration was probably not unlike the feeling we sometimes have at the inauguration of a new governor or president. His coming to power, we think, will change everything. It’s “good news.”

But as the biblical writers often do, Mark takes a word which everyone in his day would have understood and redefines it. In effect he says the really joyful tidings, the truly good news, the real historical event that introduces a new situation for the world happened in the birth of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.

Good news is different, as Tim Keller points out, from good advice. Advice gives you something to do; good news reveals something that has been done for you. The essence of the major religions of the world is good advice. It tells you how to live in order to be accepted by their deity. The essence of Christianity is good news. It tells us what God, the Creator of the universe, has done in history to redeem and restore the world. Yes, Christianity gives us direction on how to live, but only after we understand, and in response to, what God has done for us.

So, before the generation that served as eyewitnesses to all that Jesus did died out, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John recorded this good news for all, that we might come to know the depth of God’s love for us, and live from it. Mark begins by directing our attention to the fact that the arrival of Jesus was not out of the blue, but was the final chapter in a very large story, one which provides us with the important context for this Christmas good news.

I. The Context of Christmas in the Story of Israel

A. The story begins with a world in which God gave human beings everything they needed, not least of which were relationships with him, with one another, and with the created order, that were whole and healthy. But very quickly the human race determined it was better to do its own thing, to be its own king and follow its own will. This way of self-centeredness bled into every relationship they had, with God, with each other, and with their environment. The story went from bad to worse as very soon, this rebellion (Ge. 3) turned to the first murder (Ge. 4), then to widespread violence (Ge. 6), and finally to the construction of a city, the center of which contained what became known as the Tower of Babel (Ge. 11). Through this tower, the human race desired to make a name for itself. As Tom Wright reflects on Genesis 11, he can almost hear God saying, with both amusement and sadness, as he looks our over what his people have done and the direction they’ve taken, “Oh, so you’ve built a tower, have you? Whatever will you think of next?” Arrogant and prideful, and thus highly dangerous to themselves, God confuses their language and scatters them across the face of the earth, for their own good.

B. Importantly, God does not give up on them, or on his creation project. For in Genesis 12 we see God calling a man named Abraham, out of pagan, idolatrous background, and making some spectacular promises to him: “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Ge. 12:1-3). Abraham and his descendants were to be the lynchpin, the means of God’s blueprint to redeem and restore a world that had gone the way of selfishness and injustice, broken lives and broken hearts.

Illustration: That we need such a blueprint sadly becomes clear over and over again, the most recent display being the events that have taken place in Ferguson, Staten Island, and Cleveland. Whatever you might think of the various decisions and facts of the cases, at the core they all reveal the deep brokenness in our world that exists on so many levels, from family, to neighborhood, to authority, to race. We desperately need someone from outside of ourselves to save us from ourselves.

C. God’s promise to Abraham reveals God’s intention to do exactly that. Called a “covenant,” God made a rock-solid commitment through which he bound himself to his plan and his people. His people, however, were not always so committed. Page after page of the OT reveals just how far Abraham and his descendants, known as the people of Israel, chose to wander. Chosen to reflect God’s image to the people around them, revealing God’s life-giving will and way, they continued to be enamored with their own will and way. But it didn’t throw God off his stride for God acted through this covenant people, from within them, to complete his rescue operation. Coming from Israel, a descendant of David, their greatest king, would fulfill and complete what God had begun in this people. As the son of David he would come from us so that he could know us. As the Son of God, he would come from outside us so that he could rescue us. This anointed one, the Messiah, would be the One through whom all peoples on earth would be blessed and God’s shalom, or well-being would come.

II. Three Desperate Situations

A. Now, you may be saying, “I don’t see this at all in Mark 1:1-8!” Well, Mark summarizes this story through three quick OT references, all of which he attributes to Isaiah in a kind of shorthand way. The references come from three significant, and desperate, situations in the history of God’s people.

1. The first is from the Exodus event: “I will send my messenger ahead of you” (Ex. 23:20). There, God’s people found themselves in the wilderness of Sinai, having just crossed the Red Sea, escaping the clutches of the onrushing Egyptian army. God’s promise was to lead them out of the wilderness and into the Promised Land.

2. The second is from the Exile in Babylon. “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight paths for him’” (Isa. 40:3). Having disobeyed and rejected God thoroughly, he gave his people over to foreign invaders who had taken them captive. But, though banished from the land of promise, God had not forgotten his promise. He promised to bring them back from exile.

3. The third Mark draws from the Second Temple period and the prophet Malachi, who recorded this message from God: “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come” (Mal. 3:1). God’s people had returned to the land of promise from exile,

but things were not as glorious as they had expected. The temple had been rebuilt, but it was only a shadow of its former self. As far as they could see, God hadn't returned to this temple, and although home, they were not much more than an insignificant tribe that was still dominated by various pagan empires. Prior to the birth of Jesus, and for about 400 years, there had been no prophetic word from God. Though physically not in the wilderness, it certainly felt they were still in exile.

III. A Voice in the Wilderness

A. It is into this wilderness, into the need for rescue and restoration and renewal, a voice comes. It is the voice of John the Baptist who Mark identifies as the long awaited messenger. Dressed like a prophet, looking an awful lot like the prophet Elijah, to be exact, the people get the sense that something new and dramatic and life-changing is taking place. God is speaking again and gospel, good news, is being announced. People stream out into the wilderness where this messenger is holding court. The King himself is coming, John announces. "Here is your God!" (Isa. 40:9). "He has come to restore your relationship with him, with one another, and with his created order." "What's more," John reveals, "he is bringing the gift and power of the Holy Spirit with him so that your hearts can be renovated and you can live and serve and reflect him in all that you do." In other words, God is coming to lead his people out of the wilderness. In Jesus, he is coming to fulfill his covenant promise to Abraham, so get ready to meet and receive him.

B. God, Mark wants us to know right up front, is faithful to his promises. The good news, the "gospel," is that God has done something life-changing for us. In Jesus he has come to rescue and redeem and restore the world. In Jesus, God has come to fulfill, to complete, the Story of Israel which had begun with his covenant promise to Abraham. Importantly, the good news isn't for spectators. You have to enter in and participate if you want to be brought out of the darkness of the wilderness and into the beauty and goodness and justice and loving-kindness of the kingdom of God. That entering in, John's message states upfront, comes through repentance. Repentance is an acknowledgement and a turning away from the self-centeredness that has been a part of the human condition since our original rebellion in the Garden, and a turning toward the loving and healing purposes and way of God. It is one-time act, through which we enter this realm of God's love, and it is a daily action, through which we continue to tune our hearts away from ourselves and toward the life that is truly life as found in and through the life of Jesus.

In a graphic image, Isaiah calls it road construction, referring to the way an ancient people prepared their city for the arrival of a king. If our relationship with God is to have a clear path, we need to raise up the valleys, bring down the mountains, and smooth out the rugged places. Repentance is the bulldozer which does just that. It covers over the self-centeredness, brings down the pride, and smoothes out the unrighteousness so that God can drive into our hearts to remake and restore us, and we can drive into his and enjoy the depth of his love. Let's do so now as we go to his table together.