

“The Good News of God’s Faithfulness”

Introduction: As we have just heard, Mark doesn’t begin his account of Jesus with angels singing, shepherds watching, or wise men searching. He begins it with what, on the surface, seems like a fairly drab statement: “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah . . .” It sort of seems like a “Once upon a time in a land far away” kind of beginning, and we may even feel ourselves beginning to stifle a yawn! But in fact, with the use of the term “good news,” Mark was actually seeking to wake his readers up.

For, in Mark’s first century world, “good news,” which literally means “gospel,” meant “news that brings great joy.” The term was used to describe some significant event that changed things in a meaningful, even dramatic way. So, for instance, a great military victory that changed the course of a war, or the birth of a king or the coronation of a new emperor were all described as “good news,” news that significantly, it was believed, changed the course of history.

Mark takes this word and applies it to Jesus. In effect he says, the really great news, the real ground-breaking, history-making, mind-bending, life-shaping event that had taken place in space and time and history took place in the arrival of this fellow Jesus. In Jesus, Mark was saying, building on the sentiment we heard in Isaiah last week, God has “torn open the heavens and come down” (Isa. 64:4). So, what makes this such good news?

I. Good News vs. Good Advice

A. As we think about this, it’s helpful to distinguish good news from good advice. The late Tim Keller often pointed this out. Advice, he says, gives you something to do, while news reveals that something has been done for you. The essence of the major religions in the world, he observes, is good advice. Such advice tells you how to live in order to be accepted by their deity. By contrast, 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. It tells us that God, in Christ, has accepted us. We don’t need to perform or earn something; we simply need to respond.

B. Furthermore, the good news isn’t just about looking back and recognizing that our sins have been forgiven so that we can look forward to being a part of God’s new creation when we die. That’s good news to be sure, but it’s only half of it. As Tish Harrison Warren puts it in her book, *Advent: The Season of Hope*, Christians believe not just in one coming of Jesus but in three. That is, she explains, Jesus comes not only in the past and not only in the future, but he comes to us in the present moment. He does this through the gift of the Spirit, Mark hints, when he includes the Holy Spirit as being a significant part of the good news about Jesus: “I baptize you with water,” John the Baptist explains, “but [Jesus] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (v. 8). With the Spirit comes the experience of God’s love and the power to live a new life, a life that comes to look increasingly more and more like the life of Jesus, whose image we have been made to live into. Jesus is what it looks like to be truly human.

Illustration: Think of it this way. Someone gives you what sounds like good advice about how to hit a golf ball, or love your child, or do your job. Maybe as an example they even include the story of some great person who has done this in order to inspire you. And initially, you may very well be inspired. But as time goes on, the burden of having to perform, and continuing to fall short, wears you down. It may even

cause you to give up. But if someone comes alongside you and helps you hit that ball, or love that child, or do that job, well, then, that's a whole different matter. Good advice, about what you must do in the present, only gets you so far. Good news, about what has been done for you and continues to be done for you, past, future, and present, keeps you moving forward, despite the challenges you'll encounter along the way. This is indeed good news of great joy!

## II. The Faithfulness of God

A. We can also see the goodness of the news, not only as we compare it to good advice, but also as we consider how it reveals the faithfulness of God. Mark somewhat subtly draws our attention to this with a handful of brief OT references, drawn from Exodus, Isaiah, and Malachi:

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"—"a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

The point is that the coming of Jesus at what we call Christmas was not something that happened out of the blue, but was the final chapter in a much larger story. We could in fact say that the story of Christmas actually begins long before even the prophets with the story of creation. An older carol captures it well:

Angels through the realms glory, Wing your flight o'er all the earth.  
Ye who sang creation's story, Now proclaim Messiah's birth.

However creation happened, however it was "sung" into being, the account in Genesis reveals the goodness of God, a goodness God has stitched into the very fabric of the world. It reveals that God gave human beings everything we needed to live well, not the least of which were relationships with him, with one another, and with the beauty and fruitfulness of the created order. In the beginning, everything was right with everything else. Creation was designed to sustain us, people were designed to take care of each other, and our relationship with God was designed to bless us.

But then, sadly, it became all about us. We wanted to be in charge so that creation and everyone in it could be used for our benefit. The tag line for Burger King: "At BK, have it your way; you rule!" was as appropriate a description of human nature then as it is now! We want to rule, to have the world run our way, not God's way. And so soon, as the early chapters of Genesis narrate it, this rebellion against God turned into the first murder, then to widespread violence, and finally to the construction of a city designed by mankind to glorify them. It's not difficult to see how corruption, injustice, oppression, racism, sexism, slavery, etc. would begin to follow.

Gratefully, the goodness of his creation, including us, was not something God was willing to scrap. It was, in his mind, worth redeeming and restoring. His restoration project began, fascinatingly enough, by calling a man named Abraham out of his pagan, idolatrous background, promising to make his descendants into a great nation, and declaring that through them the nations of the world would be blessed. However, God's people Israel struggled, and spent much of their time wandering and rebelling until things got so bad that God gave them over into exile.

Yet, God still did not scrap his restoration project. Remarkably, God comforted his people with his amazing forgiveness and led them, through the wilderness, home from exile. In the process, he revealed that his restoration project to bless the world was still ongoing and would be completed by a particular

descendant of Israel, as our opening psalm explains (89:1-4). This Messiah, or anointed rescuer, would come from the line of David, Israel's greatest king, and he would rule forever. That his coming was getting close was announced by a fellow named John, known as the Baptist, who went back out into the wilderness to prepare the way for this King and Lord, calling those who came to hear him preach to work the bulldozer of repentance in their lives, bringing down their high peaks of pride, filling in their valleys of selfishness, and making the rugged and rough places of envy and greed into level ground.

### III. In the Wilderness

A. So, if the good news takes us back to creation, it makes stops along the way in the wilderness. It's the location Mark makes note of in his account of the good news:

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"—"a voice of one calling *in the wilderness*, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

Physically, the wilderness is an incredibly inhospitable place. It's a tough and desolate and forlorn territory. It's often found in the Bible as a metaphor, spiritually, for all that is overwhelming and fear producing in our life. It stands for that which makes us feel helpless and alone. It's the place we find ourselves when we've come to the end of ourselves, when we find that what we've trusted in as our savior and rescuer cannot come through. It's a place Israel went back and forth in and where Jesus was driven to by the Spirit. Thus, it's a place of formation, a place where we cry out, "Restore us, O God," and a place where God often meets us.

B. The three events that Mark refers to with these OT references are the Exodus, when God rescued his people from slavery and led them through the wilderness into the Promised Land; the return from exile, when God led them back to the Promised Land, through the wilderness; and the Second Temple period when, though now back in the land, God's people find themselves still feeling like they're in the wilderness because nothing was like the way it had been, not their holy city, not their Temple, not their influence in the world.

C. Now, John is out in the wilderness and the good news he brought there was that the faithfulness of God is great; it's beyond measure! That over the centuries God had hung in there with his people, even when and especially when they had not hung in there with him. Christmas reveals that God had not scrapped his world but thought it, not only worth visiting, but also worth rescuing.

That good news is way better than good advice! It's news that displays the faithfulness of God who meets us in the wilderness of our lives and desires to make us truly human, as well as to lead us home.

As we will sing:

Son of God of humble birth, beautiful the story

Praise His name in all the earth, hail the King of glory!