

Advent 2B
Peace, Seattle
December 10, 2017
Mark 1:1-8, Isaiah 40:1-11

WHICH GOOD NEWS PREVAILS?

Last week we began Advent and the new church year with an excerpt from Mark's 13th chapter. This week, we go back to the beginning of his gospel, where we meet John the Baptist on the edge of the wilderness.

But before we go to John, I want to linger with you on the opening verse of Mark's gospel. It reads: THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD.

I want to linger here because, while on the surface this verse seems totally perfunctory and inconsequential, it's actually loaded with clues telling us what Mark's narrative of Jesus is about. But to understand what Mark is up to here we must set this verse into its first century context.

So let's spend some time unpacking "THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD."

On two large stones in the market place of the ancient town of Priene, Turkey, an inscription was found dating to the year 9 AD. This inscription proclaims the birth year of Caesar Augustus to be the beginning of a new era and the starting point for a new calendar.

What's striking about this inscription is the language it uses in referring to Augustus—words like SAVIOR, BENEFactor OF HUMANKIND, and THE GOSPEL OF DIVINE AUGUSTUS are carved into the stone.

"Gospel" was a word generally used by Rome to announce that victory had been won in battle. In the inscription, the word "gospel" or "good news" is used to announce the kingdom of Augustus, a kingdom that heralds peace and salvation for all the known world.¹

When we place this announcement inscription alongside the opening verse of Mark's gospel, it becomes clear what Mark is up to. Mark uses the same word found in the Priene Inscription "GOSPEL"—to declare that the story he's about to tell, the story of Jesus of Nazareth, is the REAL DEAL, the REAL GOOD NEWS...

But the Good News story Mark's about to tell has nothing to do with Rome or with the so-called divine Augustus. Mark's Good News story is instead a declaration that Jesus is the Christos—the Messiah, the true Son of God and Savior of the world.

As the true Son of God, Jesus offers the world a version of Good News no Roman emperor could ever hope to offer or bring to pass. Mark's purpose is to tell the good news of Jesus in such a way that it will be compelling and plausible to Jews and Romans alike.²

It's all there—packed into that single opening sentence:

THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD.

¹ For a detailed article on the Priene Calendar Inscription, see Craig A. Evans, *Mark's Incipit and the Priene Calendar Inscription*. *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 1:67-81. http://www.jgrchj.net/volume1/JGRChJ1-5_Evans.pdf

² Ibid.

Mark then takes us straight to the wilderness and to a solitary voice who, echoing Isaiah, cries:
PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD—MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT!

The voice belongs to John the Baptizer, and he's quite a character, this John. His body, his diet, his clothing, his message—all are pared down to their most basic elements.

John has one reason for being: to prepare the way for the Son of God. His job is to root out sin, and bulldoze a straight path before the Lord. Nothing else matters—not even his own survival.

John is a throw back to the prophets of old. But who in their right mind spends time in the desert anymore? All the shakers and movers are up in Jerusalem. That's where the true leaders are, not frying their minds out in the desert.

Yet, Mark tells us, something uncanny is happening around this man John. The words he hurls into the pale desert sky cannot be written off; his ritual of confession and washing cannot be ignored.

People are coming from all over to see him, and while many are intrigued and some merely curious, most are sincere. They want to come clean; they want to turn, they want to believe that there's more to life than what they've known; that the God of Israel is more than a historical footnote.

And they sense in John the embodiment of Isaiah's prophecy:

"IN THE WILDERNESS PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE STRAIGHT IN THE DESERT A HIGHWAY FOR OUR GOD."

The first time Israel heard these words was after 80-years of exile in Babylon, five centuries before.
COMFORT! O COMFORT MY PEOPLE, sang the prophet.

The Good News then was that after all those years of captivity the Lord God was going to lead them back to the promised land. Israel was going home.

Mark quotes Isaiah because he wants his readers—wants us—to know that the God who liberated Israel from exile THEN, is about to do a new thing NOW—build a new highway, forge a new bridge between heaven and Earth, God and humanity, once and for all.

What's good about this news, Mark says, is that God is ALL IN. God himself is coming to town, not in the guise of a Caesar, nor with the arms of a well-provisioned warrior, but—crazy as it seems—as a teacher and healer named Jesus.

Friends, one glance at today's headlines tells us that the bridge God determined to build in Jesus is still under construction. That God's dream of unity, of redemption, of SHALOM is still not complete.

Our longing for the completion of God's promise is much of what this season is about. COME LORD JESUS! we pray. MAKE US WHOLE—HEAL OUR WOUNDS, BRING YOUR JUSTICE!

Our pray grows ever more earnest when the voices of fake benefactors, of charlatans and pretenders crow louder than ever. These would-be messiahs each offer their own prescriptions for a path to peace and prosperity, a path, they insist, that will benefit us all if only we put our trust in them.

But we know too much to let ourselves be taken.

So while we pray COME LORD JESUS! we also steel ourselves against lies that masquerade as truth. We pledge our feet to march to the beat of a different drum; we commit ourselves to follow in his way, and not to be swayed by marketers of greed and violence, the violation of nature and the fear of the other.

Mark's opening line, THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD, you see, is an invitation to cast our lot with him. To place our hands, our lives, in his, trusting that come hell or high water, come famine or wildfire, he will not let us go or leave us orphaned.

Friends, this is the real news and true gospel that greets us today, as relevant now as it was when mark first penned it.

During a tax revolt against Roman Emperor Theodosius in the fourth century, the anger of the citizens of Antioch spilled out as they pulled down statues dedicated to the imperial family. Their act against state sponsored religion was a direct challenge to the imperial cult, and they lived in terror of the fire and fury that would be unleashed upon them by the emperor.

During the uprisings, John Chrysostom, preaching to the Jesus-followers there, reminding them that true power was not to be found in statues nor in the imperial shock troops. True power was built on the virtues practiced by the people every day: prudence justice, courage, temperance.

"The waters have risen and severe storms are upon us," preached Chrysostom, "but we do not fear drowning for we stand firmly upon a rock... Let the sea rage—it cannot break the rock! Let the waves rise, they cannot sink the boat of Jesus."³

Where are your feet planted? Where is your hope founded? How will we live in these times when the waters rise and storms threaten? How will we act as we await the completion of that bridge to wholeness which God in Jesus is still constructing?

The times in which we live are vulnerable times. In fact, says author Peter Block "Living in the vulnerable present, amid our uncertain future is now our permanent condition." Well, how are we to negotiate that kind of vulnerability, that kind of waiting?

Henry Nouwen writes:

Waiting as a disciple of Jesus is not an empty waiting... We wait... in the conviction that we have already seen God's footsteps... As we wait we remember him for whom we are waiting, and as we remember him we create a community ready to welcome him when he comes.⁴

The Meal we share is an emblem of that waiting. It feeds our hope, it nourishes our community. It shapes our callings in the world as we encounter it now, and as we trust, in Jesus, it will become.

AMEN.

³ Quoted by Rose Marie Berger in *Sojourners*, November 2017, p. 31

⁴ *Bread for the Journey*