

Good News (A Sermon for Advent 2A)

St. Mary's Episcopal Church (Cypress, Texas)

Mark 1:1-8

December 10, 2018

The Gospel writer Mark wastes no time telling us what his story is about. The very first words of his account of the Gospel proclaim, without hesitation, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

Matthew begins with a genealogy linking Jesus back to Abraham. Luke begins with a short address about his research methodology. John begins with a mysterious poem about creation. But Mark just hits the ground running and never looks back.

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

Now, Mark's Gospel tends to hurdle from one scene to the next. Everything happens immediately after everything else. The fast pace of this sixteen chapter account of the Gospel just makes me want to keep reading and get to the end as quickly as Mark seems to want me to. It's like binge watching, biblically.

But if we did such a binge reading, we'd miss the depth packed into this story. So with this in mind and because Advent is upon us, let's slow down for a few minutes and really digest this first verse: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

In today's world, when we hear the term “good news,” the two words are usually embedded in the sentence: “Well, I've got some good news and some bad news.” We've all used this conversational staple.

“The good news is the rest of this week will be lovely; the bad news is next week we're in for rain.”

“The good news is no one was seriously hurt in the accident; the bad news is the car was totaled.”

“The good news is I found the recipe; the bad news is we’re out of eggs.”

In meetings, around kitchen tables, on the bus, we use the words “good news” to talk about the sometimes funny, sometimes bland, sometimes serious details of our lives. These two words are so ordinary, so normal.

Because they sound so common, I wonder how we encounter the words “good news” when we hear them right at the beginning of Mark’s Gospel. Perhaps Mark is really excited about the story he’s going to tell. Perhaps Mark is employing a specific term that Jesus’ himself - or his first followers - used to describe his message.

Either way, Mark is almost certainly doing something that we 21st century folks would surely miss entirely because of our modern understanding of “good news.”

You see, in the first century Roman Empire, when Israel was an occupied region, the term “good news” had a special meaning. The word was used almost exclusively for propaganda about the empire, and usually about the Roman emperor himself.

“Good News: the Emperor won a victory in Gaul!”

“Good News: the Emperor’s wife has given birth to a strapping infant boy!”

“Good News: the Emperor has had another birthday!”

The Roman propaganda machine churned out these ancient press releases, and the military made sure people in the occupied countries celebrated the occasions. This was one small way that the Empire kept control of all that conquered land.

So when Jesus, and later Mark, proclaim their own “Good News,” they are purposely setting their story, their message, their view of who’s really in charge, squarely in the face of the Roman establishment.

The good news of the Empire was about power, and fear, and control. But Jesus’ triumph was accomplished through his Good News of welcome, healing, sacrifice, meals, and love.

The “Good News” which Jesus and his followers proclaim is a stark challenge to the ruling order of the day. Indeed, Mark shows his faith and his gutsiness in the simple act of writing those two rebellious words on the page.

Now let’s back up to the first two words in the verse: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

The beginning.

These two words seem completely innocuous. They obviously start the story. They’re on page one. They would have been at the top of the scroll in Mark’s day. So then why does Mark need to tell us that we are reading the beginning of the story when we are obviously reading the beginning of the story?

Perhaps Mark isn’t just stating the obvious. Perhaps this “beginning” is more than just an introduction. What if it’s a title, or sorts, for the entire story? Perhaps the “beginning” that Mark has in mind encompasses the entirety of his sixteen-chapter Gospel.

If the whole entire Gospel is the “beginning of the good news,” then the natural question becomes, “What is the middle and end of the good news?” And this is where followers of Jesus Christ down through the centuries come in.

Jesus lived the beginning of the Good News. Mark, along with Matthew, Luke, and John, wrote down the story of that beginning. And you and I are characters in the middle of that same story begun two thousand years ago. You and I are players in the unfolding drama of the Good News. You and I have taken up the narrative of the Gospel that God continues to tell in our lives.

As characters who have now appeared later in this same narrative, we have the opportunity to take up the same mission that Jesus championed.

This opening verse of Mark's Gospel invites us once again to read the prologue to our own lives as followers of Jesus Christ. This beginning of the Good News gives us - who live in the middle - our meaning and our purpose and the promise that we are part of the great story of God's mission to reconcile all creation back to God.

The Good News was a challenge in Jesus' day. And it still is in ours. But we're up for the challenge because once the Good News of Jesus Christ has lodged itself in your heart, you can't help but share it in your words and in your deeds and in your whole life.

Now, I'll end this sermon with some good news and some bad news. Which do you want first? The bad news. Sure. The bad news is there's still so much brokenness in this world, so many places where God's reconciling love seems so far away. The good news is that with God's help, we can challenge the ruling order of our day and bring the wholeness of this reconciliation to those broken places.

The good news is that we are the current characters living out the story begun in the Gospel.

The good news is that the story isn't over yet.

Amen.