

“The Good News Begins”
Mark 1:1-8
Sermon #81
Advent 2
39th Sunday in the COVID-19 Pandemic
12.6.20

Mark 1:1-8 CEB

1 The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, God’s Son,**2** happened just as it was written about in the prophecy of Isaiah:

Look, I am sending my messenger before you.

He will prepare your way,

3

a voice shouting in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way for the Lord;

make his paths straight.”

4 John the Baptist was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. **5** Everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and were being baptized by John as they confessed their sins. **6** John wore clothes made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. **7** He announced, “One stronger than I am is

coming after me. I'm not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals. **8** I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

The Word of the LORD. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I have been waiting a long time to say this, but I am so glad Mark is the focal point of all the Gospels for the new liturgical year. I've preached from Mark before since I've been here. But, the oldest Gospel is here to stay for a while and I'm looking forward to preaching from it through Christ the King Sunday 2021.

2020 has been full of bad news: COVID-19, 260k empty

Thanksgiving seats, domestic terrorists hiding behind hoods and swastikas carrying automatic weapons who murder civilians and law enforcement, a terrible political climate, families falling apart, joblessness, uninsured because of job loss, homeless because of job loss, people who are homeless EVEN THOUGH they work, addiction going through the roof because no one feels good and they need something to help them feel good, the War on Terror turning 19, raging climate disasters, and people saying their last goodbyes to their friends and family through Zoom or on the phone because they cannot see each other in person. All of this on top of years and years of hurt.

To say 2020 has inhaled profusely is an understatement.

And maybe we ask ourselves: Why would God allow such tragedy? How vile can people get? When will this end? Why can't we all get along?

Well, God's not to blame. We have no one to blame but ourselves for ignoring the good of humanity and seeking the good of only three people: I, Me, and My. Just when we think people can't go any lower, they do. Just when we think it can't get any worse, it does. Just when we think we've turned a corner on this mess, the corner only reveals more heartache, death, and lies.

In the three years since I first preached from Mark 1, maybe this Gospel-the oldest and shortest of the four-has impeccable timing.

It has come back for such a time as this. And Mark has so much Good News to tell us!

Mark, while full of Good News, is not free of danger. For our spiritual ancestors in the 1st century world hearing Mark at home or around a campfire, they are in danger of prison. Just in the first verse it proclaims Jesus Christ as God's Son. NOT CAESAR. And that will get a lot of people in trouble if they are caught reading the words found in this book. Yet, despite the threat of harassment, Mark comforts the readers with these words:

*The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ,
God's Son, happened just as it was written about in the prophecy of
Isaiah...*

These are words bring balm to a community that is poor, facing political tumult, false teachings, and war. And in these two verses, Mark reveals to us that time is precious, so he will not begin with a background or genealogy. Instead, he begins with the Good News of the coming Messiah who tells us to change our hearts and lives and to believe the Good News of God's love for a broken people. And if that Good News isn't enough Good News for the people in the 1st century world or for us, this Messiah will not baptize with water as John did, but with the Holy Spirit.

In a tumultuous time for our friends in the 1st century, Mark's opening words quoting the Prophet Isaiah are words that brought them encouragement. About 40 years after Jesus' resurrection,

Mark sets the stage for people to experience this story as if they were living pre-Easter.¹ He must get them right in the action of everything. Mark captures the audience's attention in the daily life of common people Jesus loved and served. Mark sets the people reading this Gospel to experience Jesus not as one who is gradually revealed to be the Messiah, but one who is already proclaimed as Messiah and LORD of the world. Just in these first eight verses, especially around John the Baptizer's ministry in the wilderness, Mark sets John as subordinate to Jesus. John is the messenger, Jesus Christ is God's Son. John will baptize with water. Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

In a world full of turmoil, uncertainty, war, harassment, and an evil empire that seems to have no end, the "beginning of the Good

¹ M. Eugene Boring. *Mark: A Commentary*. WJK Press: Louisville, 2006, p.33.

News about Jesus Christ, God's Son" is needed right then and there. No time to waste. When you are an impoverished subject of Rome living in remote places across a conquered land, hearing some Good News can encourage frightened people. Obviously, everyone benefits from the Good News. However, while it's hard enough to be a subject of the empire, being poor makes it worse.

Praise God, despite the challenges of the first century audience, they didn't have to look far for the Good News in Mark. It permeates every verse in every chapter of this Gospel. And Praise God, despite the challenges we face in 2020, we don't have far to look either!

On Monday, November 30, NPR published an article about one of the potential vaccines for COVID. In constant daily drops of bad news, seeing the title of an article that has the words “Good News” in it, I had to stop what I was doing and read it.²

Dr. Carlos del Rio, a vaccine scientist at Emory University in Atlanta, gives us some vital information about what to expect from this vital good news in what’s been a disastrous year. Like the shingles vaccine, people who receive the vaccines for COVID will feel horrible for a day or two. And that’s normal because it means the vaccine and your body are doing their jobs. Dr. del Rio continues in the article that even when people are vaccinated, it will still take time to determine if it means the vaccine actually prevents infection. Being vaccinated doesn’t mean, at least for the moment,

²<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/11/30/940037920/more-good-news-for-modernas-covid-19-vaccine-candidate>

that one can simply walk around without a mask. But, at the very least, the upcoming vaccines can help prevent deaths. It's like this is the beginning of more good news to come. It may take time, but, like Mark's audience, we must be patient for more Good News to come.

Something else Dr. del Rio mentioned in the article. Yes, it's incredible that people on the frontlines of vaccine research have gone from having nothing to being on the verge of a vaccine in less than a year. Yes, there are still some more hoops to go through because testing and approvals are set in place for our protection. But, the most incredible statement happens at the end of the article.

"A vaccine that prevents people from getting sick, especially from getting critically ill? It's a great vaccine right now," del Rio says. With nearly 2,000 deaths per day, "My God, we really need this vaccine."³

"My God, we really need this vaccine."

Like our ancestors thousands of years ago, they needed to hear the Good News of God's love for a broken world. Under the oppressive thumb of the Emperor, living in extreme poverty, wondering if there is any good left, the ancient audience needed to hear that God's love was and is on the loose in our world. And God's love seeks us out and claims us. Mark knew that and because of the amazing power of the Holy Spirit, this Good News was written down in the

³ *ibid.*

oldest of the four Gospels. And this Good News is to be shared immediately.

Our world needs to hear the Good News of God's love for them.

Our world is desperate for it. And, as Mark fleshes out in his Gospel, the ball is in our court to share it. Through the Holy Spirit's power, it is our responsibility to share the Good News that has no end. In a world where 260k lives were lost due to negligence, where hate crimes continue to plague us, where war continues to threaten lives, where people struggle to make ends meet, we can echo Dr. del Rio and Mark by saying: "My God, we really need this Good News!"

Praise God this is only the beginning of the Good News! I'm confident that there's more to come not only regarding the fighting of COVID, but also of the Good News shared with us in Mark 1. The same Good News that has been present even before the world was created, that has been present through the prophets, that has been present through the life of Jesus Christ, God's Son, that is present right here and now, will continue to give us hope and encouragement in the future.

Beloved in Christ, believe this Good News!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Amen.