

Title: What's The Good News?

Text: Mark 1: 14 – 20

Date: January 21, 2018

We have the option of being in the gospel of Mark for the next few weeks, so this is a good time to lay a foundation to try and understand how he thinks. We also have the option of being with me for the next year, so this is a good time to lay a foundation and understand how I think.

Though we still have Christmas on our mind, Mark doesn't start with any of those old familiar Christmas stories. No star, no shepherd, no wise men. The story is set up with this wild John the Baptist and then - *bamm* – we begin with Jesus launching his ministry, and calling his first disciples.

If you have been hanging out on Christian street corners for a while this story is going to sound really familiar. At the same time, if we allow our racing minds to slow down, we've got to admit that this passage is full of some words and phrases that might we be hard pressed to define.

For example, *twice* in the first two verses we hear the well-known term "**good news.**" So what's the good news? I would be ever so curious to know how you would answer that question. It is really not a bad question. If someone stopped you on the street, and asked why you attend Shepherdstown Presbyterian, I would like to hope that you would have some good news to share. What is the "good news" about your personal faith? I wonder how you would articulate that.

If you were to ask many Christians what the "good news" of Jesus was, they would say it is that "Jesus died for my sins." But is that what is going on here? Did Jesus come to Galilee proclaiming, "*I've got good news! I'm gonna die!*"? I rather think it must have been something more than that. If it was only about Jesus, the perfect lamb of God, dying - we could have saved some time by just allowing the infant Jesus to be slaughtered by Herod with the rest of the infants. No, I suspect it must be something more.

One clue that there is something more than that comes in verse 14 where it highlighted that Jesus is "**proclaiming the good news of God,**" not the good news of Jesus. We are to "**believe in the good news.**" (v.15) So what is this good news?

Apparently this good news has something to do with "**the kingdom of God,**" but what is *that* all about? Many people these days talk about entering the "kingdom of God" as though they were talking about going to heaven, but that doesn't make sense here. It doesn't sound like Jesus is proclaiming the "good news" of going to heaven. After all, he seems to suggest that whatever this kingdom is, it has "**come near.**"

And since it *has* come near, it appears that the implication is that we are to "**repent.**" (v.15) What does *that* mean? Are we to feel bad that we have done naughty things? Are we to fess up, because the judgment is at hand?

So let me tell you how I read some of these words and phrases that we *think* we know so well.

We might find some clues by understanding Mark's grammar. When he says that "**the time is fulfilled,**" and "**the kingdom of God has come near,**" both of those verbs are in the perfect tense, meaning it has already happened, and its effect is ongoing in the present. So more than a warning of some cataclysmic event that is about to happen, understanding this correctly implies

that we need eyes to see something that has already happened, and its effect is continuing in the present.

If this then is the case, then “repent” does not have the sense of airing your dirty laundry before judgement. Rather than a moralistic sense of repenting, the invitation here is to change your way of thinking – to wrap your minds and imaginations around this new reality. And this is my invitation to you as well. I want to try and describe this kingdom of God, and want you to try to open your minds to this new way of seeing things. Repent!

As an interesting footnote, this phrase “**the kingdom of God**” is rare in the gospel of John, but an important concept for Mark and Luke. So it is worth our time grappling with.

I would invite you to think of the kingdom of God as that arena where the will of God has taken hold – where the power of God is being manifest. So in the spirit of Epiphany we might look around us and see where the power of God is being manifest in changed lives – both individually and communally. Where the presence of God is making a difference – where it can be seen – *that* is where the kingdom of God is. Where the intentions and priorities of God are being brought to fruition - *that* is where the kingdom of God is. To be clear, this is not meant in a passive sense, but in the sense of the Divine actually being involved, and on some level messin’ with us.

We should *also* learn from Mark how the kingdom of God is framed in distinction from the kingdoms of this world. Whereas the church has often been complicit in terms of reinforcing and benefiting from the kingdoms of this world, the biblical notion of the kingdom of God is always seen most clearly in distinction from the kingdom of the world. That’s the back story to this book that the Sunday Seminar is reading together. The subtitle is “Gospel Visions for The Church in A Time of Empire.” Of course we currently live in a time of empire, but the church has most always existed in a time of empire. The Kingdom of God represents a kind of intrusion in the world, and the world is going to resist this intrusion. As you can see, the stage is set for conflict.

I am a little self-conscious that we have spent a great deal of time on only two verses, but I think laying a foundation here is important. You might need to repent; that is, see things from a new perspective to “get it” – in order to grasp this as good news. The truth is, however, that those ground down under the heel of empire have always been best positioned to perceive the good news.

* * *

I feel a need to at least say something about verses 16 – 20: the call of the first disciples. Many a sermon has been preached about calling the fishermen, and how they dropped their nets immediately, and followed Jesus. Rather than a line by line analysis, I am going to take a high view of this.

I once read an author who referred to the 3 Bs of the church, and the order is significant: **Believing, Behaving, and Belonging**. In the church where I was raised, like many of you, your starting point with the church revolved around **believing** the right things. After that, we addressed **behaving**; that is, proper Christian behavior. I remember the line, “I don’t drink, and I don’t chew, and I don’t go with girls that do.” We concerned ourselves with issues like dancing and swearing and what you *don’t* do when you are dating. So then, after you believed the right things, and behaved a certain way, *then* we could talk about **belonging** – about joining the church.

The story of Jesus calling the disciples suggests that maybe we got it all wrong. Jesus starts with **Belonging**. He simply says to the disciples, “follow me.” He doesn’t interview them on their

knowledge of the scriptures, or their personal belief systems. He simply says, "follow me." Though working class fishermen, he doesn't take the time to make sure they don't talk like truck drivers. He simply says, "follow me." It all starts with relationships and, over the years, change happens.

As I think about it, this approach seems harmonious with the Shepherdstown style. Rather than moving from **Believing**, to **Behaving**, and on to **Belonging** . . . we start with **Belonging**. We start with an invitation to **belong** – not in the organizational membership sense, but by offering a deep sense of **belonging**. We issue an invitation: "Won't you join with us?" We don't grill you on your beliefs, or research your drinking habits. We simply say, "Won't you walk the road with us?" Or, as Mr. Rogers says, "Won't you be my friend?"

It is not that **behaving** is inconsequential. But rather than imposing certain standards on you, through the relationships you have formed here you might discover your behavior mysteriously changing. You might attend a men's breakfast, and through meaningful conversation be awakened to ways in which you might have been complicit in objectifying women. Your behavior might change. Through your relationships here you might inadvertently end up getting to know a gay person well, and discover that this person is not at all scary. You might discover they have their own complex, variegated life story, and are hardly one-dimensional characters. Through walking the road with others here, you might wake up one day to the realization that you have an unhealthy relationship with money, and you mysteriously start becoming a more generous individual.

Who knows? Starting with a safe and secure sense of belonging, and then being surprised by how you are seemingly **behaving** differently, you just might end up **believing** differently. Strange things happen when you start walking in the way and spirit of Jesus!

And you know what? When you reflect on all the ways you changed since associating with this community that chooses welcome, you have discovered what it looks like to live in the Kingdom of God. And the more you realize how you have slowly and subtly changed over time – all without burdensome New Year's Resolutions – you smile as you think, "Damn! This is good news!"

And you know what? Once you realize you are on a path of good news, and start seeing things differently - when you see something in our world that is totally out of whack with God's vision, you develop more of a sense of urgency about responding somehow. You are less inclined to dispassionately say, "Well, I'll think about it."

Finally, like James the fishermen, you might have such a sense of a new call in life that you are willing to risk being a disappointment to your father Zebedee. "I know you had expectations for me, Dad, but I'm marching to a different drumbeat now. Hope you understand someday."

"The kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news!"

Amen.

Mark 1: 14 – 20

"Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, **"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.**

“As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. “And Jesus said to them, **“Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”** “And immediately they left their nets and followed him. “As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. “Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.