

The beginning of the gospel

Good morning. (Last call for *Skeptics Welcome* group!)

As I’m sure many of you know, today we embark into a new series – that will take us through till Easter. A study *in* the gospel of Mark – *on* the gospel of Jesus... A study we are calling – “*Into the Life of Jesus*”.

And we’re calling it this because, as I said last Sunday, ***this is the goal of the gospel!*** *This is what God is seeking for every one of us.* Not simply for us to *believe in Jesus* or *have our sins forgiven*, or *know our bibles* or *get to heaven after we die* (though each of these are integral to the gospel) – but **the goal of the gospel is that we would, by the grace of God, find our lives drawn into the life of Jesus – and in Him, into the very life of God...** That, through repentance and faith, we would **come alive in Jesus’ kingdom and reign... alive in His Justice and Mercy... alive in His Grace and Truth... alive in His character and ways – by the grace of His Life alive in us...**

This is what the gospel is all about...

And the opening text of the gospel of Mark will take us right there.

So, if you have a Bible in hand or on an app – turn with me to **Mark chapter 1** verses 1-8. [If you are totally new to this, Mark is the second book in the New Testament. And there are a stack of Bibles out in the Commons on the bookshelf – feel free to grab one and keep it.]

Mark 1:1-8. It will be on the screen, but it’s helpful to know where to find it ourselves – and maybe to make some notes as we go...

And before we read the text, *let’s start with prayer.*

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, 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.’”*

(v.4) And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

This is how Mark’s gospel begins – prefaced by these words: *“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”*

And I know some of our translations have it as, *“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ”* – and yes, “good news” is a *literal* translation of the Greek word “gospel” – but it’s actually unhelpful here. The accessibility of the translation actually robs us of *the startling nature* of Mark’s opening line.

Mark begins his account of Jesus’ life, ministry, death and resurrection in the most **stunning, earth-shaking, grab-your-attention** way. And yet we don’t even notice it!

And the simple fact that **we don’t notice this** puts us at a *significant, unrealized disadvantage*. Which is worse, *right?* It’s one thing to have a disadvantage. It’s another thing to **not even know** you are at a disadvantage.

And that’s us – mostly because of our historical, cultural distance to the writing of this book. But also because of **our perceived familiarity** with this text, or at least, some of its terms.

But heard in its context, as one scholar put it, “**this Gospel begins like a block** of ice dropped from the balcony into the deep end of the pool.”

I was tempted to **burst** through the back doors at this point in the sermon – **shouting** the opening line of Mark’s gospel – because that’s what Mark is doing here – though we don’t even notice it...

Matthew starts his gospel with a genealogical history lesson. **Luke** starts with a dedication to Theophilus – **but Mark starts with something of an explosion!**

A first-century mic-drop.

“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

Now, let’s be honest – upon hearing those words – not many of our minds were **blown**, were they? As far as we can tell, there’s nothing earth-shaking about this verse.

But if Mark were here – the author of this account of Jesus – I am convinced **he would shake his head at us** – **STUNNED** – **stunned** at how we’ve missed his meaning and the implications of this words.

Particularly this word – **gospel!**

Now most of us are **familiar** with this word and concept – in multiple ways, aren’t we? When we hear the word ‘gospel’ – it conjures up all sorts of meanings and associations – some minor, some grand...

- We think of something **being true** – right? “Oh, that’s the gospel truth!”
- Or we think of a **genre of music** – or even just a **musical feeling**.

I’m always stunned how the celebrity judges on “**The Voice**” (the popular NBC vocal competition) will refer to a song or even just a **groove** as ‘gospel’ – no matter what the lyrics are about.

- And then obviously, we also use the term ‘gospel’ to refer to a particular biblical literary form – i.e. the Gospel of Mark. And by that we mean, Mark’s account of the life, teaching, ministry, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus.
- And then, with this, the ‘gospel’ is what Christians and many people say is the saving message of Jesus – that we are called to repent and believe.
All this and more is what comes to mind when we hear the word **gospel**, right?

And, depending on the context, we know which meaning is implied...

But what did this word mean when Mark wrote his account of Jesus’ life?
What did it mean in Mark’s context – in the early decades of the church?

Because that’s where this book comes from, right?

Mark, the writer of this gospel wrote this book – this account of Jesus – likely in **Rome** – somewhere between 60-70 AD – about 30 years – one generation – after the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

Which would have been a challenging and confusing time to be a follower of Jesus, wouldn't it?

We often say this of our day and age – but those must have been challenging days...

And in those thirty years so much had happened – and not all for the good. As one scholar explains of the mid-60's AD...

“It was a killing time in Rome. The church was experiencing the Neronian holocaust, in which many believers had been burned alive at Nero's garden parties and two of the church's most important figures (Peter and Paul) had been executed.” (Fee & Stuart)

Historians speak of this era as the first “Great Persecution” – particularly of the church by the Roman Emperor Nero.

Life for the early Christians was *complicated – beautiful and confusing*.

As history recounts, they early Christians continued to experience the ministry of Jesus among them and through them in powerful ways by the Spirit. **And yet** – at the same time, their devotion to Jesus was increasingly tested – as they faced growing persecution, along with the Jews. And as they simply grappled with the many not-yets of the gospel...

Here and there, someone was **healed** in the name of Jesus, but others were not.

Here and there, someone was **rescued** through prayer, while others simply endured hardship in prayer....

And this hardship and persecution left many **questioning** the gospel and its relevance for their time and lives and world... *Much like it does for many of us today...*

In a way, although worlds away from us, there are ways in which their context is not that different to **ours**...

Ok, so back to this word **gospel**.

What did this word mean when Mark wrote his account of Jesus' life?

What did it mean in Mark's context – in the early decades of the church?

Well, first a little lesson in *biblical – or koine – Greek*.

This word *gospel* comes from the greek word **euangelion**. It's the same word from which we get *evangelical* and *evangelism* (which is sad considering both of these are often viewed as **bad news** these days... Maybe that's a clue that both need to be re-aligned with Jesus... Which is one of many reasons to spend this year attending to Jesus in the Mark's gospel.).

Back to ***Euangelion***. Literally, as already stated, it means “**good news**” or “**good news-ing**” (“announce good news”).

If you pull apart the greek word, you’ve got this prefix **eu** which means good (as in *eulogy*—literally *good word*), and then the word **angel**, which means *message* (or messenger).

But there’s more to this word “gospel” than just its **strict lexical definition.**

In truth, in Mark’s day, it was a word **bursting with life-altering meaning** – for both the Romans and the Jews.

Fact is, it wasn’t originally **a religious term**. It was **a secular term**. The New Testament writers didn’t coin this term. Jesus didn’t coin this term.

The word *gospel* was ***a familiar word - with specific meaning – before Jesus came along...***

Let me say that again – the word *gospel* was ***a familiar word - with specific meaning*** – before Jesus came along – for both the Romans and Jews.

So, before this term came into religious use – and primarily by the Christian community – it was a secular term—referring to *a specific real-life event*. **Two** specific real-life events, in fact.

In the Greek culture of Jesus’ day, the term *gospel* referred specifically to ***an event where a Herald or a Messenger*** would run or ride a horse, across the mountains, ***coming from a place of battle, declaring the good news – the gospel – the euangelion – of a victory over enemies...*** And not just a victory, but a victory in a far off place ***that results in a radically new - and better - situation for the life of the community HERE!***

Growing up in this church, we used to sing a song about exactly this – taken from **Isaiah 52:7** –

“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’”

[How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him / Who brings good news! Good news! Announcing Peace! Proclaiming news of happiness. / Our God reigns! Our God reigns!]

This is **eu-angelion!**

A **Herald** arrives from the battlefield – raises his right hand in greeting and proclaims for all to hear, *“Rejoice! We have a victory! Life will never be the same because of what has taken place for us!”*

The term *gospel/euangelion* referred to **a public announcement about a public event** that has radically good implications for **the whole of life**.

Life is now different because of this victory.

A new age has begun... A new day has dawned.

As C.S. Lewis so memorably describes it in The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe: *“The winter has finally passed, Christmas is here... And spring is coming.”*

Why? Because a new King is on the Throne!

And here in the opening line of his great work – Mark uses **this term** to refer to Jesus – **“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus...”**

In a world where injustice seems to reign so often, where power is used for the benefit of the powerful not the weak, *and often, at the expense of the weak* – in the first century and today – these words are ***stunningly beautiful good news – desperately needed good news...*** *In Mark’s day* – one generation after Jesus under the oppressive regime of Nero. ***And in our day*** – two millennia after Jesus - under the regimes that rule in our time – here and across the globe.

I was speaking with a friend the other day who often travels to Guatemala for work. And he told me about a conversation he had with a Guatemalan about foreign aid... And the man spoke appreciatively about the basic things that wealthy countries often bring. But in the end, he said, “Our greatest need is not just for another hospital or school, ***but for a government that is not corrupt.***”

And as far as I can see, this is a story that is retold all over our world today – and its nothing new...

And it’s against this backdrop, into this world, **into this context**, that Mark 1:1 rings out – “*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ...*”

When we think about the gospel, we need to let this ring out in our hearts and minds — “***A victory has been won! A new King is taking the throne! And life no longer has to be as it was... A new age has begun.***”

This is what Mark intends for us to ***be gripped by*** as we encounter this word gospel...

But this isn't the only event that should come to mind.

It's not the only usage or meaning for this term in Mark's day...

Historians also tell us that, for the Romans, this word **euangelion** or *gospel* was also used on the unique and joyful occasion of **the birth of an heir to the throne**, of his coming-of-age, or of his ascension to the throne.

This unique occasion was specifically referred to as **euangelion** – gospel.

Historians have found,

“A calendar inscription, from about 9 BC, found in Priene in Asia Minor, [that] says of the Emperor Octavian (Caesar Augustus): **‘the birthday of the god** [that is, the king] was for the world **the beginning of joyful tidings** [euangelion/gospel] which have been proclaimed on his account.”

The birthday of the god was for the world – ***the beginning of the gospel...***

And as one scholar points out, and I think we'd agree,

“This inscription is remarkably similar to Mark's initial line and it clarifies the essential content of an evangel in the ancient world: **an historical event which introduces a new situation for the world... Mark announces Jesus' coming as an event that brings about a radically new state of affairs for humanity.**”

And Mark's first audience – the Christians in the 60's and 70's of the first century – a generation after Jesus – needed to hear this again – and again. ***As do we!***

That things are not as they seem. That what we see is not all that is.

That in Jesus, God has stepped into our world – and is taking the Throne – and ***though Rome is still in office, Jesus is on the Throne.***

Though Rome is still in office, Jesus is on the Throne.

And His Reign is one of justice and mercy.

Which is what makes this news GOOD news! EU-angelion!

And this is where the rest of Mark 1:1-8 points us...

Verse 2f – “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.’”*

Read on its own – it sounds rather bland and innocuous. ***But heard in its context,***
these prophetic verses scream good news to us – and to all!

Although Mark only names Isaiah, the first of the prophecy is actually from **Malachi** – words preceded in Malachi by **God’s lament over the injustice of not just the pagan nations, but of His own people** – and not just his people, but the **leaders** among his people. People who neglect justice, who pervert justice – who call evil “good” – and then publicly pray, “Where is the God of justice?”

And here Mark gives voice to **God’s response in Malachi 3:1** –

“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple... But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiners fire or a launderer’s soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD...”

I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who

oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me...”

Sounds like the Rescuing God of Exodus, doesn't it?

Back to Mark 1:4,

And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

There is so much here we could explore, but what we most need to grasp is not the meaning of John's unique fashion sense or dietary habits – but **the message that his life and lips proclaimed**. He appeared in the wilderness – “**preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.**”

Luke, another gospel writer, includes far more of his teaching – but at the end, he simply states, (Luke 3:18), “**And with many other words** John exhorted the people and proclaimed the **good news** to them.” **The Good News!**

Which might be surprising to us – because his core message was **repentance**.

And repentance doesn't usually ring in our ears and souls as **good news** – but it is. It's **incredibly** good news, in fact. **The best news!**

Because **a New King is taking the Throne – A Good King – a Righteous King – A King who will Reign with Justice and Mercy!**

And His word to us – *the first word of the gospel* to us – is not condemnation, but **repentance**... The *call* to repentance! The *hope* of repentance!

An invitation to repent – to turn from the way we’ve been living and the rulers we’ve been serving – to live now in allegiance **to Jesus** – who reigns with justice and mercy...

An invitation to repent – to bow in humility and acknowledge where we have been a part of the injustice – a part of the problem – people who have lived for ourselves – at times, at the expense of others... That in the grace of God, we would be **forgiven & restored** by the **King – Jesus** – learning to live His Ways – *to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God...*

If the gospel is the **good news of a new and better King – a King who reigns with justice and mercy – with righteousness** – then **repentance**, far from being **bad news**, is a gift of **sheer grace... the best news ever... for all...**

But that’s not all. There’s more to the grace of the gospel – and it calls out to us in the final words of our text today – still as a part of Mark’s introduction to the story of Jesus...

We hear it in the final words of John the Baptist here. **Mark 1:8**, he says,

“I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

In Judaism, baptism was the sign and seal of conversion for a non-jewish proselyte – and a picture of the cleansing and renewal that came through repentance and faith.

But here, John declares that although the baptism he offered was simply with water – an external cleansing – **Jesus** – *the One to come – the New King – who reigns with justice and mercy – He will baptize us with the Holy Spirit.*

Which is to say – Jesus would and will and does – as we bow in repentance and faith – ***immerse us into the very life of God...***

Which is what we said at the outset – about *the goal of the gospel* – that we would not simply become **religious**, or simply **moral** – but that we would be drawn *into the life of Jesus* – and in Him, *into the life of God... A people alive in and with God...*

Which is what we need – and don’t deserve...

But in the grace of God, this is the promise of Jesus – and the gift of the gospel.

That God Himself – the King who reigns with Justice and Mercy – the Rescuing God of Exodus – the Spirit of Jesus – would reign in us. Cleansing and empowering us to walk in the way of true repentance and faith and renewal...

aligning our lives with Jesus – from the inside out...

Oh friends, **this is the gospel today** – as it has always been.

A gospel we need – as it always is.

The gospel of a new and better King...

A new and better Ruler...

*A new and better Lord – **Jesus**.*

And the grace of repentance.

That we might become true citizens of His Kingdom.

→ *So, let me ask you today*

- *Where do you need to embrace the gospel today?*
 - *To surrender your life to the Good Lordship of Jesus...*
- *Where do you need to bow to Jesus and let Him be Lord over you and in you?*

Because this is how the gospel *becomes good news* for you and for me – through repentance and faith...

Let's pray...