



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

GOOD NEWS

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent, December, 2014

Readings: Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85;; 2 Peter 3:8-15; Mark 1:1-18

Sermon text: The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Mark 1:1

Mark doesn't fool around. The very first sentence of his gospel gets right to the point: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

This is just the beginning of the story, Mark writes; there will be a good deal left to say even after his gospel ends. And it is the beginning of something good, of good news for all people. The Greek word here is *euangelion*. *eu*: good; *angelion*: message. (We get the English word *angel* from the same root; an angel is a messenger from heaven.)

The good news concerns Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary; he is the *Christus*, which is the Greek form of the Hebrew word Messiah, the anointed one of God, the new David, King of the Jews. But Mark¹ goes on, this is not only good news for the Jews. Jesus Christ is none other than the Son of God, King of kings and Lord of lords. Good news for all people, the best news of all time.

But not entirely new news. The story begins in the middle of history. Mark, unlike Matthew or Luke (but like John) omits any birth narratives. We hear nothing of the child or young man Jesus. Instead we open with a reference to the ancient past, the prophet Isaiah, who wrote of the coming of a messiah long before the time of Jesus (we will hear these passages during the Advent Lessons and Carols service), and also of one who would come to prepare his way, a messenger crying out in the desert, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Isaiah 40:3).²

This voice in the wilderness calling, Mark writes, is none other than the well-known preacher and baptizer, John. The wild man of the Jordan, clothed in camel skins, eating locusts and wild honey. Skinny, strange and taking no prisoners. He calls out those in the city and comfortable suburbs: repent before it is too late. Come, take a bath in the river to cleanse your sins, which are many. And then live a life worthy of being the children of Abraham, the chosen of God. For the day of the Lord is coming and it is coming fast. The ax is sharp and about to swing. Time to get right with God. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and turn to the Lord your God.

This was a surprisingly effective way to build church attendance. I guess it was good news in its way. It certainly made people think. The signs of the time pointed to the need for change. The people had labored under the yoke of harsh kings and Roman overlords; taxes were crushing, dissent was met with swift and terrible punishment, crucifixion was favorite Roman way of crushing those who revolted. Where was the king of the Jews, the son of David, the savior of the people? Surely coming soon.

Was John the Messiah, the Christ? No, he said. That one is coming; I am but his messenger, my job is to point to him, to prepare his way. I baptize with water. He will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

The young man Jesus was among those who came to see what the talk was all about. He stayed, it is clear, to hear more. He was one of those who underwent the baptism in the river. But he was different than the others.

For him the experience of baptism was shattering, life-changing, world-changing. He felt the heavens open and the voice of God ring out: “You are my Son, my Beloved.” And immediately he was filled with the Holy Spirit—an incredible sense of purpose and power that drove him straight away into the wilderness. He needed some time to process what had just happened. He was alone in the desert for forty days and nights. Things happened and when he came out his life had changed, and then he changed the world. And that story is what Mark calls the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

How is it good news to realize your life has to change. Sounds like receiving a diagnosis from the doctor: unless you do this, change that, your heart is going to give out. Better change your ways. And I guess it is like that. The good news is that there is a chance, an opportunity. Turn it around. Repent, the English translation of the Greek word, metanoia, which means to turn one’s mind around. Conversion is another word for the process.

But the good news isn’t only that there is hope—though you must change your destructive ways of thinking and acting. It isn’t only that the kingdom of God is coming—a reign of justice and love. The good news is the messenger himself, Jesus. He is the message as well: if you believe in him, follow his Way, then you will be saved. Your life will be better.

How so? Well, we Episcopalians don't often get into the details here. We aren't much for spelling out the rules of a no-fun club. We keep the call to discipleship pretty simple and sum it up in the Baptismal Covenant, found in the Book of Common Prayer (pp. 304-6; I hope you all have a copy at home; if not we have extras we can give you). One of the vows or promises is to say, in response to the question posed by the priest—"Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?"—"I will, with God's help."

This is good news, in its way. We promise to resist evil, but acknowledge the clear truth that we will fall into sin—we will become self-absorbed and act selfishly, we will let distraction, sloth and disobedience draw us from the love of God. The good news is that the door stays open. We are always welcome to come on home. The prodigal child will meet a warm welcome, though not from the self-righteous.

The good news, the core teaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, is that we are saved through his cross, through God's grace and love, and it is none of our doing. If we are saved by grace, then we are not saved through our own efforts, such as being pious and coming to church, or piling up the merit badges of good behavior and charitable works, let alone the material signs of worldly success. The gospel of Jesus Christ means you can't be proud of yourself for being some kind of righteous dude, and judgmental of others for falling short. The good news is that Jesus Christ came to save sinners—and still loves the outcast, the downtrodden, the frequently fallen. The good news is that you who mourn, who fall, who weep, you too are blessed. You too are a child of God, made in God's image. The good news is that you who fail to live up to the standards you have set for yourself, that you have promised to keep in all kinds of covenants and vows and resolutions, you too are beloved of God. Which stops you from feeling rejected and a complete failure if you can't live up to the high standards of the Way. So those who hear and believe the good news are neither overly proud or overly dejected. What we are, if we have really grasped in faith the good news of Jesus Christ, is thankful, hopeful and determined to persevere in his Way, to follow him, to help bring about the kingdom of God that he, like John before him, said is coming and already at hand. The good news is that he is with us still.

Therefore rejoice. We are saints and sinners together, all of us both saints and sinners, all of us welcome to the table of our Lord.

Come to the table. Taste and see: the Way of the Lord is good. See if your mind isn't turned around and your life made new. If you haven't been baptized and would like to be, come see me. I am a trained baptizer. In any case come. Come to the table of our Lord. Come join the people of the Way, the prophets, the poets, the sages and the regular folks. Come Holy Spirit. Come Lord Jesus. Give us another shot of the good news.

In Christ's name, Amen.

¹ Or a later scribe inserts; some of the ancient authoritative texts lack the Son of God.

² Scholars believe there were at least two and more probably three distinct individuals behind the various texts collected under the name Isaiah. One wrote during the invasion of the Assyrians in the eight century BCE, another around the time of the fall of Jerusalem and the exile in Babylon (597-539), and a third who wrote during the reign of Cyrus, the Persian emperor, who defeated the Babylonians and let the Israelites return to their homeland (after 539). This is the voice heard in today's reading: Comfort, O comfort my people. Isaiah 40:1