

“The Beginning of the Good News”
Mark 1:1-20
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First Presbyterian Church of Spruce Pine
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On this first Sunday of the New Year we turn our focus to the Gospel according to Mark. From now until Easter Sunday, which comes at the end of March, we will be walking through the sixteen chapters of this fast-paced story of Jesus’ ministry. While Matthew and Luke begin with the backstory of Jesus’ birth - his parents Mary and Joseph, the angel Gabriel and then the shepherds, the birth in Bethlehem, the story of the holy family fleeing to Egypt to escape the persecution of King Herod - while Matthew and Luke give us all this backstory, the Gospel of Mark is very different - it tells us nothing about Jesus as a child. Instead, Mark begins with the adult Jesus baptized by John, and then Jesus immediately starts his ministry of teaching & healing, sharing the good news of God’s reign come near. As we will soon see, the word “immediately” is one of Mark’s favorites - he uses it 42 times, more than in any other book of the Bible. Mark is a master storyteller and he knows how to move the action forward to create a sense of urgency. As I have shared in my email updates, there are lots of good ways to engage with this gospel - from reading a few passages every day in your daily devotion time, to watching [a video of Mark on YouTube](#), or digging into a study book - the resources are [linked in my email](#) and printed out in the narthex.

Last year our confirmation class studied Mark, so we already have some scholars among us! Like I told them, there is no better way to grow in our faith than reading and praying through the scriptures. When we open our Bible and ask the Holy Spirit to open our hearts and minds to what God is up to in the world, things happen! The Word begins to form us into the people God is calling us to be!

By way of introduction there’s a lot more that could be said about the gospel of Mark, but I think it’s best to just jump into the narrative, beginning in chapter 1, the first twenty verses:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,

who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight!’ ”

So John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And the whole Judean region and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart

and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him. 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 fishers. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of 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.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Imagine this scenario: "You are sound asleep and dreaming, when suddenly the door bursts open and a bright light shines full in your face. A voice, breaking in on your dream-world shouts, 'Wake up! Get up! You'll be late!' And without more ado, the speaker splashes your face with cold water to make the point. Time to stop dreaming and face the most important day of your life" (N.T. Wright, [Mark: For Everyone Bible Study Guides](#), p. 9).

I doubt any of you woke up on this cold January morning like this, but this is how New Testament scholar Tom Wright describes the opening words of Mark's gospel. Mark does not begin with the angel Gabriel "bringing good news of great joy to all the people" or the wondrous scene of the baby being born in a manger. Rather, Mark begins with God's prophet John the Baptist, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord; make God's paths straight!" To a world that was weary and beaten down by the occupying Roman Empire, these words of John were like throwing a bucket of cold water on the faces of the people who were losing hope. **"Wake up! Now is the time to listen to what God is doing in the world!"**

Though we might think it strange to hear that John was clothed with camel's hair, "with a leather belt around his waist, eating locusts and wild honey" (1.6) the Jewish people of the day knew exactly who this was. This was the long-awaited Elijah who did not die but was taken up to heaven on a chariot (2 Kings 2.11). The Jewish people believed Elijah would return some day, preparing the way for the coming of God's anointed, the Messiah - the one to come and save the people. Many believed the Messiah would be the one to overthrow the Roman oppressors and return the promised land to God's chosen people. **A theme we will see throughout Mark's gospel is that although Jesus is named in the very first verse as being the Christ (the Messiah), he is not the type of savior that was expected.** Instead of advocating military power to overthrow the Roman oppressors, Jesus brings the reign of God through the power of love and vulnerability - the willingness to take up your cross and not your sword, the power that comes by serving others and not jockeying for worldly status (8.34-38, 9.33-37).

But before we jump ahead of ourselves, let's go back to the water John the Baptizer is splashing in our proverbial faces! We are told that John is practicing "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." What exactly is going on here? A ritual not happening in the Temple in Jerusalem, but something that is attracting people to go out to the Jordan River out in the wilderness. And not just for a few religious folks - we are told "the whole Judean region and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins" (1.4-5) A baptism for the repentance of sins? What is that all about?

Well, when it comes to confessing our sins, I think the conventional wisdom is that repenting has to do with us telling God all the bad things we have done - whether its bad words or bad behaviors or bad attitudes, we all can come up with our own list - then, we are just to name all of these, and after feeling appropriate regret and shame about them, wait for God to forgive us. During these first few weeks of the new year there's pressure on us to end bad habits - to lose weight or to exercise more or to become more productive by committing to read more books - to change our bad behaviors into good ones, and thus to become healthier and happier. But I'm afraid what underlies these motivations is an assumption that for us to be worthy of God's love, then we need to make certain changes. Repentance becomes a matter of changing the things we do so that if we feel bad enough about them and change, then we may be forgiven. We may then be loved.

Unfortunately, this conventional way of looking at repentance does not align with what the Bible teaches us. You see, repentance is not about us feeling bad about our behaviors and trying to change them. **No repentance has to do with a total re-orientation of our lives, a turning from one direction and going in another - and it's a change that is motivated not by guilt or shame but it's a free response to God's initiative.** I think that is what is going on here in these opening verses of Mark's gospel. John is telling us to wake up, to turn our whole lives around, not because we need to fear an angry God who is coming to get us. No, there's one coming much greater than John who will baptize us not only with water but with God's Holy Spirit. In fact, when Jesus is baptized by John we are told that the heavens were torn apart, the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove, and a voice confirmed his identity as God's beloved child. "You are my Son, in whom I am well pleased!" (1.11)

Did you know Mark is the only gospel that tells us that the heavens were torn apart? Matthew and Luke just say the heavens opened up or parted. The verb "to tear open" (schizō) appears one other place in Mark - when Jesus takes his last breath on the cross, Mark tells us the curtain in the temple is torn in two, from top to bottom (15.38). It was thought that the heavens formed a shield or curtain, behind which the gods resided. No wonder when there was a thunderstorm, it was easy to imagine the gods being angry with us, throwing bolts of lightning and making loud rumbles! And in the Jewish temple it was believed that God's holy power rested in the place called the "holy of holies" and so the curtain was placed in front of this sacred space to protect the people from God's awesome power. "Only the high priest could pass beyond this curtain" and that was only on the holy Day of Atonement (Elisabeth Johnson, [Working Preacher: January 1, 2012](#)) Bible scholar Don Juel has an interesting interpretation of the tearing of the heavens at Jesus' baptism and the temple curtain at Jesus' death. **With the heavens opened and the temple curtain torn apart, it's as if our protection is gone. With Jesus' coming "The barriers have been torn down, and God is 'on the loose' in the world"** [[Elisabeth Johnson,](#)

quoting [Don Juel's Mark](#) (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990), p. 36]. This interpretation makes a lot of sense to me - the beginning of the good news of Jesus is that God's Spirit is now unleashed in the world. No wonder there's a sense of urgency throughout the story of Jesus - immediately the Spirit drives him into the wilderness, and after 40 days of testing he begins by proclaiming the good news. In the words of Eugene Peterson ([The Message](#)) , "Time's up! God's kingdom is here. Change your life and believe the Message." Yes, God's Spirit is on the loose! No wonder Simon and Andrew hear Jesus' invitation and immediately drop their nets and follow him. The same is true for James and John - they hear Jesus' call to follow him and they immediately leave their father in the boat, along with the hired help. You see, the one who calls them is the One with authority, the One who is possessed by the Holy Spirit, the One who ushers in a new reality into a weary world. In the chapters ahead we will see how this Spirit-filled Jesus will confront the evil spirits and demons of the world. And though we hear that the powers of this world have killed John the Baptist, we know that One greater than him is on the loose, bringing God's kingdom to those who need healing and wholeness. Not just to those living 2,000 years ago, but also continuing with us in the world today.

Thirty years or so ago Bette Midler sang a beautiful song called "[From a Distance.](#)" In it she imagined what the world looks from a distance. "From a distance there is harmony, And it echoes through the land... From a distance we all have enough, And no one is in need, And there are no guns, no bombs, and no disease, No hungry mouths to feed..." The refrain is repeated time and time again, "God is watching us, God is watching us, God is watching us from a distance."

I wonder if we are honest with ourselves, we might all prefer this type of God, One who is watching us from a distance, and not being involved in our day-to-day lives. **While I appreciate the spirit of this song, I have come to believe that the God we have come to know in Jesus Christ is nothing at all like the God Bette Middler sings about.** You see, God the creator is not far off somewhere watching from a distance the world below. Rather, the beginning of the Good News we read in Mark and throughout the New Testament is that God's Spirit has broken into our world - the heavens have been torn asunder, God's Spirit rests fully on Jesus - and yes (!) that same Spirit resides in us who are baptized in his name! It might be safer to have God stored away up in heaven because if God is on the loose then we are no longer in control. Like those folks casting and mending their nets by the sea, God may be calling us to repent - to turn around - and to follow Jesus all the way to the cross. Bible scholar Amy-Jill Levine puts it like this: "After 2,000 years-plus, the idea of the imminent in-breaking of God's kingdom may seem exaggerated. [But] It should not. It is never too late to repent. [Indeed] "The Gospel has a sense of urgency: repent *now*, decide *now*, act *now*" ([The Gospel According to Mark: A Beginner's Guide to the Good News](#), p. 11).

Friends, as we begin this New Year with all the challenges and opportunities before us, in our lives as individuals as well as our community life as a congregation, let us embrace this good news, that God indeed is on the loose, and God's Spirit is upon us, calling us to trust and to act now. Thanks be to God! Amen.