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Mark 1:14-20

THE GOOD AND THE BAD

I have some good news and some bad news; which do you want to hear first? When I hear that question asked of me, I brace myself—because as much as I want to hear the good news, I also don't want to hear the bad news. When you think about it, however, much of the time the good news in our lives is only good *because* of the existence of bad news. Good news is often *linked* to bad news. Good news is linked to the existence of bad news when the doctor comes out of surgery and tells the family in the waiting room, “We think we got it all.” Good news is linked to the existence of bad news when the unemployed waitress learns that the government passed a stimulus bill that will enable her to pay her rent. Good news is linked to the existence of bad news when you finally secure an appointment to get the vaccine in the midst of a deadly pandemic. Good news and bad news are often linked to each other.

Good news and bad news are linked in our scripture reading from Mark's gospel. In fact, they are found existing side by side in the very first sentence. Jesus has just been baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River when Mark writes, “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.” We could easily slide right passed those first few words without giving them any thought. We could move right on to read about Jesus walking along the Sea of Galilee and calling his disciples without thinking about what we just read: “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.” We've got the good news—Jesus proclaiming the good news of God—but in comes linked to the bad news of the arrest of John the Baptist.

John's arrest had to have been a tragedy for the Jewish community. John was an extremely significant preacher and prophet. Mark tells us that crowds of people from the Judean countryside as well as from the city of Jerusalem trekked out into the wilderness to hear his preaching and to be baptized by him. For however unusual John may have been, with his strange clothing of camel's hair and his diet of locusts, John brought the people a powerful spiritual message and he was highly regarded, so highly regarded that even by Jesus sought John out for his own baptism.

So imagine how disheartening it had to have been when John was arrested. For an arrest by the Roman government was *never* anything *but* very bad news. And as we know from the gospel story, John's imprisonment ultimately ends with bad news—with his gruesome beheading.

The story of Jesus' ministry begins with bad news: disheartening, discouraging, tragic bad news. The arrest of John the Baptist at the start of Jesus' ministry is really symbolic of all the bad news the Jewish people were enduring at that time. They all lived under the cruelty of the Roman government and were terrorized by the commonplace sightings of crucified victims along their highways. Anxiety and fear filled their lives. They lived with Rome's ever increasing taxation demands. They lived with crushing poverty, incurable diseases, and the daily reality of death. Bad news was the norm.

You really can't get through this life without experiencing bad news, but it does seem like this past year has been extraordinarily tilted in that direction. Four hundred thousand Americans dead from this pandemic. People out of work. Businesses failing. School children struggling with the imposed hardships. The national shame of racism came out of hiding to walk

about in the full light of day. Violence and hatred and an assault on democracy erupted in our nation's capital. In this past year, bad news seemed to surface nearly every day.

Bad news does not spare our personal lives either. In fact, that is often where bad news is most keenly experienced. A husband, wife, parent, child, sister, or brother dies. The doctor delivers you a frightening diagnosis. Your child flounders emotionally or academically. You lose a job. Your marriage fails. You are griped by chronic pain. A conflict leads to estrangement with a friend or family member. Bad news happens all the time. We cannot flee from it. So how do we deal with it?

“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.’” Jesus strides right into the bad news with the good news of God. Jesus confronts the bad news by proclaiming *better* news: that the Kingdom of God was near. The gospel writer Mark wants us to understand that the Kingdom of God came near *in the person of Jesus*. Jesus embodied the Kingdom of God. And so we learn what that Kingdom of God looks like by looking at Jesus. In other words, we learn what good news looks like by looking at Jesus. Good news looks like radical, steadfast love—a kind of love that is even committed to the welfare of one's enemy. Good news looks like forgiveness and a kind of mercy that enables a person's transformation. Good news looks like the inclusion of outcasts. Good news looks like compassion to the weak and vulnerable. Good news looks like a commitment to what is right and just. Good news looks like service and generosity and humility. The Kingdom of God came near in the person of Jesus. Good news came near in the person of Jesus.

And then Jesus strides off to the Sea of Galilee and calls a bunch of fishermen to join him in sharing this good news—to share this good news to a community and a people who knew such

bad news. He doesn't first check to see if they have the right qualifications or skills. He doesn't conduct interviews to find the best candidates for the job. He doesn't go to the more elite members of society, the people with the right connections and influence, those with good reputations and the right credentials. Instead he calls uneducated, working class people. And he says to them, "Hey, you! Yeah, I'm talking to you! You are capable of embodying God's good news! Come follow me."

We cannot escape the bad news of this world. We cannot protect ourselves from ever knowing bad news ourselves. What we can do, however, is to enter the bad news around us with the good news of God. What we can do is stride into the places and circumstances of bad news with the good news of God's love. The good news of God is powerful. It offers hope. It changes hearts. It transforms lives. It offers meaning. Jesus understood that the good news of God is powerful even, and maybe especially, in the hands of ordinary folks like you and me.