

A Message of Good News

Mark 1:14-15

June 26, 2022

Our scripture for this morning is only two verses, but they are packed with good news from God. Until this point Jesus had ministered for several months by himself. Jesus who had been a carpenter may have taken some time to adjust to a new life style as an itinerant preacher and to hone his message. The Bible says that he knew some of the men who would become his future disciples but he had yet to call them into ministry. The record we have of his “solo” ministry includes: his first miracle, the changing of water into wine at Cana and his ministry to Nicodemus in Jerusalem. He also had some early success as an itinerant preacher in Galilee but was rejected by his home church in Nazareth. Jesus’ public preaching with his disciples begins about nine months after his baptism.

Paul wrote in Galatians 4:4, “but when the right time had fully come God sent his son, born of a woman...” Jesus, along with his older cousin John the Baptist, came to preach repentance and renewal. John with his preaching and baptizing at the Jordan River initiated a unique time spirituality speaking. Jesus’ public preaching follows that of John and it, “Marks the fulfillment of the special salvation-time which is distinguished from all other time.” (1) This special salvation-time was a narrow window of about four years when coming to know God was through the personal ministry and witness of John and Jesus.

In Mark’s gospel account Jesus begins his ministry with the words: “The time has come,” ... “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.” (Mark 1:15) Mark says that Jesus, after this proclamation called his disciples and began ministering publicly with them. The event that prompted this public ministry was the news that his beloved cousin John the Baptist was in prison. Mark in the sixth chapter of his gospel gives a detailed account of John’s death at the hands of king Herod. John was imprisoned at Machaerus, a fortress on the eastern side of the Dead Sea. This fortress is not mentioned in the scriptures, but it is part of the writings of the first century Jewish historian Josephus. John was arrested because he had told King Herod that it was unlawful for him to marry his brother Philip’s wife Herodias which he did. Mark says, “Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him.” (Mark 6:19) During a birthday party for the king she got her chance and had John beheaded. John’s death is God’s signal to Jesus “to replace John and bring his work to fruition.” (2)

Our scripture says that Jesus began his public ministry by preaching the “good news.” As Christians we are familiar with this term but it was not a common phrase for

the Jewish people. The phrase was used primarily by the Romans when denoting a victory in battle. “This term figures prominently in the stories of the lives of the Roman emperors who were honored as gods. We read, for example, of the ‘good news’ of the emperor’s birth, and of his enthronement etc. an equivalent concept is not found in the Old Testament.” (3) The term “good news” is used only a handful of times in the Old Testament, mostly in connection with the return of the Israelites from exile. In the New Testament the phrase “good news” is primarily used by Paul and it indicates Christian preaching. Paul uses the words “for the event of preaching as well as for the content of that preaching, which is, as a rule, the death and resurrection of Jesus.” (4) In the “good news” ... “God himself calls the world to faith in Jesus and to salvation in him.” (5) The “good news” ... “can be heard and understood only as a testimony of faith.” (6) This may seem strange. It is not that Christianity is a kind of secret society and in order to be a member you had to have a special kind of knowledge, much like the Gnostics, a religious sect which opposed Paul and the early church. They believed that knowledge rather than faith was the key to salvation. For the Christian faith is the key. When salvation comes to a believer by grace through faith the believer becomes different. Paul sums up what happens with the words, “if anyone is in Christ, he (or she) is a new creation, the old has gone and the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17) And how is the believer made different? Several changes take place and I will briefly mention a few. First, he or she “hears” the truth of the “good news” and it impacts their life in such a way that they no longer have to guess and grope for God in the dark. Job said, “If only I knew where to find him.” (Job 23:3) The believer knows that God is real and has an assurance that comes from God because God comes and lives in their heart. (John 14:23) Additionally, our world has an aura of hopelessness but to hear the good news means to have hope. Paul wrote, “And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured his love into our hearts...” (Romans 5:5) Third, there is peace. William Barclay writes, “The penalty of being” (human) “is a split personality.” (7) In our human nature we are both good and bad. In Christ there is victory over our warring selves and in him there is peace. Next, Jesus promises salvation which is not only the “escape from past sin; it is the power to live victoriously and to conquer sin.” (8). Finally, there is the promise of immortality—death is not the end but the gateway to eternal life. The believer has an assurance of immortality and that he or she is on their way to an eternity with God and Jesus. This is the message of the good news Jesus preached and it continues to be good news for us. These spiritual blessings and assurances are God’s gift to the believer. The eyes are opened, the heart is changed and the believer is heaven-bound.

Jesus goes on to say that the kingdom of God is nearby. The kingdom of God is not an easy concept to get our minds around. It is an Old Testament concept and it has a

radically different meaning than that which is understood in the New Testament. The kingdom of God for the Jews “in the time of Jesus spoke of the sovereignty of God which one accepted if he submitted obediently to every commandment; in addition, it spoke of the reign of God which comes after the annihilation of every foe and the end of all suffering.” (9) These ideas are very different from what Jesus was preaching. In the first part of the Jewish understanding the coming of the kingdom of God is completely dependent on human decision. The requirement to be totally obedient to the commands of God is not possible because as human beings we are sinners. Only Jesus as the son of God was without sin and was therefore fully obedient. The second part of the Jewish understanding of the kingdom of God can be seen as “something that just happens in the normal course of events.” (10) It is to happen sometime in the future when the reign of God comes and foes are eliminated and suffering ended.

The kingdom of God as understood in the New Testament “is conceived first of all as something in the future which comes from God. Therefore, it is something that a human can only wait for, seek, receive, and inherit, but he is not able to create it by himself.” (11) Jesus often spoke of one entering the kingdom of God as a realm of authority. It is living in the palm of God’s hand under the power of God’s grace and guidance. Jesus spoke to the crowds saying that the kingdom of God was near and in fact is already here for the one who is willing to accept it. Jesus never gave his listeners or us a timetable for the coming of the kingdom of God, unlike the Jews of his day who saw its arrival as sometime in the future. The kingdom of God is not dependent on our deeds but is a little slice of heaven here on earth in which the faithful reside before going on to glory. The kingdom of God about which Jesus preached is both present and future.

Jesus concludes our scripture with a call to his listeners and us to “repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15) Repentance means a turning about. For those of us who are veterans, we will never forget basic training and the drilling and marching formations in which the drill instructor called out, “about-face.” Repentance is an about-face. It is a change of mind and a turning away from sin not so much out of the fear of the consequences of sin, although that is part of it, as for a hatred of sin itself. We hate sin because it keeps us from being in fellowship with God. Many in this world are so bogged down in the muck and mire of sin as to never have experienced fellowship with God. That is not what God wants for them and in truth most know that their life is fouled up; it is not what it should be and that something is missing. Ecclesiastes says about God, “he has...set eternity in the hearts of men...” (Ecclesiastes 3:11b) They are missing the personal relationship, harmony and joy that comes from being in sync with the Lord not only here and now but in the future. There are also those who have a

relationship with the Lord God, but have let sin slip in and rule. 2 Peter 2:19 says, “for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him.” They need to return to their master—their savior and Lord. This is possible through confession and repentance. John wrote in his first letter, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9) It is always people who turn away and not God. God is always there and all we have to do is turn back to him.

Simply put what does it mean to believe in the “good news?” I like the answer that William Barclay gives, “To believe in the good news simply means to take Jesus at His word, to believe that God is the kind of God that Jesus told us about, to believe that God so loves the world that he will make any sacrifice to bring us back to Himself, to believe that what sounds too good to be true is really true.” (12)

Jesus never makes us do anything but shows us the best pathway in life and gives each of us the opportunity and power to follow. The choice is always ours alone. It is like the game we used to play as children, “follow the leader.” We are part of the game only if we choose to play. We can choose to ignore the leader, leave, and go our own way, or we may choose to trust the leader and follow wherever he leads. When we follow Jesus day by day and moment by moment, then we experience the kingdom of God here on earth and we have the answer to the question “Can I trust Jesus to be my savior and Lord?” We can answer with a resounding YES!

Amen.

- (1) The Good News According to Mark Eduard Schweizer p. 45
- (2) The Good News According to Matthew Eduard Schweizer p. 67
- (3) The Good News According to Mark Eduard Schweizer p. 30
- (4) Ibid. p. 30
- (5) Ibid. p. 30
- (6) Ibid. p. 31
- (7) The Gospel of Mark William Barclay p. 25
- (8) Ibid. p. 25
- (9) The Good News According to Mark Eduard Schweizer p. 45
- (10) Ibid. p. 45
- (11) Ibid. p. 45
- (12) The Gospel of Mark William Barclay p. 25