

Believe the Good News: *Mark 1:1-20*

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Mark has news for us today! Not just any news, good news. Not just any good news—Good news about God!

We need a little good news about God, these days. It seems everywhere we look, there's bad news about God. In the name of God people strap on bombs and kill themselves and their own people. As we speak there are "Christian" militias in Sudan committing genocide, in the name of God. In the name of God, the "Lord's Resistance Army" is marching through Uganda, kidnapping children and ravaging entire villages. There's plenty of bad news about God these days.

We hear televangelists claiming hurricanes and natural disasters are God's punishment on the wickedness of our country, which makes you wonder why the poor in Mexico are suffering so much today from these storms. Pulpits across the country preach against all the people God hates, condemning to hell those they deem "evil doers". The news is—God's out there, and he's mad, destroying cities, sending armies, picking sides in war, and sending lots of folks to hell.

It's no wonder people don't believe in God anymore. It's no wonder some of the best selling books today are attacks against the very existence of God. God needs a new press agent these days.

Well, he's got one in Mark. Mark the Evangelist makes no qualms about it: his story is one of good news. "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

After John is arrested, Jesus shows up in Galilee, proclaiming this same good news of God.

The time is fulfilled. Change is in the air. Business as usual is no longer possible. It's a new time, a new age. The kingdom of God has come near. The world is being reordered. Those on the bottom are being brought to the top, and those with abusive power are being thrown off their thrones. Caesar is no longer the only "Lord" in town. The kingdom of God has come near!

As far as Mark sees it, this is good news. But is it good news to us?

You can't help but wonder why Mark would begin this story about good news with the forerunner of the Messiah, John the prophet, imprisoned. If I were Mark, sharing my good news, I might leave this part out.

And as for starting the story in Galilee? There are some better locations than Galilee. Galilee is not the place you'd expect a Messiah to come from. Galilee is

“the other side of the tracks.” It is a haven for deadbeats, the working class, people like fishermen and tax collectors and religious zealots.

If you want to find a kook, a wild-eyed religious fanatic—go to Galilee. But if you’re looking for the Messiah of God, go to a place like Jerusalem, not Galilee.

Galilee is a diverse place, once called by the prophet of Isaiah, the “district of the nations.” People from all over the known world find a home in Galilee, yet as it happens too much in a diverse place, the groups don’t always get along. There are ethnic gangs, ethnic slurs. There are more than a few jokes going around about those foreigners of Galilee. The respectable folks don’t live in Galilee anymore. The religious folks have long packed up their synagogues and moved to the other side of the sea.

It’s no wonder the good religious folks don’t recognize the Messiah when he shows up in Jerusalem. He’s come from Galilee! Nothing good comes from Galilee, especially nothing good from God. Good news about a Messiah from Galilee?

This is not the news the people are expecting. This is not the Messiah they were ready for.

Of course, we are ready for Jesus. Mark’s given us enough information up front so that we know what’s going on. This guy named Jesus is no ordinary Galilean. This is no ordinary Jew.

This is the one of whom Isaiah and the prophets prophesied, and the one for whom John is preparing the way. John says of him, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

This is the one on whom, after he was baptized by John, the very Spirit of God descends as a dove, and a voice from heaven declares, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

This is the one who is driven out by the Spirit into the wilderness, and there he endures forty days of temptation from Satan.

This is no ordinary Galilean. This is Jesus, the very Son of God, the promised Messiah. And here he is, showing up on the scene, in a place like Galilee.

If Mark didn’t let us in on the great secret of Jesus’ identity, the secret that no one in Mark’s story gets, if we had not been told from the beginning that Jesus really is the Messiah, we too would have a hard time believing that the Messiah could come from a place like Galilee. But we hear John preaching. We are there when

the Spirit descends. We see Satan defeated in the wilderness. This *is* the Messiah, the one we've been expecting. How could anyone miss him?

But miss him they do. All throughout Mark's Gospel, no one gets it: the religious leaders, his own family—even his closest disciples—everyone sees Jesus and his great acts, but they do not perceive. Everyone hears his authoritative teaching, but no one understands. They don't get it, but we get it.

His own family comes to him. Jesus is casting out demons, how dare he cast out demons. Calm down, Jesus, and come home. And Jesus says, "Who are my mother and brothers? My real mother and brothers are those who do the will of God." His own family didn't get it, but we get it.

Jesus teaches in his hometown to the folks who saw him grow up. They were astounded, "Where did he get all this?" they ask. "Isn't this the carpenter, the illegitimate son of Mary?" And Jesus can do no acts of power in his hometown because of their unbelief. His hometown didn't get it, but we get it.

The religious leaders plot to kill Jesus. He's threatening their power. "By what authority do you say these things?" they ask. As Jesus stands trial before the Sanhedrin, they finally ask, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" "I am," Jesus says. "Blasphemy," they cry out, "Blasphemy!" The religious leaders didn't get it; I hope we get it.

On the night Jesus was betrayed, his disciples gathered with him in the upper room. "You will all desert me," Jesus tells them. "Not I," Peter says. A few hours later, Peter is asked, "You were with Jesus of Nazareth, weren't you?" "I do not know what you are talking about." "Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean." "I swear to God, I do not know what you are talking about!"

If anyone else would've gotten it, surely Peter in all his confidence would have. Peter didn't get it. Do we get it?

On Easter morning, when the women arrive at the tomb, see the stone rolled away, staring at the folded grave clothes: "He has been raised; he is not here...But go, tell the disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." Fleeing from the tomb, terror and amazement seizing them, they tell no one because they are afraid.

The women, the first witnesses to the resurrection—even they didn't get it. Are we sure we get it?

Of course we are sure we get it. We've been baptized into Christ. We worship weekly, tithe, study our Bibles, and pray. We even got a huge cross in the front of our sanctuary. We listen to Christian music, buy Christian books and wear Christian shirts. Surely we get it.

We have heard the preaching of John; we have seen Jesus baptized; we have watched the Spirit descend; and we have gone with Jesus into the wilderness. Peter didn't see this. The religious leaders didn't see this. The women didn't see this. But we see it. Surely we get it.

But as we hear the cock crow twice, and listen to the over-confident Peter declare "I don't know what you are talking about!", we'd do well to calm our confidence a bit.

For as much as we religious folks are confident that we have the truth about Jesus, that we have all the right answers to give a questioning world, it sure seems like we've missed the boat a time or two.

We could go back in time and talk about the crusades, or the Inquisition. We can talk about the witch trials, the massacre of Native Americans, slavery, segregation. But we can look around today and have a few things to talk about as well.

Churches have fled the inner cities, filled with crime and drugs, yet hungry for Jesus, and they've moved to more comfortable suburbs, big buildings surrounded by a sea of parking lots. Ministers like me spend most of their weeks locked in an office, studying scripture, planning sermons and classes, and dreading that phone call from someone needing help or that person who comes looking for food.

Churches all over the country sit in the midst of crowded cities, yet our pews are empty. We share the Gospel, this good news for the world, but we usually share it among ourselves, never speaking of our good news to the outsiders.

The name "Christian" has been sullied by hypocritical politicians, and arrogant televangelists. Christians are seen on the news demeaning and despising all manners of people in the name of God.

When a preacher in Southern California did a survey of non-Christian college students at a State University, asking them how they felt about Jesus, the majority said they were big fans of Jesus. But when he asked them about the Church, the majority had nothing but bad things to say. They like Jesus, but they can't stand the church.

What has happened that the church and Jesus have become so separated in the minds of unbelievers? How is it that they could love Jesus, but despise the body of Christ?

We can blame the unbelievers for not getting it. We can say the fault is all their's. We've tried to be Jesus; we've tried to do this thing right. We mean well.

We worship every Sunday, tithe, pray, and stay away from all manners of evil. We are good people. If the world rejects us, then it's the world's fault.

And then Jesus shows up, declaring, "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news."

This is a message for our unbelieving world, for sure. There are dark places in our world, places screaming out for the kingdom of God to come near.

Could it be that we Christians need to hear this message as well? Could Jesus be preaching to us, this morning?

Over the next few months as we live in Mark's Gospel and meet this unsettling Messiah, Jesus will stir us up a little bit. He will speak truth to power. He will confront our prejudices. He will rattle our cages. He will bring a whip into our temples and curse our fig trees. And this will be the only side of Jesus we will see, unless we understand Mark's point at the beginning of his Gospel.

The title of our series is "Good News?" with a question mark, because that's how the good news functions in Mark. For those who know they are sick, Jesus is good news. For those who know they are sinners, Jesus is good news. But to the overly religious, those who would put a stumbling block in the way of the "least of these", Jesus is not good news.

For the powerful, Jesus is a threat. But for the powerless, Jesus is good news. For those who are in need of a savior; those who have lived in Galilee, and know what it is to be rejected and needy—Jesus is Good News.

The Kingdom of God has come near, and it's come near to us! Repent! And believe the Good News!

The question we must ask ourselves is: do we believe this good news?

We may declare, "You are the Messiah" with Peter; we may shout with the demons called Legion, "What do you want from me, Jesus, Son of the most High God." We may cry out with Blind Bartimaeus, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" But do we believe the good news?

We may keep the tradition of the Elders, honor God with our lips, teach doctrine, and keep the Sabbath day holy. But do we believe the good news?

Until we truly recognize this Messiah who comes from Galilee—we miss the good news.

Until we see that he has not come for the righteous, but for the sinners; not for the healthy, but for the sick—we miss the good news.

Until we see that he has come to preach good news to the outcasts of our world, those who populate places like Galilee, the prisoners, the demon-possessed, blind and lame—we miss the good news.

Until we see that the widow with her last two worthless coins can give more than those with their great wealth; until we realize that the greatest in the kingdom is the one who has become least—we miss the good news.

Until we realize that if we are to be disciples of this Messiah, then we must also follow him to Jerusalem, not to receive the prestige and power, but to receive a crown of thorns and a cross—we miss the good news.

Until we truly get to know the Messiah who came from Galilee and was crucified in Jerusalem—we miss the good news!

But even for us who may miss the good news, Mark's got some good news for even us today. Remember the words spoken to the women at the tomb that Sunday morning, when they found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty?

“He has been raised; he is not here...But go, tell the disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”

There it is again, Galilee. Mark's story begins and ends in Galilee. If you want to find the Messiah, he's in Galilee.

Graveyards and tombs are no place to find a Messiah. Temples and Jerusalem is no place to find a Messiah. Places of power and worldly authority are no place to find a Messiah.

Are you looking for the Messiah? He's in Galilee, among the people. The poor and the sick, the lame and the blind.

He's in Galilee, among the people. The outcasts, the nobodies.

We've missed it before, but it's not too late. Go to Galilee, and we will find the Messiah, preaching the good news.

It is not too late for us to Repent.

It's not too late for us to believe the Good News.

Don't give up on the church just yet; we're headed to Galilee.

We've got no need for the trappings of religion; we're headed to Galilee.

We've got no place for worldly success and fame and riches; we're headed to Galilee.

We're no longer satisfied simply talking to ourselves about God; we're headed to Galilee.

We're no longer content to sit inside these walls while the world is longing for the kingdom of God to come near; we're headed to Galilee.

For in Galilee lies a second chance, the opportunity to meet the Messiah once again.

In Galilee we hear John the Baptist preaching, "I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In Galilee we see the Spirit descending on Jesus.

In Galilee we see Jesus victorious over Satan in the wilderness.

But Galilee is not some distant, far of, long-time ago place: Galilee is here, in our cities, in our neighborhoods.

Here in Irving, the Kingdom of God has come near.

People from the four corners of the world live in our city—the Kingdom of God has come near.

Refugees from poverty-stricken countries have flooded into our city—the Kingdom of God has come near.

The poor, the foreigner, the outcast—these are our neighbors. The kingdom of God has come near.

We don't have to go to some distant country to find Galilee. Galilee is here.

And where Galilee is, there is Jesus, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news."

The invitation is for us. We've misunderstood Jesus; we've misrepresented the kingdom of God, but we have a second chance. It's not too late to repent. It's not too late to believe the good news. It's not too late to join with Jesus in his Galilean ministry.

As Mark begins his story, he declares that this is only the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. It's as if Mark is asking us from the beginning, will we believe the Good News, and finish the story?

So let us come with Mark into Galilee and meet this Messiah, the one the prophets have longed for, the one we need.

Look, there he is, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. He's speaking to a group of fisherman, just off the boat. What's that? They're dropping their nets. Leaving their catch and their boats behind. They're following Jesus.

We look at what's in our hands. Will we drop it? Will we follow this Messiah into Galilee?

The time is fulfilled.

The Kingdom of God has come near.

Repent.

Believe the good news.