

**Mark 1:1-11**                      *At the Water's Edge*  
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL  
January 10, 2021; Baptism of the Lord  
The Rev. Terry Hamilton-Poore

The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, God's Son, happened just as it was written about in the prophecy of Isaiah:

*Look, I am sending my messenger before you.  
He will prepare your way,  
a voice shouting in the wilderness:  
"Prepare the way for the Lord;  
make his paths straight."*

John the Baptist was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. Everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and were being baptized by John as they confessed their sins. John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. He announced, "One stronger than I am is coming after me. I'm not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

About that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down into him. And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."

\*\*\*\*\*

The first words of the Gospel of Mark are "The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, God's Son. "Good news," Mark says—"Gospel" in the Greek-- but these days, can we even agree on what news is good?

Just look at the news of last Wednesday. For some people, it was good news that Georgia elected its first Black senator, a man who is also an eloquent and prophetic pastor. For others, it

was good news when a white mob waving Confederate and American flags—as though they were equivalent—stormed the Capitol Building to take back “their” house.

What is good news? What is good?

Strangely, there is even some disagreement about that within the Bible, itself. For example, Ezra and Nehemiah see marriages with foreigners as an abomination that pollutes the purity of God’s people; while Chronicles—which was written around the same time—suggests that “intermarriage isn’t a problem demanding harsh response but an opportunity for the nation to grow and become stronger.”<sup>1</sup>

That same debate continues into the New Testament—the question of ethnic purity and control (see the debate about the Gentiles in the early church in Acts) versus openness, equality, and inclusivity. Which are we to think of as good? Which does God think of as good?

The leaning toward ethnic purity and control is also linked to the issue of power and conquest. Should we live in peace with the other, treating the alien among us the same as we would a native-born citizen, as Exodus and Leviticus and Deuteronomy command? Or should we wipe out the other, as the book of Joshua seems to require? Which is good? Which does God think is good?

Many white Christians have been steeped in the narrative of ethnic purity and conquest—that’s where we get White Supremacy and Manifest Destiny and “The White Man’s Burden.” You

---

<sup>1</sup> Melody D. Knowles, “Ethnic Outsiders in the Chronicler’s Genealogies,”—editorial note on 1 Chronicles in *The CEB Study Bible*(Nashville: 2011) 627 OT

can't say it's not biblical—other than the “white” part, because, let's be clear, none of the people who understood God to be telling them to conquer the Promised Land were white.

So the tension is there within scripture, and the tension is real. But which theological thread does Jesus embrace? When Jesus steps into the baptismal river to be claimed as God's Son, what does he understand his calling to be? What news has he been anointed to share? Which understanding of God's purpose will he proclaim as “good”?

Mark wastes no time in letting us know.

First off, as the New Testament scholar Richard Deibert observes, “Mark begins by locating Jesus within a particular prophet, Isaiah.”<sup>2</sup> Even the word *gospel*, translated as *good news*, echoes Isaiah in the Greek translation with which Mark's readers would have been most familiar. In chapter 40, the prophet cries: “Go up to a high mountain, you who proclaim *gospel* to Zion. Lift high your voice with strength, you who proclaim *gospel* to Jerusalem.”<sup>3</sup>

And what was Isaiah's “gospel”? Mark's readers knew Isaiah as the prophet who called the people out of exile; who proclaimed release to the captive, new sight for the blind, uplift for all the poor, outcast, and downtrodden. Even the eunuchs are singled out for good news in Isaiah. At the time, the word we translate as “eunuch” was a term that was used interchangeably for those who were physically altered and for those who were what we might now call homosexual;

---

<sup>2</sup> Richard I. Deibert, *Mark* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999) p. 9

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

and eunuchs were considered unfit to enter the inner part of the temple. But Isaiah declares that even eunuchs are fully a part of God's people.

All of this gives us a clue about where Jesus is coming from; but Mark doesn't stop with Isaiah.

The primary spokesperson Mark uses to establish Jesus' identity is John, and in describing John's clothing of camel hair, Mark evokes the prophet Elijah, who stood in fierce resistance to an oppressive and corrupt king and queen; who saved a foreign widow and raised her child from the dead;

and John is depicted in the wilderness, eating a wilderness diet of locusts and honey, a reminder of the wilderness journey from slavery to freedom, and of God's acts of faithfulness along the way.

So, the stage has been set, and then, Jesus, himself, steps onto the scene as the one to whom all of this is pointing. He comes in response to John's call to seek forgiveness and be reoriented to God--a call that has brought "the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem." If it's *all* the people, then it's all different classes of people. And because Jerusalem was an international city, occupied by the Romans, whose army was conscripted from all over, "all the people" indicates all different nationalities, as well.

When Jesus steps into that river filled with the multi-colored, multi-classed, multi-lingual crowd, to share the waters of baptism with them, the Holy Spirit descends and enters him; and God declares: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."

Do we still need to wonder what news God thinks is good?

This has been one tumultuous week, coming right after a tumultuous year. My daughter texted me on Wednesday, “I’m tired of living in historic times!” Aren’t we all?! And it’s easy, in all the noise and confusion, to lose sight of where God is in all this, and where Jesus is. It’s easy to lose sight of how we are called to act in the midst of it. That’s why it’s good, periodically, to step away from the clamor out into the starkness of the wilderness. Good to see Jesus immersed in the waters of the Jordan, and remember our own baptism, washing away everything that isn’t important or helpful.

In Jesus, we see that this is not news of domination, but of equality, in which we all stand on the same level before God. Not news of privilege, but of sacrifice for the good of all. Not news of clinging to a crumbling past, but of creating a new and better future for everyone. From the moment Jesus steps out of that river, still dripping with the waters of baptism, that is the news he will share in every word and action, no matter what it costs him.

So, today, once again, we stand at the edge of that river--the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. It’s our beginning, too, as Christ’s baptized siblings. Here, we, too, are claimed by God and called to share the same gospel—the same good news-- with *our* words and *our* actions: news that frees people, that uplifts people, that includes people, that heals people.

How good is that?!

And in sharing that good news, we get to hear God say to *us* the same words that Jesus heard:

“You are my beloved child; in you, I find happiness.”

That’s the very best news, indeed. Thanks be to God.