

The Beginning of the Good News Sunday, 3/1/20

1 You've all heard, and possibly told, one of those good news/bad news jokes. For example, a man says to his partner, "I have good news and bad news. Which do you want to hear first?" "Just tell me the good news," his partner replies. "The good news is that the air bags in our new car work perfectly." Every Gospel in the Bible has a little bit of this character of a good news/bad news joke, but Mark's Gospel leads right off with it. Mark starts with the good news, with the very first line of his Gospel declaring "the beginning of the good news." Mark identifies that good news as "Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God." The rest of the Gospel is really just illustration of that good news. In particular, Mark writes to convince us exactly why Jesus is good news.

And yet, just four verses into his Gospel, Mark drops some bad news that you may have overlooked. Mark tells us that John came "preaching a baptism of repentance." Why, you may ask, is this bad news? If Mark had written this as a joke, he might have put it this way: "I have good news and bad news. First the good news. Jesus is coming. He's coming to save you from all that's broken in your life and your world, and he has the power and authority to do so, because he's the Son of God. The bad news is that you can't just keep on living the same way and expect to be saved. In fact, the work begins now, preparing your life and your world by turning away from destructive attitudes and behaviors and choosing to follow and do the work of Jesus.

Granted, that wouldn't have made a very funny joke, but that's as it should be, because Mark wasn't kidding around. His news is good, but it's not trivial, and it's unlike any other good news you'll hear. It has the potential to stand your present and your future on their heads in ways you couldn't even begin to imagine. Whether it will change your life depends on two things: Can you accept Mark's premise that Jesus is the Son of God, and can you honestly recon with your need for repentance.

2 If Mark had started his Gospel with verse 4, I wonder how many people would have read it. Imagine meeting this guy on the street, a kind of modern-day John the Baptist. How much time would you be willing to spend talking with him, or even just listening to him? I'm guessing I'd be inclined to avoid making eye contact with him all together. And yet, we need to hear what John and Jesus say to us, because repentance is the necessary starting

point for all of us, without which there wouldn't really be any need for good news. That's why we gathered here on Ash Wednesday and put ashes on our foreheads. It's why we confess our sins in prayer.

If you think this guy looks crazy, imagine how John the Baptist must have looked. His clothing was made out of camel's hair- I'll bet it was dirty and smelly! His diet consisted of locusts and honey, so I imagine he might have had one or two grasshopper legs stuck in his beard. And then there was his crazy message. The whole baptism idea for John was just an outward sign of an inward change, something much more difficult: turning away from anything and everything ungodly and lean into living in a new direction. Talk about a busybody. No wonder Herod had him beheaded! John must have hardly looked or sounded like the herald of good news. And yet, it was exactly John and his message that God chose to announce the ministry of Jesus.

3 What does John's message teach us about the good news of "Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God?" Let's continue Mark's narrative now, picking up in verse 9. **{Read Mark 1:9-15, NIV}**.

This whole good news/bad news aspect of the Gospel is illustrated in the following story: A soap manufacturer and a pastor were walking together down a street in a large city. The soap manufacturer casually said, "The Gospel you preach hasn't done much good has it? Just observe. There is still a lot of wickedness in the world, and a lot of wicked people, too!" The pastor made no reply until they passed a dirty little child making mud pies in the gutter. Seizing the opportunity, the pastor said, "I see that soap hasn't done much good in the world either; for there is much dirt, and many dirty people around." The soap man said, "Oh, well, soap is only useful when it is applied." And the pastor said, "Exactly, so it is with the Gospel."¹

In a way, that's what connects baptism and repentance with the Good News. Just as the application of soap and water cleans our dirty bodies, the application of the water of baptism is a cleaning of our lives, an outward sign that we've committed to do exactly as Jesus, and John before him, commanded us: Repent! Wake up and turn away from your self-

¹ <https://ministry127.com/resources/illustration/soap-and-the-gospel>

centered ways of living. Start living the way God wants you to live. Do it now, and keep on doing it!

Does God love us regardless of what we do? Yes. Has Jesus already done all the work necessary to save us? Yes again. But just like soap, the salvation of Jesus is only useful to us when we apply it, and in order to make it our own, we have to get wet- not just once at our baptism, but again and again, starting each day by reorienting our lives to God and turning from anything that distances us from God. My own need for repentance is usually more frequent than daily. When I have the presence of mind to do so, prompted by the Holy Spirit, I remember who I'm following and why I'm here, and I repent of bad attitudes or behaviors, sometimes on a moment by moment basis. How about you? Do you ever pause to reorient your thinking, your attitudes, your actions, your life to Jesus? Repentance is about so much more than feeling sorry for our sins.

4 Since we'll be celebrating two infant baptisms in the next few weeks, let's think about how the baptism of babies makes sense in light of the critical importance of repentance. Can babies repent of their sins when they haven't even learned how to walk, talk, or sleep through the night? In the United Methodist Church, we believe that even the ability to repent is a gift of God's grace, something we haven't earned and can't do alone on our own power. When we baptize a baby, we simply acknowledge what we already believe about adult baptisms: That none of us, apart from God, are able to turn away from our impulses to do wrong. None of us, apart from the grace and power of God's Holy Spirit, are able to choose to pick up our crosses and follow the example of Jesus in living self-sacrificially. God's grace always goes before us, with us, and after us, whether we're a newborn or 120 years old.

5 Some of you who received ashes last Wednesday night heard me say some variation of this: "Repent and believe in the good news." It's no accident that Jesus said the very same thing at the beginning of his ministry. "'The time has come,'" he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"² Can you see the connection between repentance and the Good News? The Good News of Jesus becomes good news when we not

² Mark 1:15. New International Version (2011)

only recognize the brokenness in our lives, but when we devote ourselves whole heartedly to choosing God's side. On Ash Wednesday we begin a special season of repentance, when we receive the ash cross on our foreheads, but our repentance doesn't come into full flower until Easter Sunday, when we recognize that our imitation of Jesus isn't limited to just picking up our crosses and following him. No, if we follow Jesus, we'll also be raised from death like him! Repentance and resurrection necessarily go together, just as the last chapter of a book must follow from the first. Mark's Gospel isn't a good news/bad news joke, a kind of cruel teasing of good news with a biting punchline that takes away the hope at the end. It's just the opposite! It's by acknowledging the bad news first that we begin to understand and embrace what good news really looks like.

6 What does all this teach us about who Jesus is? Mark makes some pretty bold claims, naming Jesus as both the Son of God and the Messiah. We'll examine more of his evidence in the weeks to come. We saw evidence today that Jesus was at least a prophet, someone who spoke to people in a clear and powerful way about God and how God wants us to live our lives. But what do you say? Who is this man?

Who we say Jesus is matters, because what he asks of us is unlike anything we've been asked to give by any other person, including our parents, our children, and our spouses. Jesus doesn't ask for a partnership, he asks for everything. His demand that we be "all in" might sound like bad news to you. If it does, I encourage you to not to turn away discouraged. We're only at the beginning of our journey through Lent, and in the weeks to come, we'll discover that Jesus is in fact much more than just a prophet. His expectations are high for his followers, but his love and grace are bigger. We're on a journey to Easter Sunday, and if you stay on the road with Jesus, you'll discover good news that puts everything else in perspective.



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