



Sermon Transcript January 7, 2018

Gospel of Mark: The Good News of Jesus Good News Mark 1:1-20

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on January 7, 2018 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon can be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
Mark 1:1-20

¹The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,
“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
who will prepare your way,
³the voice of one crying in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’”

⁴John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” ⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” ¹²The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

¹⁶Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁷And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” ¹⁸And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.

Introduction to the Gospel of Mark

This morning we begin a series on the Gospel of Mark. This series will take us all the way to Easter Sunday. The Gospel of Mark is only sixteen chapters long. And yet, the journey to the cross takes up over half of the Gospel of Mark. In Mark 8-10, Jesus has three conversations with his disciples about his pending death on the cross and his subsequent resurrection from the dead. Then in Mark 11 we see Jesus riding into Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday. Then the rest of the Gospel of Mark is about the events of that one week that ends with the crucifixion of Jesus and his resurrection from the dead. In Mark 16 we read of two women who went to the tomb where Jesus was buried, only to find it empty. Here they were greeted by an angel who said to them, *“Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here. See the place where they laid him.”* So this journey through the Gospel of Mark will be a fitting journey for us as we make our way towards Good Friday and Easter Sunday. (Easter, by the way, happens to be on April 1 this year, April Fool’s Day. One can only imagine the sermon titles that will emerge as a result.)

The Gospel of Mark is a written account of the life of Jesus Christ. Mark is very clear about that in the opening verse, *“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”* In other words, this book is about Jesus. It is one of four such accounts we have for us in Holy Scripture. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are four written testimonies about the person and the life of Jesus. Mark is the first one of the four to be written. In fact, after it was written it was widely disseminated and Matthew and Luke used the Gospel of Mark as a template for their account of the life of Jesus. That is why these three Gospels are called the “synoptic gospels.” While they each have a character that is unique to themselves, they follow a very similar pattern in telling the story of Jesus.

As Mark begins his account of the life of Jesus, he gets right to the point. As you begin to read the Gospel of Mark, you have no question as to what Mark thinks about this Jesus. He states his opinion about Jesus in the very first verse. This Jesus is the Son of God. He begins by saying, *“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”* Then with the rest of the book he sets out to prove his point.

One interesting feature about the Gospel of Mark is that it doesn’t contain a lot of the teachings of Jesus. It is not to say that the Gospel of Mark is completely void of the teachings of Jesus. It just doesn’t have large sections of the teachings of Jesus, like the Gospel of Matthew does. Rather, Mark makes his point about Jesus by simply recording for us what Jesus does. So for the first eight chapters, the miracles of Jesus are a

prominent feature as Mark makes his case about Jesus. In fact, after witnessing Jesus walk on water, heal the blind and the deaf, feed the 5,000 with only five loaves of bread and two fish, and cast out the demons . . . Peter makes a confession right in the middle of the book. In Mark 8:29, after witnessing miracle after miracle and listening to Jesus teach, Peter concludes that Jesus is indeed the promised Messiah. He confesses to Jesus, “*You are the Christ.*” In other words, Peter was convinced by what he observed in Jesus that Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah.

I think it is helpful for us to know that the author of the Gospel of Mark is a man by the name of John Mark. This is the same John Mark who accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey, but later deserted him half way through their trip. Barnabas wanted John Mark to go with him and Paul on their second missionary journey, but Paul protested against taking John Mark because of what he did on the first trip. So Paul and Barnabas separated and Barnabas took John Mark under his wing and we find that when Paul was later in prison he called for John Mark to come to him. And now, here he is, an author of one of the four accounts we have of Jesus. But while John Mark is the author, the source for his information was Peter. You can’t get any more of an “inside scoop” on the life of Jesus than Peter. He was as close to Jesus as they came, part of the “inner circle of three” and privy to some of the intimate conversations with Jesus. As early as the second century, there are several documents that affirm that Mark was “a disciple and an interpreter of Peter” and after the death of Peter he recorded for us this account of the life of Jesus. My favorite quote from one of these documents reads like this, “Mark declared, who is called ‘stump-fingered’, because he had rather small fingers in comparison with the stature of the rest of his body. He was the interpreter of Peter. After the death of Peter himself he wrote down this same gospel in the region of Italy.”¹

So I can imagine Peter recounting to Mark this confession he made about Jesus being the Christ. Perhaps he recounted the miracles that he witnessed Jesus doing and how he couldn’t help but conclude that this Jesus was indeed the Messiah. But I picture Peter then pausing and turning to Mark and saying, “but I didn’t understand what that confession fully meant.” Because it is here where Jesus begins to tell them about the cross. The first time Peter heard such words from the mouth of Jesus he protested. Mark 8:32 tells us that Peter actually took Jesus aside and rebuked him. Can’t you see Peter recounting this scene with John Mark? I can see him shaking his head, knowing what he knows now, and saying, “can you believe I had the audacity to rebuke Jesus . . . But I didn’t get the whole thing about the cross. In fact, Jesus turned to me and then said, “*Get behind me Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.*”

From this point on Mark continues to build his case that Jesus is the Son of God by telling us the story of the cross. Here is the irony of Mark's account of the life of Jesus. It is the cross that forms the clinching argument that Jesus is indeed the Son of God. As Mark recounts the crucifixion of Jesus, he tells us of a Roman centurion who had taken part in the events of that day. Crucifixion was a common form of punishment in the Roman world, so it wasn't like this centurion hadn't been part of a scene like this before. But this time, it was different. And while standing at the cross and looking up at Jesus, this Roman centurion confessed, "*Truly this man was the Son of God!*" William Lane says "The reason that almost half of Mark's sixteen chapters describe the final period of Jesus' ministry is that it is in his suffering, death and resurrection that the revelation of God in Christ is most clearly seen."² In other words, it is the cross that most reveals to us that Jesus is indeed the Son of God.

The reason Mark records this testimony about Jesus is so that we too may believe. These four Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus are written to illicit a response from us. In fact, the word "gospel" has become a technical term for Christian preaching.³ We see this call for a response in our passage this morning. In Mark 1:15 the announcement of the coming of the kingdom of God calls us to "*repent and believe in the gospel.*" The confession that Mark makes in Mark 1:1 and the confession that Peter makes in Mark 8:29 and the confession the Roman centurion makes in Mark 15:39 needs to be our confession this morning. John says the same thing about his Gospel account of the life of Jesus. At the end of John 20, John tells us the purpose for why he wrote an account of the life of Jesus. He says, "*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, and that by believing you might have life in his name.*"

My prayer for us as we move forward in our journey through the Gospel of Mark is that we too would respond with belief in Jesus. For some, that may be a first time expression of belief. We call that "conversion." Perhaps you are skeptical of the claims of Jesus or no one has ever explained to you that you need to turn in faith to Jesus. My prayer is that through this series, some would for the first time make the discovery the Roman centurion made in Mark 15. But belief is not just a one time expression. It is an ongoing expression of faith. Anyone who has been a follower of Jesus for any length of time knows that our faith is filled with peaks and valleys, it is filled faith and doubt. So my prayer for many of us is that this journey through the Gospel of Mark would strengthen and deepen our ongoing belief in Jesus. Jesus is worthy of our complete trust. And so this morning we begin by thinking about the gospel. It is good news about Jesus. It is good news about salvation. It is good news that moves us to mission.

Good News About Jesus

The gospel is first of all good news about Jesus. When we read the opening statement of the Gospel of Mark, “*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,*” it is good for us to know who Mark is writing to and what has prompted him to write this account of the life of Christ. The Gospel of Mark is not just some generic paper or treatise on the person and the work of Christ. Rather, it was written to a specific group of people and it was written to address what was happening in their world at that time.

Mark wrote his account of the life of Jesus somewhere between 60 and 70 A.D. and it was written to believers living in Rome. The incident that caused Mark to record for us his account of the life of Christ was the intense persecution of Christians under the reign of Nero. In 64 A.D. a fire broke out in the city of Rome that reached all but four of the fourteen wards of the city. Three of the wards were reduced to ash and rubble, while seven other wards were greatly damaged. Politically, many suspected that Nero either started the fire himself or allowed it to spread so that he could rebuild the city according to his plans. When he couldn’t shake free from the suspicion directed towards him, he blamed the Christians for the fire and as a result a cruel and intense persecution was carried out against the Christians in Rome and many were rounded up and martyred. In fact, it was under the persecution of Nero that both the Apostle Peter and the Apostle Paul were executed. Peter was crucified upside down and Paul was beheaded.

Why the Christians? Why did Nero find the Christians to be an easy target for persecution? The Roman historian, Tacitus, felt some pity for the Christians who were falsely blamed for setting fire to the city of Rome. In fact, he saw right through what Nero was doing. He wrote, “To suppress this rumor, Nero fabricated scapegoats—and punished with every refinement the notoriously depraved Christians (as they were popularly called.)⁴ But even though Tacitus felt some pity for the Christians, his words capture some of the mood that average Roman citizens had of Christians. Did you catch how Tacitus referred to Christians as “the notoriously depraved Christians?” In general, Christians were viewed by the Roman community as “haters of mankind” because they did not participate in the idolatrous feasts which were often accompanied with various acts of sexual immorality. They were also called atheists because they did not worship the pantheon of Roman gods. They were considered to be anti-social and unpatriotic.

Knowing this background forces us to read this opening statement in the Gospel of Mark with Roman eyes and ears. How would a Roman read and understand this opening phrase, “*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*”? We talked

about this on Christmas Eve Day when we noted that the birth of Caesar Augustus, the Roman ruler during the birth of Jesus was also referred to as “gospel” - “good news” - “glad tidings of great joy.” An inscription dating back to 9 B. C. says of Caesar Augustus, “the birthday of the god was for the world the beginning of joyful tidings (gospel) which have been proclaimed on his account.”⁵ So when Roman eyes would read this opening statement about Jesus, they would see the word “gospel” and it would trigger in their mind what was said of the Emperor of Rome. The word “gospel” to Roman eyes and ears meant, “an historical event which introduces a new situation for the world.”⁶ And so Mark announces Jesus’ coming as an event that brings about a radically new state of affairs for mankind⁷ and rivals the claims of Caesar as Lord. In other words, Mark’s opening statement presents Jesus as the true Son of God, the one who truly brings about a “new state of affairs for mankind.” Or as Mark puts it later, in Jesus, the kingdom of God has come into the world. And so this gospel is written to encourage a persecuted church to persevere, because Jesus is the true Son of God who rose from the dead.

Therefore, the good news we proclaim is first and foremost about Jesus. He is the Son of God. John the Baptist said of Jesus in verses 7-8, “*After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*” When Jesus comes down to the waters of baptism a voice from heaven is heard saying, “*You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.*” Stephen Wellum said of Jesus, “Even at his baptism and the beginning of his earthly ministry, Jesus self identified as God the Son incarnate, the one man anointed and able to do what only God can do.”⁸

We may not be living under the persecution of Nero, but we do find ourselves often standing on the outside of the mind of the culture and perhaps even viewed by the culture as being “haters of mankind.” In fact, if there is anything that rubs our culture the wrong way is the notion of “intolerance” or when we might suggest that there is a right and a wrong. And so the words of Jesus in Mark 8:34-36 ring just as true for us as those who first received this account of the life of Jesus. Jesus said, “*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?*” What is it that enables us to endure such things like our brothers and sisters who have gone before us and paid the ultimate price for their faith? It is the reminder that the gospel is first and foremost good news about Jesus. He is the Son of God and by announcing his coming God has brought about a “new state of affairs for mankind.”

Good News About Salvation

So what is this “new state of affairs for mankind?” Even though the word for “good news” or “gospel” had a point of reference to the Roman world, as we just saw, I still think that when Mark used this word, the predominant thought on his mind had to do with how this word was rooted in the Old Testament. In fact, as Mark begins to make his case about the “good news” of Jesus he starts by referring back to the Old Testament. We see in verse 2 the prophet Isaiah is mentioned and then we have a quote from the Old Testament. Even though Isaiah is the one mentioned, this quote is a combination of verses from Exodus, Malachi and Isaiah. I think Isaiah is mentioned here because the latter half of his book is about the “good news” of the future coming of God’s salvation to this world. In Isaiah 52:7 he writes, *“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’”*

We saw in our recent Advent series that there were 400 years between the last prophet of the Old Testament, Malachi, and John the Baptist. They are known as “the 400 silent years.” So when John the Baptist comes onto the scene, he comes to *“Prepare the way of the Lord, to make his paths straight.”* In other words, in pointing to Jesus he is announcing that the promised salvation of God has come. This is “good news!” This becomes the focal point of the message of Jesus as it is referred to in verse 15, *“The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand.”*

What is interesting about the story of John the Baptist is the way Mark uses the word “wilderness.” It is quoted from Isaiah in verse 3, *“a voice crying in the wilderness.”* It is used to indicate where John the Baptist carried out his ministry in verse 4, *“John appeared in the wilderness.”* And it is used of Jesus in verses 12-13 to describe where Jesus went under the direction of the Holy Spirit, *“the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days being tempted by Satan.”* This reference to “the wilderness” is not just an incidental detail to the story of Jesus. Rather, it calls the Jewish worshiper to think back to the early years of their journey to the Promised Land. Just as Israel passed through the waters of the Red Sea, Jesus passed through the waters of baptism. Just as Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days. In Deuteronomy 8:2 God said of Israel’s wandering in the dessert, *“The LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, . . . testing you to know what was in your heart.”* It was for 40 days that Jesus was tempted by Satan. It not incidental that through John the Baptist’s ministry that the people of Israel are being called back out into the “wilderness” to repent and be baptized

as they get ready to receive the salvation that will come with Jesus.

Mark is indicating here that there is a “new Exodus” taking place through Jesus. Mark is demonstrating that in Jesus there is a “new Israel” being formed through whom God will bring his promised blessing to the world. That is the point of his baptism. As we discover in his testing in the wilderness, unlike Israel, Jesus is perfect in every way. But by going out into the wilderness and by submitting to a “baptism of repentance” the exalted Son of God is identifying with sinful man. The wilderness in the journey of Israel was a place of judgment. Jesus was taking on the judgment of God so that we could know salvation. One theologian put it this way, “He associates himself with sinners and ranges himself in the ranks of the guilty, not to find salvation for himself, not on account of his own guilt in his flight from the approaching wrath, but because he is at one with the Church and the bearer of divine mercy.”⁹

Throughout the Gospel of Mark we will see evidence of this good news of salvation. In Mark 2 we will hear Jesus claim to have authority to forgive sins. In Mark 10 he will say that he has come “*not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.*” And when the Roman centurion is looking up at the cross and confessing that Jesus is indeed the Son of God, Mark is telling us that at that very moment the curtain in the temple is being torn in two, meaning that there is now access to the living God through Jesus Christ. This is the good news! Salvation has come and in Jesus there is forgiveness of sin and hope for eternal life.

This week I stumbled across a touching conversation Justin Taylor had with his three year old son. He was tucking his son into bed when he said to his little boy, “Hey, I got a secret to tell you.” He leaned into his son’s ear and with an exaggerated whisper he said, “I. Love. You.” His son smiled and looked up at his dad and said, “I have a secret for you, Daddy!” And he leaned into his dad’s ear and said . . . “I’m hungry!”¹⁰ This sweet interchange between this dad and his son is a picture of the gospel of salvation. As we make our way through the Gospel of Mark, may you hear the “exaggerated whisper” of God that says to you, “I. Love. You.” This is the thing Peter and the disciples were having trouble putting together about the Messiah who has come. They didn’t understand the cross. When he begins his earthly ministry, he marches out into the “wilderness” and so identifies himself with us and this begins his march to the cross where ultimate love is on display. Why does he do it? He knows we are hungry. But the hunger of the soul can never be satisfied apart from Jesus. Jesus said, “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*” Jesus is our righteousness and it is through faith in Jesus that he satisfies our hunger.

Good News About Mission

Our passage ends by telling us how Jesus called his first disciples. Here we see him issue a call to Peter and Andrew, James and John to follow him. In his invitation to them he says, *“Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.”* So yes, this good news is about Jesus and it is about salvation. But it is also to be proclaimed. That is how the word “gospel” was used in reference to the birth of Caesar Augustus. That inscription said, “the birthday of the god was for the world the beginning of joyful tidings (gospel) which have been proclaimed on his account.” Do we not have something better in Jesus to proclaim. It is also the expectation of the prophet Isaiah that we proclaim this “gospel” to other. He said, *“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’”* This verse is quoted in Romans 10 where Paul says, *“And how are they to hear without someone preaching . . . How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news.”*

Can you hear the cry of the world in that little three year old boy? “I’m hungry.” In some ways, he didn’t hear what his dad had to say in that tender moment. How many people don’t hear the whisper of God’s love, but they continue to be hungry. Our world has adopted slogans to live by that in the end still leave you hungry. Our world says, “you have to be yourself and not listen to what others say.” Often this means defining your identity by your desires. But Jesus comes along and tells us that we won’t find our true selves until we find ourselves in relation to God. Our world says that we should “be free to do what we wish as long as we don’t hurt anyone.” Jesus comes along and demonstrates that true freedom is found in sacrifice, losing ourselves in humble repentance at the cross, and this is where you find love. Our world says there is not such thing as right and wrong and we all get to determine that for ourselves. If that is the case, there is no God and there is no legitimate cry for justice. Jesus comes along and goes the cross, the place of judgment, so that the wrath of God is removed and we are no longer under condemnation.

May our time in the Gospel of Mark renew our commitment to evangelism. The good news of Jesus by definition is meant to be proclaimed and we are surrounded by a hungry world who doesn’t know where to find bread. This is why we are compelled to plant churches. This is why at the end of the month we are going to initiate a “Crossing the Bridge” assignment. This is why we are here on 511 Maple Street.

Conclusion

Be engaged in this series. Read the Gospel of Mark. Lean in to the whisper of God's love for you. Turn in faith and belief. Proclaim this hope wherever you go.

It is the Good News about Jesus. It is the Good News about Salvation. It is the Good News About Mission.

¹R. G. Heard, "The Old Gospel Prologues" *JThS* n.s. 6 (1955) pp. 1-16

²William Lane *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 2

³*Ibid.*, 44

⁴*Ibid.*, 14

⁵*Ibid.*, 43

⁶*Ibid.*, 43

⁷*Ibid.*, 43

⁸Stephen Wellum *God the Son Incarnate* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016) 152

⁹A. Schlatter quoted in William Lane, 58

¹⁰Justin Taylor "A Touching Conversation" <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/touching-conversation/>

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COMMUNITY GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Share with the group a highlight of your holiday season.
2. As you start a new year, share with the group a “next step of obedience” you would like to take in your faith journey. Share how you would like the group to help you take this step.
3. Share one thing from the sermon that stood out to you.

Diving Into The Word

4. Read Mark 1:1 and try to make five observations about the gospel from this verse. What do you see in Mark’s opening confession. Compare what he says to Mark 8:29 and 15:39.
5. Read Mark 1:2-8 and discuss how Mark “prepared the way for the Lord.” How does this help us understand how we prepare the way to receive the Lord? What role should the confession of sin play in our faith? When is the last time you confessed sin to God? When is the last time you confessed sin to other? (see 1 John 1:9 and James 5:16)
6. Read Mark 1:9-12 and discuss why Jesus was baptized. How does this passage demonstrate that Jesus is the Son of God and is able to bring us salvation?
7. Read Mark 1:14-20 and discuss what this passage teaches us about evangelism.

Taking It Home

8. What is one thing you are taking with you from your conversation?
9. What is a step you can take to become “fishers of men”?