

B Advent 2 12.10.23

Mark 1:1-8

Focus Statement: God keeps God's promises.

Last week's reading started us at the end of Mark's Gospel. This morning, we finally get the beginning. Literally, the beginning. The first word in Greek in Mark's Gospel is arche, which means, "the beginning." Both the beginning of Mark's writing and the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry. Beyond the beginning, I want to spend some time this morning with verse one, six words in Greek, a few more in English, because this sentence functions as both a title for the Gospel and a summary of what's included. In six little words, the writer of Mark gives us the core of Jesus' not just mission and ministry, but very identity and essence of the savior of the world.

We talked about arche, which is a good introduction. You might have heard echoes of Genesis one-one, which starts with the Hebrew equivalent of that same word. But its the second word where things starts get really interesting. The Greek is euangelion, which is translated as "good news." Euangelion may sound like another English word you're used to, evangelism, or evangelical. Which is a word that can get a rough rap in the way it's been co-opted by a particular version of Christianity, but it is in the name of our denomination for a reason, because evangelism means sharing the good news, the good message, the good word of the promise of the hope of God through Jesus Christ for the world.

But good news is not the only way Euangelion can be translated. It is also sometimes translated as "Gospel," which is the Old English word for "good news," Gah from the Old English "got" meaning "good" and spel from the Old English "spel," meaning story or message. Here's why this matters. We think of a Gospel as being a narrative account of the

life of Jesus Christ, but it's more than that. What the writer of Mark was saying was not that he was giving you a biography of the life of Jesus, but that through this biography of the life of Jesus, you would come to know Jesus himself as the good news, the good story, the good message itself, incarnated into human form.

How do we know that? Oh friends, we know that because fun Greek facts are awesome awesome. The English "of" is the Greek genitive case. Genitive is the possessive case, but it's more than that. It is this rich, full depth of connection and relationship assuring us that Jesus isn't the bringer of good news, he, in the flesh, is the good news of God's love and God's presence among us.

So Jesus is the good news, but who is Jesus? And why? This gets us to our last three words. Jesus, first off, is the Christ. Christ, *christos* in Greek, is the Greek translation of the Hebrew *messiah*, meaning the anointed one of God. *Christos* can also be translated as Lord. In the Hebrew tradition, the title was a claim to the kingship of Israel. To call someone the Christ in the first century was to make a claim to their rule over Israel over and above the emperor. Which would be an act of political treason punishable by death. Right off the bat, word four of the Gospel, the writer of Mark is setting the stakes for us. Jesus is the Christ, the true ruler of God's people.

He is also, our last two words, the Son of God. Son of God was a term regularly associated with Israel's leaders, coming from the Davidic tradition of the kings being sons of God by adoption. But in this instance, there's more than that. In the Gospels, first here in Mark and

then in the other three, Son of God is a theological term, showing us Jesus' unique relationship with and connection to God as the one who is both divine and human, God in human clothing. The one, to circle back to the beginning of the sentence, who is the good news.

All of this got me thinking about John. John the Baptist, you may remember from previous Advent two sermons, I love that guy. He is a great unexpected Christmas character. Mark's John the Baptist isn't as out there as Matthew's or Luke's, who have him calling people a "brood of vipers," asking them about "flee[ing] from the wrath to come," and threatening to chop them down and throw them into the fire. But he was still in the wilderness wearing clothes made from camel's hair and eating locusts, so still a live wire character.

You may have noticed something else about Mark's Gospel, or maybe you didn't because we're so culturally conditioned to insert it into the story. There is no infancy narrative in Mark's Gospel. No stories of Jesus' early life, of angels appearing to Joseph and Mary, of shepherds and wise men and a baby in a manger. Even John, who also doesn't have an infancy narrative, has "In the beginning was the word," and Jesus' presence with the Father before the creation of everything. Mark, in contrast, gives us a fully-formed adult Jesus arriving on the scene to be baptized by John in the Jordan, already with the heavens torn open and a dove descending and a voice from heaven declaring him, God's Son, the Beloved, with [whom God is] well pleased." Mark doesn't need an infancy narrative because for Mark where Jesus came from is not the important part of the story. Mark's abrupt beginning serves to center the narrative on what is crucial about Jesus, that he is the Christ, the Son of

God. That he is the fulfillment of God's promises of salvation throughout all of history, a fulfillment that took place not at his birth, but at his death on the cross and subsequent resurrection. Jesus matters because of who he is, not because of where he comes from.

And John points us to that. That's John's whole role in the Gospel, to point us to Jesus. He is "the voice of the one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord." A reference that points us to our Isaiah text from this morning and reminds us that Jesus is not a new idea, he is the same old, old story of God's love for God's people. Manifest in a new way, yes, but the fulfillment of ancient promises.

I've always thought of John as on-board with that, of being as aware of his importance and role in history as Jesus himself certainly was. But this week, for whatever reason, I started to read John differently. Maybe it's because with Jesus as the sole exception, no character in any Bible story is ever totally sure of their role in the narrative. Unless of course they're super cocky, in which case they're usually wrong. The biggest heroes in scripture are usually pretty unsure why they are the ones forced into the position they are in, unsure of why God has called them to this task. And I started wondering this week if John was among that number. If instead of confident and cocky, "you brood of vipers," John was more like me. If John knew about Jesus, heard the rumblings of his teachings, and thought, I don't know who this guy is, and I don't know just what he's up to, but I know my scripture, I know God's promises, and I know the desperate, longing need of the world. So I'm going to, with every fiber of my being, point to this guy, and hope and pray I am pointing in the right

direction. A leap of faith rewarded, let's be fair, not in John's lifetime, but in his on-going role as the one who points us to the promise of God in Jesus.

Dear people of God, Advent is a season for following in John's footsteps and making real our wildest hopes about where God is at work in the world. It is about trusting the wild promise of a God who slipped into skin in the most vulnerable form to walk among us, live with us, learn from us, love us, and eventually die for us, so that nothing could separate us from the God who has loved us since before the beginning, when there was nothing but a voice moving over the waters. And so, I challenge you, encourage you, urge you even, to follow John's lead and trust that you are the person for the work of pointing this world to Jesus. Even when, maybe especially when, you can't see the whole journey but only the next step.

And here's the gift we have that John, at least in Mark's telling, did not. We have each other. There are so many ways we can be arms pointing to God's love, voices proclaiming that good news, and we get to do it together. We have a special meeting after worship, where we'll talk about some risks we are considering taking with our building. And, let's face it, Doug will tell us every time we pass a budget it's a risk, but somehow God keeps showing up. Meeting people at the food pantry is a risk. Helping out a neighbor is a risk. Really listening to someone, opening up with them about their struggles and yours, is a risk. The first time you walked into this congregation, be it last year or seventy years ago, you took a risk of entering a new community, and we are richer for your courage in that moment.

Dear people of God, John points us to a promise that is older than time itself. He gives voice to a story that hasn't changed since before the world began. The story of a God who loves us beyond more than we can imagine. And we are invited to, like John, take part in pointing out that old, old story. Thanks be to God. Amen.