



## THE BEGINNING OF THE GOSPEL

Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:1-11

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Mark takes a flying leap, dives straight into the deep end of the pool, descends all the way down into the water, and touches the bottom at the deepest point. Unlike John, the opening of Mark's Gospel has no soaring words of poetic theology. Unlike Matthew, Mark has no ancient genealogy, strange dreams, violent king, or mysterious strangers from the east. Unlike Luke, Mark has no angel visitation to Mary, no journey to Bethlehem, no shepherds in the field, or any angelic chorus announcing wonders beyond imagining. No, Mark simply plunges into the heart of the matter: the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

What is this good news or gospel? The word *gospel* comes from the old English word, *god-spell* which means glad tidings. Mark is not writing a biography of Jesus or a history of Jesus and his era – as if Jesus were a dead, not-to-be forgotten hero from the past. No, Mark writes with the sure conviction of faith that Jesus is present with him and with the church through the Holy Spirit. Mark writes so that you and I may encounter the living Jesus through the written account of the gospel. The gospel is not a word about Jesus, the gospel *is* Jesus. Through the gospel we see and know the living Christ.

When Mark opens with “the beginning of the good news,” he wants us to think of another beginning: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light;’ and there was light.” (Genesis 1:1-3) Only this time the light takes the form of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This is a new beginning for us and for all creation.

The gospel is the good news of God's redeeming grace in Jesus Christ. Long before the appearance of Jesus in the wilderness where he was baptized by John, we hear echoes of the gospel throughout scripture. When Isaiah announces God's word of comfort to a broken-down, exiled people, we hear the gospel. The Lord says that the prophet should “speak tenderly” to a people who have been overcome by their sins, overwhelmed by their circumstances, and overshadowed by powerful masters in a foreign land.

In those tender words, we see the compassion of Jesus. Jesus demonstrated that kind of compassion when he compared a hungry crowd to lost sheep without a shepherd and then he fed them. We see that same holy comfort in the way Jesus treated the stranger, the sick, the poor, and the outcast. Isaiah said the Lord is like a shepherd who gathers the lambs in his arms and gently leads the flock. We see Jesus in the same way when he gathered the children into his arms to bless them. Yes, the good news of God's graciousness is found long before the appearance of Jesus.

Even before Isaiah, the good news of God's redeeming love was heard by the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. God responded to their cries and sent Moses to set them free. When God bore them on eagle's wings into the wilderness to give them the Ten Commandments, God said, “I am the Lord

your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.” (Exodus 20:1) Even the law is rooted in God’s gracious act of deliverance. The patriarchs and matriarchs, like Abraham and Sarah, followed a God who blessed them and provided for them out of abundant grace. The gospel, or the good news of God’s redemptive love, goes even further back. Even before Adam and Eve, in the very beginning of time, we see that whole creation as the work of the Creator, the Son who is the word of God and the Holy Spirit who is the wind of God. There was never a time when there was no gospel.

We say in the *Nicene Creed* that we believe “in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made.” The Son was with the Father and the Spirit from all eternity, before the beginning of time. The gospel has always been a part of the way God deals with us because it is the very nature of God. The gospel flows from the heart of God before there is ever time or space. The most fundamental thing we can say about the nature of life in the universe is that it is rooted and grounded in the grace of God. The center of the universe is not a black hole that will one day devour all things or some cosmic energy that continuously fuels the expanding galaxies. The center of all things visible and invisible is God’s loving will that creates, sustains, and redeems the creation. The beginning is Christ, and the end is Christ no matter what happens in between.

The coming of Jesus Christ as the Son of God makes the truth of the gospel plain, visible, real in history. In Jesus, we see the fullness of God’s purposes and the unconditional character of God’s love. Jesus draws together and makes clear what may seem scattered and confused. In him, we are able to see the meaning of the past, present, and future. Where does the gospel actually begin? On one hand we say that there was never a time when there was no gospel, no good news of God’s redemptive love. On the other hand, there is another way to think about when the gospel begins. When did we first come to understand for ourselves the truth and power of the gospel? When did the good news of God’s redeeming love become real to us?

Mark was written so that we might see our lives in the light of the gospel. The gospel begins in our lives when we are taken hold of by Christ’s redeeming grace. Such a moment may come early in life or late in life. It may come in a hospital room or a classroom, on a weekend retreat or a conversation over coffee, or it may come through the wise counsel of a teacher or the healing touch of a nurse. It may come in deep pain or in great joy.

This weekend as we remember the terrifying events of 9/11, we lift in prayer those who lost their lives trapped in buildings or on planes; we remember those who gave of themselves and their health and even their lives to save others. We remember the individuals and families today who still live with the shock, the trauma, and the loss of that day. As followers of Jesus, we remember that those who died are not gone forever but are gathered in the arms of Christ. In such moments of remembrance, we come to a deeper trust in the gospel truth that in life and in death we belong to God. We remember that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. In remembering this truth, we experience a new beginning of the gospel in our lives.

The gospel begins in our lives when we come to realize that we are carried in the shepherd’s arms, that we are forgiven no matter what we have done, and that we are loved beyond measure.

The gospel begins when we realize that the gospel is not just a word, or four books in the Bible, but a transforming encounter with Jesus, the Risen Lord.

This fall, as we study Mark's gospel, we enter a journey with Jesus as he begins his ministry in Galilee. He is baptized by John and then he heals, teaches, and proclaims the kingdom of God. The journey continues as Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem where he will suffer, be crucified, die, and rise from the dead. As we make this journey together, we will keep our eyes on him.

Traveling the path with Jesus is a lot like walking a labyrinth. Ever since the Middle Ages, walking a labyrinth has been a part of the spiritual practice of the church. Labyrinths can be found in stone on the floors of great cathedrals or simple outdoor pathways marked by grass or shrubs. At times these were known as the "path to Jerusalem," because simple pilgrims who could not make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem could walk the path of Jesus set into the cathedral floor. I want to encourage you, as we read Mark's gospel together, to walk the labyrinth of the gospel. We plunge into the circle; we bring our questions, prayers, needs, our hopes and our dreams; as we walk, we meditate on the path Jesus walked; we follow him on the way that leads to the mystery of God at the center of all things.

I remember the Sunday when I was home from seminary and in a worship service at my home church. That morning, a young man was baptized in the service. After his profession of faith and baptism, the pastor said that the man would like to say a word to the congregation. The young man told of how he had been a clerk in a convenience store the night that it was robbed at gunpoint. He was shot and wounded during the robbery. He temporarily lost his sight. Thankfully, he recovered from his wounds and regained his sight. During his journey through that dark labyrinth of the soul, he met Jesus. He said, "I never thought that I would thank God for my injury and for my blindness. In the darkness, I came to the light. Not only did my physical sight return, but I came to see the light of Christ and his love for me." Then he quoted the familiar words, "I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind, but now I see." In the darkness, he found the mystery of God at the center of all things. He found the gospel.

My prayer is that we may live our whole lives in the sure conviction that we are carried by God's redeeming grace in Jesus Christ. On one hand, the gospel has no beginning because it begins in God who has no beginning and no end; on the other hand, the gospel begins when we see clearly, perhaps for the first time, that God's redeeming love is here for each one of us.