

SERMON TITLE: “The Gospel is... Jesus”
TEXT: Mark 1:14-20
PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church
BY: Ryan Dueck
DATE: January 22, 2012/3rd Sunday After Epiphany

We’ve reached the mid-way point in our four part series on the question of “what is the gospel?”

We have talked about the “good news” of a created world made by God to reflect his creativity, love, and abundance. Even though a rupture occurred, and sin and evil entered our world, the fact that our world was *intended to be* remains good news.

We have talked about the “good news” of God choosing to work through a particular people, and through them to bless the entire earth, to carry the story of salvation forward. It is “good news” that God doesn’t just drop saving information down from the “skylight” but invites us to receive the story of our salvation and the world’s from our neighbour, whether here and now, or across space and time.

Both are part of the gospel story.

Today we move on to Jesus and the crucial role he plays in God’s story.

When most of us hear the word “gospel” we instinctively think about Jesus and what he accomplished on our behalf on the cross and in the empty tomb.

But perhaps we move too quickly to these themes in our understanding of how and why Jesus is good news.

A few years ago, I saw a bumper sticker that had this message emblazoned across it:

If Jesus is the answer, what was the question?

It is perhaps a bit of an irreverent way to put it, but also a helpful one—especially for those of us who have been followers of Jesus for a long time.

We are so accustomed to Jesus being the cornerstone of our faith and life, that we perhaps don’t always have a good sense of how or why Jesus is the answer—how or why Jesus is himself **good news**.

What is the question that Jesus answers?

This can be a surprisingly difficult question to answer. Everyone has their own idea about who Jesus was and is, what he accomplished and why. Everyone

“reads” and interprets Jesus through the lens of their own culture and their own interests.

Jesus can be a rather flexible figure! Jesus has been described as everything from a gentle peacenik hippy-type, to a wandering philosopher, to a Che Guevara-type political revolutionary, to someone who was deeply confused—possibly even mentally ill—and had a Messiah complex, to a proto-American television evangelist, to a capitalism-sanctioning Republican, to any number of other conceptions. Everyone has their ideas about who Jesus is.

Just this week I came across a review of a new book about the Gospel of Mark which claims to “discover” a Jesus who saw himself as nothing but an ordinary human being wracked with existential angst, who had no interest in questions of morality and for whom the events of Mark’s gospel represented one long process of self-exploration and identity formation.

No divine mission. No understanding of himself as Israel’s Saviour. No resurrection. Just a heroic, tormented young man who ends up getting himself killed.

There are no shortages of opinions in our culture and in scholarly literature about who Jesus was and why he mattered.

The “real Jesus” isn’t always easy to find.

It isn’t always easy to understand the questions that Jesus answers.

In our text today, we see the first disciples faced with a similar question.

The Gospel of Mark doesn’t waste any time: Jesus arrives on the scene, announces that the time is fulfilled, that the kingdom has drawn near, and that people are to repent and believe in the good news.

One would think such announcements would be made from the rooftops from the halls of power in Jerusalem, but Jesus begins by calling a couple of fishermen from Galilee!

Even stranger, they drop everything and simply follow him! For them, Jesus was the answer!

What were their questions?

- In their songs and their liturgies, they had long been anticipating a king in the line of David to rule and to reign with justice for the weak and the poor
- From the prophets (like Isaiah), they had been hearing of a strange suffering servant who would take on the sins of his people, who would bring them peace

Their questions were the same as the questions of all good first century Jews:

When will God come in power to rule and reign over his people? When will the *shalom* that we have been waiting for arrive? When will God come to put everything that had gone wrong, right again?

For the nation of Israel, the questions that needed answering—the questions that the Messiah would answer—were very this-worldly.

They were not looking for someone to answer the question of what happens to us after we die. Their hope was for a new reality of peace and justice for the poor and the oppressed and those who were used to seeing themselves on the margins of society.

It was a hope for *this* life and for *this* world.

This is a big part of what Jesus is announcing when he says that *the kingdom of God has come near* (Mark 1:15).

The ***time*** of the Lord's favour has arrived.

There are two Greek words for "time," *kairos* and *chronos*. While *chronos* refers to chronological or sequential time, *kairos* signifies a time in between, a moment of indeterminate time in which something special happens—it means something like "the right or opportune moment."

This is the word we find in our text today: "The time (*kairos*) has come!" Things are about to change. God is on the move, the story has made a decisive turn, and things are about to change.

In Luke 4, Jesus makes this very clear when he stands up in the synagogue and reads from the Scroll of Isaiah:

¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

He then says, "***Today*** this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

A little later in the story, according to Matthew, John, who is in prison, begins to get word of what Jesus is saying and doing. But even John is confused—he's

heard about what Jesus is saying and doing, but he's not sure if this is how Messiahs are supposed to act. He sends his disciples to ask Jesus if he is the one of if they should expect someone else.

Jesus' response to John's disciples is similar to his quoting of Isaiah in the synagogue:

Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."

This is what it looks like when the kingdom of God comes near.

The disciples who decided to leave their nets in Mark 1 somehow knew that this Jesus was the answer to their deepest questions.

That he was worth risking everything to follow.

That he *himself* was the hope of Israel.

But I don't think even those first disciples comprehended the scope of the questions Jesus answered. There was a good deal that they *didn't* know.

They didn't know that the kingdom Jesus announced was going to look very different than the one they expected.

They didn't know that Jesus was going to consistently be at odds with those in positions of power and religious authority within Israel.

They didn't know that Jesus was going to say and do controversial things like heal on the Sabbath, forgive sins, demonstrate his power over even the wind and the waves.

They certainly didn't know that he was going to die like a common criminal, despite his repeated attempts to explain this to them, and they didn't know that he was going to rise from the dead in God's triumphant conquering of sin and death and evil.

Even though there were hints in Israel's Scriptures about how the story would go when God came to his people (Isaiah 49; 52:13-53:12), nobody expected a Saviour like Jesus.

Yet, they left their nets and followed.

Those first disciples would have left behind everything.

Everything that was familiar, predictable, safe, and manageable.

Were they crazy? Every time I read this story, I find myself wishing for more details:

- Did they know anything about Jesus before this encounter?
- Did they ask any questions that aren't recorded?
- Did they have any assurances?
- How could they just leave everything and follow this stranger?

It's not very prudent after all. We don't just follow any old person who tells us to. We probably wouldn't do this ourselves, and we *certainly* wouldn't recommend this strategy to our children!

But leave, they did, and they were not the first to do so in the biblical narrative.

Way back in Genesis 12, the same God made a similar request to Abraham.

1 The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

Like the disciples centuries later, Abraham would leave the familiar and the safe, and follow this God into the unknown—this God who promised goodness and blessing.

Neither Abraham nor the disciples knew what they were getting themselves into when they decided to follow the call of God. But they considered the risk to be worth it.

Just like those first disciples and just like Abraham, our call is the same—to risk leaving the familiar, the expected, the predictable and safe, to follow this God who leads his people into a hopeful future.

We know more of the story, of course. We know that Jesus would die and rise again to open the door to forgiveness and peace and new life.

We know that Israel's Messiah was also the Saviour of all nations—that the good news would go beyond the story of Israel and include the whole world.

We know that Jesus' followers would spread around the world starting this thing called the church that has tried to proclaim, in word and deed, the good news that Jesus represents for all people.

But even two thousand years later, we are perhaps not so different from those first disciples who left their boats and their nets to follow Jesus on an adventure that they knew very little about.

We don't know all the details. We don't even know all of the ways in which Jesus is good news. We probably aren't even aware of all the questions that we have that Jesus *has* answered, *is* answering, or *will* answer.

But we don't need to.

Like those first disciples, like Abraham, perhaps it is enough to believe that the one who calls us is trustworthy, and that the good news he brings is worth pursuing together.

Very often, we think of the "good news" as information about what Jesus has done. But it is also true that Jesus himself is good news.

Those first fishermen didn't know very many facts about Jesus and what he would accomplish on their behalf, but they knew he was good news.

From Alexander Schmemmann's *For the Life of the World*:

To be Christian, to believe in Christ, means and has always meant this: to know in a transrational and yet absolutely certain way called faith, that Christ is the Life of all life, that He is Life itself, therefore *my* life. "In him was life; and the life was the light of men." All Christian doctrines—those of the incarnation, redemption, atonement—are explanations, consequences, but not the "cause" of that faith. Only when we believe in Christ do all these affirmations become "valid" and "consistent." But faith itself is the acceptance not of this or that "proposition" about Christ, but of Christ Himself as the Life and the light of life....

In this sense Christian faith is radically different from "religious belief." Its starting point is not "belief" but love.

In Mark 1:15, Jesus says, "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

The Greek word translated "believe" can also mean, "give credit to."

Give credit to God for the good news that the kingdom of God has come near.

To "believe" in the good news of Jesus goes far beyond mental assent. It means giving credit to God with our minds, with our mouths, and with our lives, for the way in which Jesus fulfills the story of Israel, and for the way in which he opens the story of God up to everyone.

May we embrace this good news with our whole lives.

May we give credit to God for answering the deepest questions of the human heart in Jesus Christ.

And may we, like those first fishermen, follow God into the unknown in his pursuit of a people and a world in desperate need of this good news.

Amen.