

The Beginning of the Good News
Mark 1-2; Colossians 1:15-23

This week we begin a summer of hearing the story of Jesus – not the meaning of it but the story. But we should reflect on its meaning as well. Paul did. We read Colossians 1, verses 15-20, which is Paul’s answer to the question: Who is Jesus?

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

But before we start explaining what all that means, we should go back. Our story takes place in the land of Judea, which used to be its own country but is now enslaved by the Roman Empire. The people of Judea – the Jews – worship just one God and tell how that God has saved them from slavery before and await the time he will do it again, by sending an anointed one, a Christ. They read with hope the words of one of their prophets, Isaiah: *Look, I’m sending a messenger to prepare the way, a voice crying out in the desert for all: Prepare the way of the Lord.*

At this time, a strange man named John comes out of the desert, dressed in camel’s skin and leather, all wild hair and ideas. He’s been living in the desert eating locusts and wild honey and talking with God, or maybe just listening, because he has a message for the Jews. He says, “Turn around! Be let loose of your sins!” People begin coming from all over to listen to him, and he takes them down to the Jordan River and dunks them under. John calls out sin where he sees it and isn’t afraid of anyone, and people begin to get excited. Is the promised Christ? But John says no. He says, “I ain’t nobody compared to him as is coming next. I ain’t worthy to tie his shoes. You wait! I dunk in water; he’ll dunk in the Spirit of God.”

Then, out of Nazareth in the hills of Galilee, comes another man. This one’s name is Jesus. Jesus comes to John at the river and gets dunked along with the rest, but when Jesus comes out of the water, he looks up and sees the skies torn open and the Spirit of God coming down like a dove. It rests on him, and then this voice says: “This is my Son. I love him, and I’m pleased with him.” By the way, remember that voice; you’ll hear it again. So now everyone’s looking at this Jesus, maybe wondering if he’s the Christ, but he just walks away and disappears into the desert. He stays there a while – with nobody but the wild animals and the angels – praying and waiting for something. Then John gets arrested – I told you he called out sin where he saw it, didn’t I? Well, he called out sin in King Herod and got tossed in jail – and Jesus comes out of the desert, preaching his way through Galilee, saying, “The time’s here now. God’s kingdom has arrived. Turn around. Take hold of good news.”

Now, right in the middle of Galilee is the sea, and Jesus is walking along the shore one day, where the fishermen mend their nets for the next night's fishing, and he sees two brothers, Andrew and Simon. Jesus looks at them and says, "Follow me. Together we'll fish for people," and they just drop everything and follow him. A few minutes later, he comes to two more fishermen, also brothers. One's called James, and the other's named John, like the wild man. And Jesus calls them, and they come after him, too, so now Jesus has friends with him as he travels.

They go into the city of Capernaum, which is right on the sea, and it's the sabbath day. You should know about the sabbath. Those Jews, the ones who worshiped one God, believe that he gave them some special rules to set them apart, and one of those rules was about the sabbath, the last day of the week. On that day, the Jews don't do any work at all, and the men go to their gathering places to worship. It's a big deal to them; it's how they show they're special to God. So, anyway, on this sabbath the Jews of Capernaum are in their gathering places, and Jesus and his followers go, and he starts teaching. That much is normal. That's what the Jews do in their sabbath gatherings: they listen to people teach them about their law. But usually they have trained teachers called scribes, who have studied at their temple in Jerusalem, not some guy who just walked out of the desert. But Jesus starts teaching, and everyone listens, because he doesn't sound like their other teachers. And then while he's teaching this man stands up in the gathering, a man everyone knows is possessed by a demon, and the man shouts out, "What are *you* doing here, Jesus of Nazareth! Have you come to destroy us? Because I know who you really are; you're . . ."

"HUSH! Not another word!" snaps Jesus. The man hushes. Then Jesus says, "You, demon. Get out of that man." And the man shakes and writhes and shouts and then . . . is better. And the Jews look at each other, eyes wide, as if to say, "Who is this man?"

Now Simon – one of the fisherman, you remember – he lives in Capernaum, and he takes Jesus to his house. When they get there, they find out that Simon's mother-in-law is sick, just burning up with fever, so Jesus takes her hand and just like that she's better. Well, with casting out demons and healing people with a touch, word gets out. Pretty soon people from all over are coming, bringing anyone who's sick, and Jesus reaches out and touches them all. People are being healed right and left. Then they bring people who're possessed by demons, and Jesus casts out the demons, too. But he won't let the demons talk. Just like with that first one, he won't let them say out loud who they think he is.

Now you remember that the Jews were waiting for a Christ to come drive out the Romans. Well, Jesus is starting to look promising, what with the way he can gather a crowd. But Jesus won't take advantage of his popularity. The next morning when his friends wake up, he's gone. When they finally find him, he's out in the hills, praying alone. "Jesus!" they say. "What are you doing out here? Everyone's looking for you! Come on back to Capernaum, to the crowds." But Jesus says, "Let's go on to the next town." So they do, and then the next one, and the next. Jesus goes all through Galilee, teaching in the gathering places and healing people and casting out demons.

One day a leper comes up to him – you got to understand, lepers are the worst of the worst in Judea; nobody wants to be around a leper – and this leper calls out, "Jesus, if you wanted to, you could heal me."

Jesus grins. He says, “I want to.” Then he walks over and touches the leper. Jesus says, “Be clean,” and he is. The man shouts, “I’m healed!” and Jesus says, “Ssh. Let’s keep it down, all right? Don’t tell anyone. Just go to the temple in Jerusalem and give thanks to God.”

But you can’t keep a story like that quiet; word gets out. Before long Jesus can’t even move, and there comes a day where he’s in a house and the crowds are so thick inside and out that no one can budge. This day there are some guests in the crowd – scribes from the temple in Jerusalem who’ve come up to look over this new preacher they’d been hearing about. And as Jesus is teaching, dirt starts to cave in from the ceiling. Four men had brought a paralyzed friend for Jesus to heal, but they couldn’t get him in the doors, so they’d climbed up the house and tore a hole in the roof. Jesus looks up to see the men lowering their friend down to the ground, bed and all, right in front of him. Jesus laughs. He looks down at the paralyzed man and says, “Now *that’s* faith. Friend, your sins are forgiven you.”

Well, that doesn’t set well with the Jerusalem visitors. They huff a bit then say, “No one can forgive sins but God! Are you making yourself out to be God?”

Jesus just looks at them for a minute, then says, “You don’t think I can forgive sins? So do you think I can make this man walk? Which is easier?”

One of the teachers says, with a sort of a snicker, “If you can make this man walk, maybe we’ll believe you can forgive sins, too.”

Jesus says, “I was hoping you’d say that. Friend, stand up. Pick up your bed and walk.” And the man does. He gets right to his feet, pushes his way out, and everybody just stares.

The Jerusalem temple leaders always hated Jesus. That day was probably when it started, but it would have happened anyway. He just kept doing stuff that made their kind of faith look small. Not long after that incident, Jesus is walking along the sea and sees a tax-collector. Now if anyone in Judea’s more hated than a leper, it’s a tax-collector, because the taxes are for the Romans, which means that the tax-collectors are traitors. And Jesus goes up to this one, a man named Levi, and he says, “You should stop collecting taxes and come join me instead.” And he does. Levi pushes the tax table over and joins Jesus at once. In fact, Jesus eats at Levi’s house that night, along with all Levi’s friends. Now, no decent person is a friend of a tax-collector, which means that Jesus was eating with other traitors and outcasts. Well, when the Jerusalem leaders hear where Jesus is, they can’t believe it. “How can you claim to be a religious teacher and eat dinner with *those* people? Good people stay *away* from sinners!” But Jesus, he just laughs at them. “That’s like saying a doctor needs to stay away from sick people. I didn’t come to spend my time with good people. I came to be with people who need me.”

Jesus just won’t play the religious game. He doesn’t spend his time with other religious people, and he doesn’t do the stuff they do. One day he gets asked, “How come you and your followers don’t fast? Everybody fasts. The priests fast, the Jerusalem teachers fast, even Wild Man John’s followers fast. It’s what religious people do!” Jesus says, “There’s nothing wrong with fasting. And there’ll be a time for it again. But not now. God’s kingdom has come to earth. Now it’s time to party.”

It’s just too different. No one can seem to take it in, so Jesus takes a deep breath and says, “Look, let me try to explain it. Let’s say you have a hole in an old cloak. You mend it, right? Do you use a brand new piece of cloth that hasn’t been washed? Of course not, because the patch’ll

shrink and tear open and make the hole worse. Or let's say you have a batch of brand new wine. Where do you put it? In an old wineskin that's already hardened with age? No, because new wine expands. It'll burst the old skin, and everything will be ruined, both the old and the new.

"Do you understand what I'm saying? I'm not here to patch up the old religion. I'm not here to refill the stiff old empty containers. I keep telling you, this is God's kingdom coming. This is new. We're starting over. Listen to my words. Forget what you thought following God was like; starting now, everything's different."

Final word: I didn't very far in Mark today. We haven't even started chapter 3. But I felt as if we needed to stop where we did. One of my goals for this summer is for you to hear the story of Jesus as if you were hearing it for the first time. And when you do that, one of the things you notice is that this Jesus is revolutionary. This Jesus is scary. He's bringing a new teaching that, if we take it seriously, will destroy all our calcified, hardened ideas about what it means to be religious. It's what he wants. And it gets even scarier. See you in a couple of weeks.