

Alan Baughcum

Sermon: Good News

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St. Michael's UCC, Baltimore Ohio

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1 Kings 19:9-18, Romans 10:5-15

Prayer: O Lord, may the words of my lips ...

Today I ask that we consider what is meant when the Bible makes references to the “good news.” What exactly is that?

The Gospel according to Mark introduces itself with this phrase “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ...” Gospel is another word for “good news.” Mark could have said, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ...” It all means the same thing.

In Mark the beginning of the gospel is marked by John the Baptizer coming out of the desert preaching a baptism for repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Baptism did not forgive the sins. It simply meant that the person being baptized truly repented of their sins and sought forgiveness.

John was arrested by the authorities because he offended them. Shortly after his arrest, Mark tells us that “... Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” The phrase “come near” can also be translated as “at hand.” The kingdom of God was at hand. Both mean the same thing.

Jesus tells us in Mark what the good news is ... “the time is fulfilled” and “the kingdom of God has come near.” Simple phrases but their meaning is so rich and so deep.

“The time is fulfilled” ... what does that mean? I think that it means that all of God’s promises were now to be fulfilled. What promises? God promised Abraham that he would be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. That promise was unconditional and global although it began with the lineage of Abraham (Gen 17).

God promised at Sinai that he would be the God of the former Hebrew slaves and that they should be a priestly kingdom and holy nation for him. Blessings would come if the people were disobedient. Curses and exile would result from disobedient. The promise or covenant with Israel was conditional (Exo 19-24).

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God made a covenant with the Jewish people through King David that David's throne or royal lineage would continue forever. This covenant was unconditional and was fulfilled in Jesus, a Jew and a descendant of David (2 Sam 7).

God promised in Jeremiah and Leviticus a new covenant. God promised through Jesus complete forgiveness of sins and a transformed heart. God promised to write his law on human hearts. That covenant is unconditional (Jeremiah 31, Luke 22, Hebrews 8).

Jesus's ministry, death, resurrection and ascension to God meant that all the time had come for all these covenants to be fulfilled. The time was fulfilled by Jesus' coming.

The fulfillment of these promises took a little more than 2000 years, from Abraham to Jesus. That is a long time for us mere mortals to wait. No wonder that Elijah could not see the long-term future when he was just worn out at the end of his life. He could not see the fullness of a future secured by God's covenants and by God's steadfast love.

I will have more to say about this in a few minutes, but Paul was also preaching a longer-term point of view to the churches in Rome. They were focused on the ins and outs of conflicts between Jewish and Gentile leaders of their congregations. They were immersed in the conflicts of the moment. Paul was telling them to raise their heads and see that God intended for present conflicts to be resolved with the faithful of all people, Jew and Gentile, serving God. Those verses from Paul are not included in today's reading but they follow immediately in Romans 11.

The second phrase in Mark is "the Kingdom of God has come near." In Jesus the Kingdom had come near. The Kingdom was at hand.

The Kingdom of God was a way for faithful Jews to avoid saying the name of God. Saying the name of something so holy was forbidden. So, they adopted euphemisms like "kingdom of God," or "heaven" or "kingdom of heaven."

Think of the Kingdom of God as the place, the full extent, of God's rule. God is totally sovereign, and God's power extends over the entire universe, even beyond time and space. That external rule is also marked by an internal transformation where God rules in the hearts and lives of believers facilitated by the work of the Holy Spirit bringing us to repentance and faith. The Kingdom of God has come near in Jesus. In Jesus we can see what the Kingdom, the good news, looks like. But it will be seen in full in the future when the earth is physically and ultimately restored. God's kingdom on earth will be a place where suffering, sin, and death are completely removed. We have hope in that future because we have seen God's Kingdom, if only in part, in the person of Jesus.

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There are two things I want us to take away from our readings in the Scriptures this morning. First, the trials and tribulations and the testing of the moment are not ultimate. God and God's covenantal promises for the future are infinitely bigger than our present troubles. Our hope is bigger than our despair.

I am not preaching "pie in the sky." I am not telling you to keep your eyes on God's Kingdom and ignore the world in which we live. I am not telling you to meekly submit to whatever evils come our way because it's all going to be peaches and cream by and by. God speaks clearly in the Scriptures about that. In Micah 6:8, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?"

And if that is not enough, Jesus' words at Matthew 25 are about as explicit as they can be. Feed the hungry. Give the thirsty something to drink. Welcome the stranger. Clothe the naked. Take care of the sick. Visit those in prison. In other words, when we see any of God's creatures in need and distress, we must help them as best we can. That means providing immediate help and working to change structures that have caused the creature to be needy and distress.

The second thing I want us to take away from this sermon is that the good news of God's Kingdom come near is in fact good news for everybody. There are those throughout history and even now who preach that the good news of Jesus is bad news for the Jewish people. That kind of antisemitic preaching is dangerous and false. It is wicked.

Specifically, people say that the coming of Jesus negated God's covenant with the Jewish people. People say that the commandments and Jewish law are examples of salvation through works and not faith. Those teachings are.

What did Jesus say about the Jewish Law? Did he denounce it? No. Go to Matthew 5. There Jesus says (Mt 5:17-19), "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

I don't know how Jesus can be any clearer than that.

Christians have also preached that the Jews killed Jesus and that his killing somehow has marked the Jewish people forever more as hateful and wicked and dangerous and damned to hell. This is a dangerous blood libel. It has led to pogroms against the Jewish people over the centuries that have

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killed and displaced millions of innocent people. It has led to the Holocaust where six million Jews were slaughtered. In our time now it has led to all kinds of atrocities against individual Jews, Jewish communities and of course the cowardly and evil killing of 1200 and the abduction of 250 more innocents in Israel on Oct. 7, 2023.

How has this come to be? Well, there is language in the Bible that has been abused and twisted to justify such calumnies.

Have you ever been in a fight in a church? I have, and they are vicious. Normally sane human beings say the worst possible things against those who used to be their best friends. When the followers of Jesus began to separate from the synagogue in the first couple of centuries, that anger shows up in words even in the Gospels of the New Testament.

It is a mistake to take words spoken in anger in the heat of the moment when congregations are beginning to separate as if they were the word of God. They were not then, and they are not now.

Hear Paul at Romans 11:1-5 where he quotes Elijah from our morning's Old Testament reading: "I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I, myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? "Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars; I alone am left, and they are seeking my life." But what is the divine reply to him? "I have kept for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal." So, too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace."

Jesus was Jewish. The disciples were Jewish. For the first few decades after Jesus most of the followers of Jesus were Jewish.

Did the Jewish people kill Jesus? No. There was a cabal of Jewish leaders in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus who were afraid that Jesus and his followers would upset the very convenient and financially profitable relationship they had with the Roman authorities. They abused Jewish law in arranging for an illegitimate trial of Jesus. When they could not get rid of Jesus, they took him to Pontius Pilate to have the Romans do the dirty work by claiming that Jesus wanted to be the king of the Jews, knowing that Pilate would interpret that politically and see it as a threat to the peace of the Roman Empire. And there is nothing in the Scriptures about the wickedness of this group of leaders incurring a curse that passed onto the Jewish people in perpetuity.

Jesus is the good news. Jesus is the good news for the world and for all the world's people and for of God's creatures in the world. Jesus, of all people, Jesus! Jesus is good news for everyone, including the Jewish people.

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I focused this morning on the sin of antisemitism because I think it is so wicked and dangerous and seemingly so resurgent today in our culture and our politics. I do not mean by my focus to slight all the ways we can abuse and cause serious problems for other peoples. We have managed to find justifications to persecute people with different skin colors from ours, or with ethnicities different from ours or with religious and political beliefs different from ours. Shame on us, shame on us!

The time is fulfilled. God's covenants and God's promises are and will be realized. God, in the person of Jesus, has come near. It is up to you and me to preach and teach and live the good news so that the whole world can hear it. As Paul says, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

Amen.