

The Gospel Begins on Rugged Ground

Mark 1:1-8

Opening Challenge

When I'm asked why I moved here I say I'm the new pastor of Lillooet Gospel Chapel. I become linked to a church building location...it's safe.

When it comes to living out our faith in Jesus, do we play it too safe?

I wonder how people would react if I said I'm here to **help people understand the gospel about Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God.**

Introduction to the Gospels

Well-meaning people have come up with ways to make the mission as ambassadors of Christ...easier. Let the experts come up with the latest method, tract, movie.

But apparently, if you crack the egg before the chick hatches, it will not survive. It needs the struggle to grow strong.

So instead of someone else' method, how about studying a whole gospel so we know and share the Jesus of the Bible. It's not a formula. It's us in wonder of God's truth and love through Jesus. And out of His Spirit's work

in us, God opens those opportunities to be His ambassadors.

Some prepare the soil, some plant the seeds, some water the seeds, some reap. All of us are unique. Why would God go through the hassle of protecting 4 different Gospels, each with unique emphasis, yet all complete? I take comfort that there's many ways to share Christ. So for the next sermon series, we're going to be in the Gospel according to Mark.

The most recent research supports John Mark wrote the first Gospel about 20 yrs after Jesus' death so he would have been an eyewitness. Mark was discipled by Peter (1 Pet 5:13) Paul (Col 4:10, Phil 23, 2 Tim 4:11) and Barnabus (Lk 15:36). More on him in the future. I'm quoting this summary from Walter Elwell:

"We may assume that Mark is writing to Gentile Christians who are suffering persecution and, like the women in the original story, are threatened by enervating fear (frozen chosen) and need to be shocked into decisive action. What if they (eyewitness of Jesus) *never* had said anything?"

PRAY and READ Mark 1:1-8

The Gospel about Jesus

V1 The beginning of the gospel (good news) about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,

Back in John Mark's day of Roman rule, a 'good news' (gospel) announcement was a big deal...such as a birth announcement of next emperor (considered a god). It could also pertain to **deliverance**.

Deliverance is about rescue and hope. I prefer to use the older term, 'gospel' because it has retained a specific connection to the teaching & life of Christ. And so the name chosen for our place of worship and ministry 'Lillooet Gospel Chapel' is fitting as a reminder that we exist as a community with Jesus, the Messiah, Son of God as our head. For God has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son (Col 1:13).

AMEN?

This 'gospel' (good news) is not announcing the birth of a new emperor or the defeat of an army. Instead it is found in the person of Jesus (Yahweh is salvation, Joshua).

In the Gospel according to Mark, Jesus has 2 powerful titles that would relate to 2 different groups:

1. Messiah or Christ – 'anointed one' chosen by God for special service (OT: Prophet, Priest, King). Many Jews were hoping for a Messiah King-Priest to restore the kingdom of David and the purity of Israel based on prophecies (like Gen 49:10, Ps 2:110, Isa 9:1-7;11:-9, Zech 9:9-10)
2. Son of God is a title that would have left many Jews puzzled (an angelic being?) Yet a Roman would be familiar with a larger than life title – a claim to divinity. And history tells us that Roman emperors claimed that kind of authority.

God's Messengers

V2 as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way – a voice of one calling in the wilderness

Ah, the Story behind the story. Who's read through the OT in the past 5 yrs?

The story of Israel's relationship to God has mountaintops and dark valleys. The prophet Isaiah

lived through a period where Israel finally faces the judgment God had been warning them about for centuries. Jerusalem (city of David) was surrounded by the Babylonian army until there was no food left. In the summer of 586 BC, they finally break through and most survivors are taken on a 700 mile journey to Babylon, land of idolatry. Their way was to acculturate the next generation so that their enemies might become one with them. To give you an idea of the seriousness: they forced Zedekiah the king to watch his sons being executed and then gouged his eyes out. He lived out the rest of his days in a Babylon prison. It's one of the lowest points in Israel's history.

Isaiah conveys God's warnings to His children Israel for the destructive path of disloyalty they have taken. He warns them to repent before they are shamed by destruction. But even though God knows these warnings will fall on deaf ears, He promises that a remnant will survive to **return and rebuild for God. A hope of deliverance.**

Mark is making the connection here that Isaiah wasn't just

writing about Israel and their deliverance 70 yrs later. For we know that the returning remnants under Ezra and Nehemiah did not stay faithful. He is boldly stating that God's prophecies through Isaiah...of the suffering servant (52-53) and the age of the Spirit (56-66) are being fulfilled in his gospel about Jesus, 700 years later!

Technical stuff: Some early manuscripts do not include 'Isaiah'. Mark is quoting first from Malachi (3:1) and then Isaiah (40:3) but it is not unusual to name the greater prophet in a combined reference. The wording is also very similar to God's promise to Israel during the exodus (23:20).

God always had a plan to deliver people from the clutches of sin and death. And we are living proof.

***V3b** Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for Him.*

I find here a call again to **return and rebuild for God**...but this time Jerusalem is our heart. Ever done landscaping? When you want to create a level path, you may have to remove stumps, weeds, grass and rocks. It's hard work. Then you have to level it

with small stones and sandy soil. It's tedious work...on your hands and knees sometimes. Then you finally choose what kind of surface to be walked on (cement blocks, flat stones etc). More lifting and careful placement (more sweat).

But when it's done well, it makes all the difference. Not so well...you are reminded every time you walk on it.

Imagine our heart is like a yard with a garden and a pathway running through it for God to walk through...

Are there sections we've left to the weeds? Does the path have uneven patches with roots pushing up? That needs work. The way to preparing our hearts for God is found in verse 4b. But first comes John

V4a *And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness*

God chose a host of angels to announce Jesus' birth in a remote region to shepherds (the lowest occupation) and God chose one wilderness man to announce Jesus' ministry. Did it work?

"In ancient times, before a king visited any part of his realm, a messenger was sent before him to prepare the way. This included

both repairing the roads and preparing the people. By calling the nation to repentance, John the Baptist prepared the way for the Lord Jesus Christ. Isaiah and Malachi join voices in declaring that Jesus Christ is the Lord, Jehovah God." (Warren Wiersby)

Why does Mark point out to us this connection between preparation and the wilderness? I think any person who spends enough time in the wild will come to appreciate that God is the provider. We have limits, especially without the resources of community and technology. Even a week away from the city at camp gave God more room to prepare my heart for ministry. Upon further research I found John's calling Israel to the wilderness has a connection to God's promise in Hosea 2:14ff...that after He punishes His wayward wife (Israel), He will restore her when He leads her into the dessert and speaks tenderly to her. Now here we come to the way to prepare for Jesus.

V4b *preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*

Heart preparation for God is soul cleansing – repentance and forgiveness of sins. In the garden of our heart, we don't just say to the weed, 'oh I wish you weren't there', we have to identify it as evil, humbly admit it to God and get rid of it. Its forgiven in God's books through Christ...toss it out of the garden and off God's path in your heart.

Is weeding easy? No.

Is it necessary to have rest for the soul? Yes!

Like David of old, "search my heart oh Lord."

But I thought Jesus took care of all that once for all?

Those who believe the Jesus of the bible continue to follow Him...and take care of the dust on their feet each day (Jn 13:10)

Repentance is godly sorrow that brings about a change of heart, mind and action. True repentance is built on faith. Faith that God actually forgives us so we have a restored relationship. This fuels our determination to change our ways to come in line with God's.

If it involves another person, Jesus teaches us to go and be reconciled first, before presenting your offering to God. It affects our relationship with God. We live a

life set apart for God. A daily process of growth and maturity called abiding in Christ (Jn 15).

How did people respond to John in the wilderness (**V6**)?

- A man guaranteed rugged - with nothing but camel hair for cloths and a leather belt...like Elijah (2 kings 1:7-8)
- A man who lived among the wild animals and ate locusts with wild honey. (Can you even imagine gathering your supper by chasing locusts and harvesting honey from wild bees?)
- A man who claimed to speak for God, offering a baptism to symbolize a cleansing from sin after confession to God.

V5 *The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.*

John's baptism was unique. Immersion baptism as a symbol of cleansing was not new. But it was one of the steps for a gentile to become a Jew. (1. Circumcision 2. Baptism 3. Sacrifice). It would have been humiliating for a natural child of Abraham to undergo spiritual cleansing

through baptism. But the real cleansing part...why many responded was the confession. And for believers today, "baptism is not our means of forgiveness, but to publically profess your faith. It doesn't mean you've arrived, it signals a new attitude toward sin and a new relationship with God. It is an outward sign of an inner change. Your baptism is something to invite your friends and family to. At a deeper level, it identifies us as having died and buried with Christ and then born again to new life in the Spirit.

Jesus instituted baptism as a part of discipleship in Matt 28:18-20. So what is there to hold a believer back?

Fear? Jesus is in you...believe it. Water's too cold? We can find a pool of warm water.

V7 *And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.*

John was powerful. Parallels with Jesus: Both were called to the wilderness for a time, both preached, both baptized, both fulfilled prophesy, they ministries overlapped in time, both

proclaimed a message of repentance to Israel, both had disciples...who buried their leader, both attracted crowds, both uttered prophecy, both were criticized by the religious elite, both were delivered up to their enemies, both died unjustly and disgracefully at the hands of rulers who permit themselves to be manipulated and Jesus was considered to be John resurrected. Oh, and they were cousins too.

John must have been quite a bit like Jesus – a man on a mission from God. From other sources in scripture we find that John is the only person in the Bible who was filled with the Holy Spirit even in his mother's womb (Luke 1:15). Jesus said that no one up until that point was a greater man than John (Matt 11:11).

God's messenger felt unworthy to approach God's Son. None of us are worthy – it is only God's radical love...that He would reach down to us.

V8 *I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

Like Isaiah (59:20-21), John's message ends with the promise of the Holy Spirit. The prediction

that Christ will baptize with the Holy Spirit appears in each Gospel (Matt. 3:11; Luke 3:16; John 1:33) and was repeated by Christ in Acts 1:5 leading up to Pentecost...when 1000s respond to Peter's message and are baptized - becoming part of the church, the body of Christ.

Titus 3:5-7

He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

AMEN

Why does the 'gospel-good news' begin with sin and repentance?

The gospel is truth and grace – right to the very soul. If people are not open to receiving God's truth about their sin and their value to God...pray that they become convicted and enlightened. For every knee will bow and tongue confess Jesus is Lord. As rich Lazarus discovered (Lk 16:19-31), we don't get another chance in the next life. It is not by our strength or our smarts or our winning ways...but by the Spirit of Christ that we can

join God's work of preparing rugged hearts to meet Jesus.

The Good News about Jesus is for guaranteed rugged people.