

SERMON TITLE: "Jesus 101: Jesus & the Gospel"
SERMON TEXT: Mark 1:1-15
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: August 5, 2018, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Most school children are still on summer vacation. But I've noticed that traffic around school buildings is increasing as administrators and teachers get organized and as students register for classes and extra-curricular activities. I've also noticed that notebooks, pencils, crayons, markers, folders, and backpacks are all front and center at Walmart, and clothing stores of various kinds are brimming with youthful fashions. I used to think of September as the back-to-school month, but that's not true anymore. The first day of classes in the Ogden School District and at Weber State is August 20. Weber School District students begin on August 21, and, even at Utah State in Logan, classes start on August 27.

With that back-to-school reality all around us, I thought it might be good to begin a new sermon series today with an educational motif. Just like first graders review their ABCs, and third graders study the mechanics of multiplication, it's common in the first year of college to take classes that are numbered 101, meaning the basics of that field of study. If I remember correctly, my freshman courses were things like Psychology 101, Sociology 101, English Composition 101, Biblical Literature 101, Physical Recreation 101, and Greek 101.

So, from now through September, here at First United Methodist Church we're going to be studying "Jesus 101." By that, I mean we're going to review the Gospel of Mark to learn the basics of what Jesus said and did in the first part of his ministry. It stands to reason, I think, that we who call ourselves Christian disciples ought to be well educated about our leader. Thus, our "Jesus 101" syllabus, or learning plan, will include Jesus & Healing, Jesus & the Law, Jesus & Vocation, Jesus & Agriculture, Jesus & Water, Jesus & Families, and Jesus & Status. Today we begin in Mark chapter one with Jesus & the Gospel.

1—WHAT IS “GOSPEL”?

Maybe a good starting place for a lesson on “Jesus & the Gospel” is to define what we mean when we say *gospel*. The easy answer is *good news*. The New Testament was written in Greek, and the Greek word for *gospel* is *euangelion*, which means *good message*. To get that word in your mind, think of *eu* like in *eulogy*, which is a good word that we speak about someone at the time of their death. The second part of the Greek word *euangelion* contains the word *angel*, which in New Testament Greek, meant *messenger*. The *eu-angel*, or evangelist, was the one who brought the good message. The Old Testament Hebrew word that preceded it was usually reserved for good news from the battle front. The messenger carried good news if the hometown army had won a military victory. By the time of the New Testament, in Greek language and Roman culture, this word for good news usually referred to the announcement of a wedding or the birth of a child. After the Romans had taken over the empire, the birth of Caesar Augustus was declared throughout the region as *euangelion*-gospel-good news.

So, it was in that environment that Jesus was born and carried out his ministry. And it was in that similar environment that, decades later, the four good messengers, eu-angels, or evangelists--wrote their good news documents which became known as the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Of those, Mark was the first gospel written, maybe just after Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70. Roman rule had become oppressive and violent. The Jewish world was in chaos. Like Californians fleeing wildfires—and like Central Americans escaping excruciating poverty, trauma, and death in their home countries—Jews and Christians fled the destruction of Jerusalem and scattered around the Mediterranean region.

Fortunately for them, the evangelist known as Mark wasted no time in offering his readers a positive gospel message of guidance, hope, and assurance in that chaotic time. In chapter one, verse one, he immediately launched into what he called “the beginning of the good news.”

2—CONTENT OF THE GOOD NEWS

So, now that we know what *gospel* means, what exactly was the content of this good news? To figure this out, I invite you to look at Mark chapter one with me, so we can see what it says.

In verse one, we see first of all, that this “Gospel According to Mark” focuses on the man named Jesus. In that same first verse, Mark lets us know that this Jesus was no ordinary man. He was *Christ*, which was the Greek word for the Jewish *anointed*. In Jewish history and faith, the word *anointed* meant chosen and set apart for an important purpose. How important? Well, to clarify even further, Mark says that this anointed Jesus was the Son of God.

In Roman religion and culture, the emperors were treated as gods. Their successors were then treated as sons of gods, who would supposedly offer the hope of salvation in their coming to power. But “The Gospel According to Mark” wasn’t going to be about any of the Roman rulers who oppressed, violated, and destroyed the Judeo-Christian homeland. This good news announcement was different. It was a challenging alternative to the Roman powers. This good news message was going to be about Jesus, who was anointed in the Jewish tradition and understanding. And this Gospel of Jesus Christ was going to tell how and why he was the true Son of the one true God.

Mark starts to make his case in verses 2-11, where he describes God’s act of choosing and anointing Jesus. In the tradition of the Jewish prophets like Isaiah, John the Baptist cried out in the wilderness for the Hebrew people to prepare a way for God’s coming. Verse nine tells us that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan River. Anointed not with oil as in ancient times, but with water and Spirit, Jesus sensed God descending upon him like a dove. In that moment, God’s voice spoke the words of claiming approval: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Another bit of information about Jesus is given in verses 12 and 13. This heroic savior of Mark’s good news is no novice. We can trust our despair, chaos, frustration, and worries to him because he has

been tested and tried. He was driven out into the wilderness for 40 days and tempted by Satan. Mark's version of the temptation story of Jesus is much briefer than the accounts in Matthew and Luke, but Mark adds that Jesus was with the wild beasts, which I'm sure intensified the physical and emotional stress. Like Matthew, Mark indicates that Jesus gained some help from angels who waited on him. In other words, Jesus survived this traumatic time by trusting in God. That time of testing proved both to Jesus and to Mark's readers that God's power was with him.

Jesus received that assurance of divine affirmation and support just in time, because, as verse 14 tells us, John the Baptist was arrested. When John's ministry was brought to this abrupt halt, Jesus felt God's call to return to Galilee and get busy proclaiming his own message. You see, the gospel wasn't just *about* Jesus. In verse 15, we see that Jesus himself preached good news. "The time is fulfilled," he said, "and the kingdom of God has come near."

This timing of Jesus' message could puzzle us. It wasn't good news that John was arrested and executed. It wasn't good news that a corrupt governmental power was hurting the people of God. It wasn't good news that John's message was now suppressed. But all these tragic events—like the destruction of Jerusalem that came 40 years later—brought clarity and poignancy. No more could God's people sit on the fence, waiting and wondering and wallowing in despair. No matter what the governmental powers did, the people still had a choice. Now was the time for action. Now was the time to proclaim an alternate kingdom, an alternate authority, an alternate way of being. Now was the time to recognize what the true God was doing and ally themselves with the change that God was creating.

And, of course, Jesus' gospel message invited his hearers to participate in this kingdom of God by initiating change first in their own hearts. "Repent," said Jesus, "and believe in the good news." Repent of your sins. Repent of your stubbornness. Turn away from temptation and evil. Turn away from pessimism and apathy. Turn away from negativity and harm. Turn, instead toward the positive path that God is laying out. See it. Claim it. Participate in it. Join it. Believe it. The gospel that Jesus

proclaimed wasn't theoretical. It wasn't abstract. It wasn't just for some future day in heaven. The gospel Jesus preached had the power to bring about immediate change for individual believers and for the society around them. They didn't have to be controlled by oppression. The kingdom of God was near for any who would embrace this good news.

CONCLUSION

With all the vocabulary lessons and historical explanations, this sermon has been a lot like a 101 college lecture. I hope I didn't lose you in all the jargon. But mostly, I hope you've come to appreciate how important *gospel* is to an understanding of Jesus. Gospel is what Jesus preached. Gospel is who Jesus was and what he did. Gospel is what others later said and wrote about him.

In the coming weeks, we'll read more from the Gospel of Mark and learn more details about who Jesus was. But, today, what I want you to hear is that this gospel of 2000 years ago is still relevant. This gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God invites us *today* to join with Jesus and other Christians in this message and life of good news. Whatever our frustrations, whatever our traumas, whatever our chaos, whatever our losses, whatever our sins—the gospel of Jesus invites us to a more positive place. Through Jesus and the gospel, we have the power to find our voice to change what's wrong and make it right. Through Jesus and the gospel, there is the opportunity to see and participate in the kingdom of God.

So, students of the Christian faith, take heart. Take heed. The time is fulfilled, and the good news message is clear. We have been invited to embrace Jesus and the gospel.