

SERMON TITLE: "Jesus 101: Jesus & the Gospel"
SERMON TEXT: Mark 1:1-15
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: July 14, 2024, at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

If you've been to Walmart this past week, you probably noticed a change. Instead of summer swimming gear and Fourth of July BBQ decorations, all of a sudden what's up front and center are notebooks, paper, pens, markers, scissors, and glue. I guess that's good since our July mission emphasis is on school backpack supplies. While most of us are still enjoying our summer activities, we know that it won't be long before the kids are back at school.

With that back-to-school reality coming soon, I thought it might be good to begin a new sermon series 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. For example, my freshman year of college included Psychology 101, English Composition 101, Biblical Literature 101, Physical Recreation 101, Greek 101, and Sociology 101.

So, from now through Labor Day, 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 that we who call ourselves Christians ought to be well educated about our leader. Thus, our "Jesus 101" syllabus, or learning plan, will include Jesus & Vocation, Jesus & Healing, Jesus & the Law, Jesus & Teaching, Jesus & Water, Jesus & the Multitudes, 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 the Greek

language, 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* wasn't necessarily a heavenly creature with wings. The one who brought the good message was usually a person. In the Old Testament, the one who brought good news usually was a messenger coming from the battle front to report that 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. Thus, throughout their empire, the Romans declared the birth of Caesar Augustus as *euangelion*-gospel-good news.

Of course, to the Jews and Jewish Christians, the perpetuation of Roman rule was far from good news. Of the four gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—Mark is understood to be the first, and probably was written just after Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70. Roman oppression, violence, and destruction was fresh in the minds of Mark's readers. The Jewish world was reeling in chaos and grief. Like today's immigrants escaping excruciating poverty, trauma, and death in their home countries, Jews and Christians fled the horrors of Jerusalem and scattered all around the Mediterranean region.

Fortunately for them, the evangelist known as Mark wasted no time in offering his readers a positive and alternate gospel message. 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 the word *gospel* means, what exactly was the content of this Christian good news? To figure this out, let's look at Mark chapter one.

In verse one, we see first of all, that this “Gospel According to Mark” focuses on the person 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 translation 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 by their coming to power. But “The Gospel According to Mark” wasn’t going to be about any of the brutal 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, the true Son of the true God, and why Jesus was the one who had the ability to offer salvation.

Mark begins 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 with water and the 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 tried and tested. Jesus was driven out into the wilderness for 40 days and tempted by Satan. Mark’s version of the temptation story 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. Fortunately, Jesus survived that traumatic time by trusting in God. Through that time of testing, Jesus proved that God's power was with him.

Jesus received that assurance of divine affirmation and strength just in time, because, as verse 14 tells us, John the Baptist was then 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. 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 soon executed. It wasn't good news that John's message of protest was now suppressed. It wasn't good news that an authoritarian government was hurting the people of God. 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 how much the Roman government oppressed them, 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 Jesus preached had the power to bring about immediate and positive 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 you didn’t get lost in all the jargon. But mostly, I hope you’ve come to appreciate how important *gospel* is to an understanding of Jesus. *Gospel* is the good news of who Jesus was and what he did. *Gospel* is the good news that Jesus preached. *Gospel* is the good news that 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 from 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 change what’s wrong and make it right. Through Jesus and the gospel, there’s the opportunity to see, to choose, to believe, and to participate in the kingdom of God.

So, students of 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.