

The Gospel of Isaiah

[Isaiah 40:1 – 11; Psalm 85:1 – 2, 8 - 13; Mark 1:1 – 8]

December 10, 2017 **Advent 2** – St. Agatha Mennonite Church

Imagine for a moment that you are in Galilee in the first century, around the year 70. You are in the midst of war – some radicals have rebelled against Rome and Jerusalem is under siege. You have heard reports that the conditions in the city are bad but the people are divided. Some say that God has raised up leaders to push the infidels from the Holy Land. Others are urging for submission to Rome in order to bring about peace and security.

Either way, everyone is anxious, caught between heavy-handed soldiers and extremist guerrillas. What's more, the emperor Nero died last year and there is unrest in Rome. Four men have been acclaimed as emperor, only to be assassinated. Now Vespasian, the very general besieging Jerusalem, has been crowned. What does this mean for the war? Things are uncertain. The price of oil has been skyrocketing – olive oil, that is. The world is in turmoil. What does the future hold? Is there a future?

Your village population is mixed, Jews and Gentiles, and tensions are high. Neighbours fear one another. Families are fractured. One small sect refuses to fight on either side, they are the followers of a Galilean rabbi named Jesus, who was crucified for insurrection about forty years ago. Roman loyalists suspect them of continuing the alleged insurrection of their founder. The rabbis call them heretics, and the Zealot rebels dismiss their founder as ineffective against Roman oppression. But you are intrigued by their claim that Jesus' crucifixion is a symbol of God's "**good news**" for Israel and Rome. If this Jesus really was God's prophet, how is his execution good news for us? Someone hands you a scroll with a title scribbled on it, "The beginning of the Good News about Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God."

The title is provocative. The "good news" is foremost a story about Jesus. The word "Messiah" reflects Jewish apocalyptic traditions about the inbreaking of God, who shakes the world. The designation "Son of God" challenges the claim of "divi filius" – the Latin phrase found on many Roman coins next to the portraits of emperors that means "**son of a god**". So we might expect the story to challenge the established political order and side with Israel against its pagan oppressors. But the story opens with a message from Israel's prophets of old to "prepare the way." And then the story of a more recent prophet in the desert: John the Baptist who called people to repent. What does this all mean? How does this make sense of the current political turmoil? How is this "good news"?

There certainly was significant unrest at the time that Mark's writing was being distributed and read and the people of the time could be excused for not catching on to the good news as they heard his introduction being read.

Many scholars believe that Mark's gospel was written sometime between 55 and 70 CE and that it was the first of the 4 gospels that now appear in our Bible. As the most widely accepted theory goes, the gospel of Mark (it's named this, but there is some question as to who actually wrote it since the author does not identify himself) was used by both Matthew and Luke to write their gospels but then they expanded on it, possibly with other sources as well. Mark's gospel is the shortest of the 4 and it has a fast pace to it.

One can imagine that in the 20 or so years after Jesus' death the eye-witnesses are starting to die off and there is a sense of urgency to get the stories of Jesus recorded before they are lost or distorted through the retelling by those who only heard of the events. So as we read through this gospel account, things move fairly quickly – in fact, almost half the occurrences of the Greek word translated “immediately” occur in Mark's gospel and most of them in the first half of it.

Mark does not spend time on a birth story of Jesus but goes directly into his introduction of Jesus' ministry and by the end of the first chapter, Jesus has already called some of his disciples and begun healing and performing other miracles. It seems that his purpose is not to give a biography of Jesus but to make sure people know the **Gospel** of Jesus. The meaning of the word GOSPEL is GOOD NEWS. So Mark's purpose is to share the good news about Jesus and what this means for people.

Because of the fast pace of this gospel, it is important to we pay close attention to what Mark says. Even his first sentence is packed with meaning – **“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”** [Mark 1:1] Mark does not claim to have the exhaustive or exclusive story of Jesus but this is just the beginning. And it is not Mark's gospel as we might sometimes say, but it is clear that this is the gospel, the good news of Jesus – and Mark makes it clear that it is good news. And finally, to make his point completely clear, it is about Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. Before we read any further in this writing we need to be clear exactly what it is we are reading.

And so Mark begins, and he begins by going back to the prophets of old. He mentions specifically the prophet Isaiah but the quote also includes something from the prophet Malachi as well. As we read these first few sentences of this book we experience a sort of time travel. There are actually 4 different time periods that we encounter in this short section.

(1) The first being the time of the prophets – which technically you could consider 2 different time periods since Isaiah and Malachi were separated by about 300 years but for simplicity we'll consider that one time period.

(2) The second is the time that Mark is writing about, the time of John the Baptist and of Jesus.

(3) The third time period is that of the initial audience for Mark's writing – somewhere between the years of 50 and 70.

(4) The final time period is today because as we read what was written almost 2,000 years ago, it is still relevant to us in our time.

So in the course of a few sentences, Mark covers a time span of almost 3,000 years and it is a message of good news for all of us who become part of this story along that path of years.

Going back to Isaiah, he was also bringing a gospel message, a message of good news to a people in Exile. The section that we read begins with a word of comfort: **“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.”** Not only does this word come from God, but there is a sense of the restored relationship between God and God's people. **“comfort MY people, says YOUR God”** Remember that these are people who have felt the separation from God, maybe they also felt disowned by God but now THEIR God offers

comfort to “MY” people. It feels a little like the story of the prodigal son receiving welcome and comfort from his father.

The message continues, “speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty has been paid.” This was certainly a message of good news to the people of Israel after having suffered in exile, but it is also a message of good news that has continued for the nearly 3,000 years since.

But the message does not end there:

“A voice cries out, ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.’”

There is still work to be done, preparations made for the revealing of God’s glory. This is the part that Mark quotes as he brings the message of Jesus to the people of his day. There is work to be done.

One can think of the preparations for the arrival of a high ranking dignitary, places need to be cleaned. In some cases major renovations are undertaken to prepare – in a sense the wilderness or desert is made presentable, the very geography of an area may be change in preparation for the arrival.

In addition for such an event you would want to make sure that everyone knows about it so the message needs to get out and announcements made.

“A voice says, ‘Cry out!’ And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’” What is the message that needs to be shared?

<<read Isaiah 40:6b – 9>>

The message is about God and recognizing who God is and that God is the one in power. This is the one who is to come and in fact, has now come: “Here is your God!” Then in the last 2 verses of this section we read a description of God but it is like 2 contrasting images.

<<read v. 10 – 11>>

God, who is mighty and strong, also feeds his sheep like a shepherd and gathers the lambs in his arms, carries them in his bosom, and gently leads the mother sheep. What a wonderful description of God and as we read this in our time today it brings to mind for us the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd and also Jesus’ reference to God as the mother hen gathering her chicks under her wing.

And I don’t think it is a coincidence that this section in Isaiah begins and ends with words of comfort. Often we think of the prophets words as difficult and harsh but here Isaiah clearly brings a message of comfort, God’s comfort, to a hurting people.

As we jump ahead to the time of Jesus and John the Baptist, we also hear the promise of comfort in God’s care but John’s message is also one of responsibility for the people to prepare for the coming Messiah. Again there is work to be done – this time it is the work of redemption. In preparation for the coming of one greater than John, people needed to turn their lives around, return to God, return from their own exile in the wilderness away from God. A rejection of sin and a turn toward God.

In preparation for the message of salvation and comfort that would come from Jesus, John called people to prepare themselves, make straight their own rough places and prepare the way of the Lord – the way of the Lord being the way of the cross.

40 years later as the memory of Jesus began to fade and people wondered if he really was the Messiah, the Son of God, the responsibility fell to Mark to once again send out the message, the good news that Jesus was real and was in fact the long-awaited Messiah. It wasn't the story of the baby in the manger that they needed at that point, they just needed the reassurance that God's Messiah had come and that this was indeed good news. Mark, in very short order, tells the story of the prophet Isaiah and of John the Baptist and their message of preparation but then jumps right into the gospel, the good news of Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God.

Today we still need to hear this message, the message of hope and comfort but also the message of preparation and responsibility. We become the modern day Isaiah, John, and Mark. We are the ones to cry out the message of hope and comfort to a world desperate to hear that message even when they may not even know it.

As the church today we need to be an example of Christ at work in the world. We have been given this message of hope and a voice says to us, "Cry out!"

May God grant us words to speak and courage to speak it out loud to those who need to hear.

Amen.