

“Good News”

A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon
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Mark 1:1

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Isaiah 40:1-2

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.

I told you last week that we’d get to John the Baptist, and here he is, in all his righteous, raging glory. An austere figure dressed in Old Testament garb, he is a prophet for the ages, clearly at home in the desert issuing his fiery call to repentance. Satisfied? Because that’s pretty much all we’re going to say about him for the moment.

Instead, I want to call your attention to the very beginning of the Gospel of Mark, to verse 1, which most people might well skim over to get to the action, as it were. Of course, if one did that, one would encounter two verses quoting from Isaiah, except that they don’t. The first actually cites Malachi 3:1, and the second is a loose quote of Isaiah 40:3. You see, Mark and his contemporaries had a different approach to Scripture than many of the modern faithful. While the Gospel writers were constantly referencing the Hebrew Bible, proof-texting just wasn’t their thing. The meaning and intent of Scripture was what mattered. You may disagree, but then you would have to address the constant misquoting that goes on in what we call the New Testament.

So, back to Mark 1:1, in which, again, we are told, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” That’s not a throwaway line. *That’s the heart of the story.* Let me explain why.

Some of you read the newspaper in the morning. At the beginning of each article is the *lede*, a sentence or paragraph that tells you what is in the story. Further, the placement of articles matters, too. Growing up with the *New York Times*, I learned early on that the most important story of the day was on the front page, above the fold, on the right side, sort of a lede of ledes. The *Times* still employs this technique. So too does our own *Valley News*.

In short, the big, important news is always put upfront.

But maybe you prefer to avoid the news, a not unreasonable impulse in 2020. So, I invite you to think back to those term papers you used to write in school. Surely, you

remember being told of the importance of the thesis statement. Like the lede in a news article, the thesis statement summarized the thrust of your argument; my teachers always wanted me to put that right up front. Perhaps yours did, too.

Well, this verse is the lede, the thesis statement of Mark. As with an article or an essay, we are told right at the start what this story is all about: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

The good news, the Gospel, of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Messiah. That is what Mark’s Gospel is about. Of all the Gospels, these are the first words, and they tell us what is to come, not just in Mark but in Matthew, Luke, and John, too.

So we know that good news about Jesus is coming. But what is that news? This is where we need to look further in Scripture, back to the Hebrew Bible and specifically to today’s first lesson, which is taken from Isaiah.

Recall that the Book of Isaiah consists of prophecies from three eras: chapters 1-39 cover the eighth century BC, when Assyria menaced Judah; chapters 40-54 were written at the end of the Babylonian exile, when the people were ready to return home to Jerusalem; and chapters 55-66 come from after the return to Zion. We believe that “Second Isaiah,” the prophet preaching to a community in the midst of figuring out who it was and what its future might entail, offered the words of today’s lesson with the greatest of hope.

His preaching began with an assertion that God had spoken a word of consolation, of support: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.”

Here there is nothing about the wrath of the Lord, the might of God. No boasting, no chiding. Instead, the first words that this prophet wanted his contemporaries to hear are ones of reassurance.

Israel in exile faced breathtaking challenges. How would they assimilate the idea of defeat? How would they make sense of the apparent power of a foreign deity over their God? How would they explain the broken covenant between God and God’s people? In short, how would they make sense of a world—their world—turned upside down?

What ensued was one of the most incredible developments in the history of religious faith. People like Second Isaiah believed with all their hearts in the covenants established by the God of Israel; they believed in the promises made to their forebears by their God; and they believed in their God’s power. These propositions were beyond dispute, which meant that things must not be as they seemed.

Perhaps, they concluded, the God of Israel had sent the people into exile for a reason. Perhaps they were being punished. Perhaps they were being freed from the limitations imposed on them by previous understandings. Exile was not meant to be the end, they realized, but a new beginning.

And perhaps God was not just the God of Israel but the God of all creation, working through even the greatest of Gentile rulers to advance his own holy will. Babylon, which had inflicted that greatest of defeats on Israel, was now defeated herself by Cyrus, the powerful Persian king who allowed Zion to return home.

And perhaps religion was to be understood as more than rituals and sacrifices. It was seen as the pilgrimage of a community, the binding not just of a monarch to God but of all the people to their God.

The God of Israel, long identified in the popular imagination with the warrior storm God, was now also known as a compassionate, loving deity who married majesty with comfort.

These ideas had been percolating amongst Israel before they reached their full maturity in the exile. And thus, as we are told in Isaiah 40:2, Second Isaiah knew God as the one who instructed his prophet to speak in tenderness to the people, to tell them—no, to cry to them—that their penalty was paid, that in essence they were forgiven.

Talk about good news!

A people lost, disoriented, fearful for their future were being told not only that the God of Israel still reigned supreme in heaven and over all the earth, that their covenant with this God still held, but also that they were forgiven.

All of the heartbreak, the destruction, the alienation they had experienced was to be put behind them. They were forgiven. The burden of the past was lifted from their shoulders.

Think about this. Think about what it must have meant to the Jews in exile. And think about what it can mean for us.

Forgiveness allows for a fresh start, for new possibilities. The past was not erased, but its power to hold us in thrall was broken.

The time to return from exile had come, for the ancients in the Babylonian Captivity, and for us, from all that has kept us from God and other people.

This isn't to say that the return home will be without its difficulties. They—and we—are faced with a crossing of the desert. The journey back may be long and it may be hard. But we can envision the final destination and know that with God's help, it is not beyond us.

Part of the power of Second Isaiah's vision is that it harks back to the greatest event in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Exodus from Egypt, the deliverance from bondage and slavery. The people were brought into the desert and given their freedom, and then they slowly made their way to the Promised Land.

Those exiles in Babylon faced a similar challenge. All of their hopes and dreams, even their very self-conception, had been upended by the exile. And now they were being told that it was time to return home, to start anew.

We in the church believe that the story of Jesus is the Exodus redux. This time, though, rather than one people being freed from physical bondage, all of humanity is brought forth from a world shaped by sin and death to one in which we are made whole by the love of Christ.

The God we believe is coming to us this Advent is not here to demand that we do him homage, that we abase ourselves at his feet. This is not a God who wants something from us. Instead, this God is coming to us in love, and hope, and comfort. This is the God each of us needs to encounter in our lives, and the God all of us together need to meet.

So, we prepare. In Mark 1, we read of a voice calling out to us in the wilderness that we should prepare a way for the Lord. But that's not what we are told in Isaiah 40, where that voice tells us to prepare in the wilderness a path for God. There the valleys will be raised up and the mountains brought low. There in the Sinai, in the wastes between Babylon and Jerusalem, and in our own conflicted and confused interiors, we are to put aside any and all obstacles that keep us from knowing the God who wants to know us.

Yes, later in the passage we are reminded of our finitude, of how we, like the grass of the field and flowers of the meadow, will pass from this earth. But there is a constant that endures: the word of God, his promises, which are to be proclaimed, shared even in Jerusalem, that ruined and broken city which still embodied hopes and dreams.

We are to cry out that the God of awesome power and the God of gentle presence, the One who does mighty deeds and the One who holds us in tenderness, is coming to us, even though things may still seem bleak and many of us are still forlorn.

No wonder we sing this prophecy each year. Even as the words of Handel's *Messiah* are dimmed by familiarity, there is something in each of us that longs to hear the promises, to believe in the truth of the God who has come to us to free us and to set us on a new path. Though written as a secular entertainment, this oratorio still gives voice to a hope in God that has been crying out for ages.

For two millennia, in places around the globe, women and men have heard these words and thrilled to them. Circumstances may appear to belie Second Isaiah's prophecy. As humanity suffers from war and plague, greed and hate, some wonder where this tender, comforting God is. And as we let our minds drift and wander, we need to focus again on what is real and what is true: not our cynicism, nor events that seem to say that God has abandoned us if ever he existed, but on the covenantal promise, the divine assurance that God, Emmanuel, is coming to be with us, in this place and this time.

This is the good news that Mark wants to share in his Gospel. We may wonder why he begins his story by telling us about John the Baptist, but then we've missed his lede, his thesis statement—he has good news about God to share—and he wants to ground all of it

in Scripture. Only then does he introduce us to John, a reminder of Elijah, that messenger of God, who serves to open up the world into which Jesus strode. Matthew and Luke set the table by giving us genealogies, and John shares theological poetry, but all of the evangelists offer what Mark shares in the first verse of his first chapter: the good news of God in Jesus, the son of God, the Messiah.

We know this Messiah, promised in the past, who came not as a conquering king but as an infant in a manger. No wonder we need a season to prepare. We need to come to grips with this stunning, surprising action of the Lord—so unlike what we would expect, but once we think about it, so in keeping with the God who offers us comfort and tenderness.

In this Advent season, let us take the opportunity to truly hear the good news that Mark wanted to share with us. We may wonder what is going to happen as the story unfolds, but we should not worry, for the author of this first Gospel tells us right up front the end of the story: God is here, and he has come in love for each and for all of us.

That is good news, indeed!