

The Gospel of Mark begins with the words: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”

And in the passage we heard today, we are told that “Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God”.

Who does not like to hear “good news”?!!

It catches our attention, doesn't it?

It makes you want to listen!

Give us that good news, O Lord, give us some good news!!

The word “Gospel” itself means “good news”.

The Gospel of Mark, the first Christian Gospel written- was written during a time when the gospels people were commonly hearing or reading, were gospels of the Roman Empire which were propaganda that heralded Roman military victory and the power of Caesar. So the Gospel of Mark – the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God and the good news of God which Jesus proclaimed, was to say the least - **pivotal and radical**.

Consider the courage it took to write an alternative gospel while under the thumb of the power of Rome which worshipped wealth, nationalism, and military prowess:

An alternative gospel that proclaimed **God as King** and God's Kingdom as a place where **all** creation is cared for, fed and clothed, and swords are hammered into plowshares.

A gospel that proclaimed that Jesus, a healer and teacher who laid down his life for the Kingdom, was the embodiment of what the Kingdom of God looked like when humans choose to live it.

For me it is inspiring to think about what compelled the author of Mark to write and proclaim such a gospel when he was up against a political power like Rome. Clearly Jesus hooked something deep in the author's soul that enabled him to push past fear and rise up in hope, compelled to invite others to share in this alternative vision of what the world could be.

Of course some people would not and still, do not, describe Mark's gospel as inspiration --- some would say he was crazy or foolish. How could a Gospel about Jesus-- a narrative -- a vision like that, stand a chance against the powerful Roman gospel?

And yet the New Testament Gospel's tell us that many **were inspired** by this alternative narrative of good news beginning with Simon, Andrew, James and John who, leaving their fishing nets behind, chose to follow the way of Jesus.

And for over 2000 years the good news of God's Kingdom and the compassionate, justice-seeking good news of Jesus - **has been inspiring people** to shape their lives by an alternative narrative than the one represented by the likes of Rome.

This past week was the Monday our country honor's the legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. whose life was shaped and inspired by the alternative gospel of Jesus.

Dr. King was courageous enough to preach and teach the alternative gospel of equality and reconciliation in the face of our own 20th century "Rome-like" country of oppression and greed. And Dr. King was not alone.

This coming March 7th will mark the 50th anniversary of the "March on Selma" when six-hundred people marched in protest against the ongoing exclusion of African-Americans from the electoral process. All of these dedicated people were trained for non-violent action in black churches where people were inspired by the alternative narrative of Jesus. And when they were met with violence by the police and onlookers, they returned to those same churches for healing and renewal so they could go out and do it again.

It is interesting to note that in 1963, 2 years before the March on Selma, our congregation, led by the Rev. Ken Claypool, voted to affirm an "Open Church Resolution" which affirmed that all forms of racial discrimination was contrary to the basic principles of Christian faith. (Anyone here remember that?)

I expect that this was a radical gospel to be proclaiming in Magnolia in 1963.

The ways of Rome: misuse of power -- the value of some people over others - the imbalance and misuse of resources, is very much alive and well in the world, as is the intrigue, fascination and hunger for military prowess; and an eye for an eye, still has a hold on us, more than ever. Thus----

The Good news of Jesus Christ and the Good news of God's Kingdom of abundance, equality, liberation, reconciliation and peace **is still**, a radical and alternative gospel.

Like the author of Mark, who was compelled enough to brave writing about Jesus and the Kingdom of God under the threat of Rome ---You must ALSO find this good news compelling **or you would not be here.**

Some part of you must be hungry for the good news of this alternative narrative for life **or you would not be here.**

Some part of you knows the deep truth of this gospel -- **or you would not be here.**

Today we are going to have our annual Budget meeting, and while on the surface it may look like it is all about numbers or the cynic in us might think all the church ever wants is our money ---As I see it, the deeper truth about the budget is this:

The central purpose of this congregation is to continue to try to live into the alternative narrative of God's Kingdom, and instill in each of us ---the habits of the heart that help us do so in our daily lives.

Like James and John, Simon and Andrew - we are called as a congregation to let go of the nets that keep us tied to a narrative that leads to death instead of life. We are called to let go of the fear that keeps us tied to the idea that some lives are more valuable than others...We are called to live from the gospel narrative that proclaims that **all life matters** --- including the life of our vulnerable planet.

We may not be a church that marches 55 miles for the right to vote, that is literally putting our lives on the line, but we did take a stand in 1963 to pass an "Open Church Resolution" and in the 90's we went a step further and became an Open and Affirming congregation...and we **do seek to teach and practice the habits of the heart** which reflect the good news of God's Kingdom by:

Open and respectful conversation,
Sharing the resources we have with those who have less,
Singing in the choir
Risk sharing our vulnerable times
Praying our way towards hope,
Fixing monthly dinners for Pete's Place,

We reflect the good news of God's Kingdom and practice habits of the heart by:

Supporting Mary's Place mom's and kids when they are here each year,
Serving on the council,
Taking good care of our building which not only serves us **but provides a service** to the community – the school downstairs, the scouts, and many other groups that meet here,
Offering opportunities to discuss and learn about social justice issues,

We practice habits of the heart by supporting our elders with rides and taking time for conversation.

By enjoying wonderfully hospitable coffee hours each Sunday (the third sacrament!)

Participating in a Month of Community and other fellowship events

Raising monies to give away to organizations we are passionate about

Expressing the mystery we call God through the arts and worship services that are lively and inspiring

Engaging with scripture, faith formation series and learning about other religions

We reflect the good news of God's Kingdom and practice habits of the heart by:

Sharing our financial resources with the church so it can continue to be a viable community of faith in the 21st century.

Under the surface of the budget numbers which we will look at today --- is the Good news of Jesus Christ and the Good news of God's Kingdom, an alternative narrative that our lives and our world needs just as much now as it ever did.

May we continue to allow that compelling message move and empower us as we, like Simon and Andrew, James and John – seek to be faithful followers and proclaimers of the good news of God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen and amen.