

“Good News”
Psalm 62: 5-12; Jonah 3:1-5
Mark 1:14-20

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Good news! Who doesn't want to hear good news? It seems we have heard so much bad news. As we begin this passage, it's so easy to skip right over this beginning piece and to go right to the calling of the disciples. And yet, this is Mark's summary description of how Jesus begins his ministry. It begins by saying he began to proclaim the good news of God. The time was full, translated "fulfilled." It gives us the sense that there's something special about this particular time. Indeed, Jesus is present. Jesus, in some ways, is the presence of God. We have come to think of Jesus as King. So when he says, "The Kingdom of God is near," it really is. He is present. He's talking about the presence of God coming into our world through him. He is the tangible presence, the tangible grace of God available to us.

As we begin to see his ministry, this good news of God's presence, it's curious to me that the very next thing he says after "good news" is "repent." How does good news lead us to repentance? As I thought about that, I realized that perhaps one thing I need to repent of is bad news. I want to talk about two forms of bad news that in some ways I have to repent of. One is what we generally think of as news that is bad. We hear something that isn't good. The number of COVID deaths, for example, is bad news. We struggle with the various way things go awry. We hear about it and it is bad news. Sometimes I think I let that bad news begin to shape my whole perspective on the world. It must all be bad because all I hear is bad news. So that's one form of bad news.

The other kind of bad news is what we might say about someone. We might say, "That person is bad news." Why? Because somehow their presence causes problems, or their way of addressing a problem just creates more problems. I think of that kind of bad news as the way that I've accepted some kind of perspective or news that takes me off in a bad direction, to a bad place.

When I think about Jesus inviting me to repent because there's good news, it's because I sometimes give too much power to the bad news or I've grabbed hold of something that really is bad news, thinking it will solve my problems. Jesus seems to be suggesting that we need to repent of bad news.

It's not that we shouldn't hear it or shouldn't know about it. We just heard a description of Jonah walking through Nineveh. I've always been fascinated with this book, not only because of the description of how God convinced Jonah, but that he walks through this incredibly large city, and they *listen*. He's giving them the opportunity to know that they are living in bad news, and more bad news might come. There are consequences to how people live and to our actions. But he's also giving them some good news. They can repent. They can change. And they do. That's the part of Jonah that is always amazing to me—they change. How hard it is for us to hear the bad news and let it be something that changes us so that we look for a way to make it right. That's the repentance that Jesus is inviting us to.

There are so many things in our society it feels like we struggle with. The way to deal with the pandemic. The way to deal with racism, climate change, our divisions. I think we could probably continue that list on. But instead of focusing on the negative, on the bad news, we are invited to ask, "Where would Jesus take us?" It feels to me like what Jesus is saying when he's inviting us to repent is to turn from that bad news and turn to him because he is the good news of God, the Kingdom of God come among us, the grace of God here to show us new life and a new way.

What does it take to hear the good news and let go of the bad news? I think it takes recognizing that Jesus is the real news of God's grace come to be with us. He's the real news that invites us to follow him, to be freed by him, and to learn to friend because of him.

The very next thing he does after he announces this good news and invites us to repent and believe, to trust, to see him as real news, is to invite a following. He invites his disciples to follow, to see a different way, to follow one who brings good news of a way forward, a path through life, a relationship with our God. He invites us to follow. And he frees. He frees these disciples from the strictures of their society. They grew up to be fishermen. That's what they would always be. No rabbi was going to ever come by and invite them to do anything because fishing was an unclean profession, and they didn't want their purity tarnished by those fishermen. But Jesus breaks that barrier, frees them to be his disciples, to follow him.

I don't know what barriers we have or what ways we have structured our lives that we think we can't do something, in particular to follow Jesus. Sometimes it's our failures, our sin. We think we can't follow because we have sinned. He is freeing us from that as well. Freeing us to follow. Freeing us to be children of God. He's inviting them to fish for people, to bring people out of the chaos and into the light. He's inviting them to friend others. I know we don't usually use "friend" as a verb, but it feels to me like that's what Jesus is about. He's inviting them to friend all people, whoever they are with, guiding them to help bring the good news that God is with us, God is present, God's grace is among us.

God is entering into our world so that we might live, that we might love, and yes, that we might laugh, because I think it's really about bringing joy into life as well. We have gotten so caught up in the bad news, in both ways, that we need this real news. We need the good news that Jesus Christ brings us, the very grace of God. We can be refreshed by the good news that God is with us, God comes among us, God invites us to follow, to be freed and find friendship. In doing that, redefines who we are as disciples of Christ, and remakes us to be those who can truly live and love and laugh.

Where is it that God is entering into our lives in this day to refresh us, to redefine us, to remake us? What are the barriers that Christ will come through as he says, "Follow me"? Will we hear again his call to follow so that we might be freed, that we might know the way to friend one another rather than divide from one another, and the way to truly live and love and laugh? Amen.