

**Good News!**  
**First Sunday of Advent**  
*Isaiah 52:7; Mark 1:1*

***"The beginning..."***

***"...of the Good News..."***

***"...about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God."***

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West Valley Church  
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*Isaiah 52:7; Mark 1:1*

“Marley was dead, to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it. And Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change for anything he chose to put his hand to. Old Marley was as dead as a doornail.” Those are the first lines of Dickens' classic book, “A Christmas Carol.” First lines are important – they are often memorable – I think everyone recognizes this first line: “'Twas the night before Christmas...” First lines usually set the stage for everything that's going to follow. On this first Sunday of Advent we are going to take an in-depth look at a very important first line.

The theme of our Advent season for 2017 is “Good News!” 2,750 years ago, Isaiah the prophet wrote this in the Old Testament:

“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’” (Isaiah 52:7, niv)

At Advent we celebrate the arrival of Good News. And for each of the Sunday messages in December, we are going to look at some instances of those who brought us the message of “Good News!”

The mountains behind me were created by our Creative Design Team, which were used in our last sermon series and are now transformed for our Advent series. They are here to remind you of the message of Good News being brought to us from messengers coming down from the mountaintops.

If you noticed, our fall sermon series really brought us to the doorstep of Advent: we began with our series called “Camino: Walking the Way of Christ,” using the 500 mile hiking pilgrimage as a metaphor for the spiritual journey. We then moved to our next series called “The View From Here,” using the metaphor of a hiker cresting the summit of mountains to see the amazing vistas that are ahead. The first series addressed the essentials of personal spiritual formation; the second series addressed what God is leading us toward as a church. And the reason for all of it is what we are talking about in December: the Good News!

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<sup>1</sup> Primary sources: Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *Preaching Mark* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), Kent Brower, *Mark: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2012),

As I said at the beginning, first lines are important. This morning we are going to look at a first line that has some amazing truth packed into it, which comes to us from the New Testament book of Mark.

Of the Four Gospels, Mark is the earliest one, or in other words it was the first one written. In fact, about 96% of Mark appears in Matthew and Luke also, so they borrowed a lot from him.

Most scholars and historians agree that this gospel was written by Mark himself – most likely the same Mark that was a disciple of Barnabas, Paul, and Peter. He was sometimes also called John Mark.

It is also helpful to understand the times in which Mark wrote. By the time of Jesus, the Jews had been in exile from their own country for up to 800 years. Even though many of them were living in Jerusalem, it was not a Jewish state – the entire country was occupied by Rome. So for the majority of Jews the deliverance to their homeland and the return to the glorious time of peace that the prophets had promised so many centuries ago was a long distant, nearly forgotten memory. If the Old Testament didn't have the written record of the prophets like Isaiah that we read from earlier, the Jews would have no memory of God's promises at all. The Jews had all but given up hope. Most of them by this time had just gotten on with the state of their lives. There were a few Jews who still held onto hope and longed for the day that God would return to his Temple and set up his Kingdom, and Israel would once again be a nation. But they were growing fewer all the time.

Understand also that by the time Mark wrote this, the Christian Church had already been in existence for about 40 years, but the Roman rulers were persecuting the Christians. So a lot of what Mark wrote was in direct contrast and opposition to the Roman national religion, which was a patriotic emperor-worship.

It was into this world that Mark wrote a simple opening line that sent spiritual, political, and social shockwaves that still reverberate around the world today:

“The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.”  
(Mark 1:1, niv)

Opening lines are important; maybe none are more important than that one. Mark's Gospel has been called the “action Gospel” because it is so fast-paced. Time and again Mark uses phrases like, “right away,” and “immediately,” and “next.” In his simple but action-packed way, Mark writes this opening line. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark doesn't spend time talking about Jesus' conception or birth; he starts out hitting the ground running:

“The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.”  
(Mark 1:1, niv)

As I said, Mark's Gospel is the first one that was written, and in its very first sentence, Mark delivers to us “Good News.” He wastes no time getting straight to the point. In this simple sentence there are some profound suppositions, implications, and expectations, so let's just unpack each phrase of this very first Gospel use of the term, “Good News.”

## ***“The beginning...”***

You might think, “What is there to know here other than what it already says?” After all, these first two words of the first line are pretty obvious – it’s the beginning of Mark’s Gospel. But believe it or not there’s a lot more going on, and we don’t have to scratch very far below the surface to find it.

First, it’s worth pointing out that Mark is saying that this isn’t just the beginning of a story; this is the beginning of the Gospel, or the Good News, itself. Mark is making the point that what he’s about to write is the beginning of some very, very Good News, which is about all that Jesus Christ has done for us because of the Father’s love, and all Christ is for us.

Mark makes this point by using a phrase, “the beginning” – intended to take our thoughts right back to the very beginning of everything we know about God’s work for us. Let me put it this way: if I were to take Mark’s two words and add one more word to it, tell me what you think of: (ready?) If instead of “the beginning” I said “*In the beginning...*” what do you think of? The book of Genesis! The very first line of our entire Bible says, “In the beginning, God created...” right? Mark did this on purpose. He’s saying that the same God who brought order out of chaos in the beginning of creation is the God who is now doing a new thing at the beginning of Mark. In the chaos and darkness of the world, God is creating something new that involves a relationship with men and women. Mark is saying that the Good News signals the new beginning of God’s good purposes. In the very beginning God created us to be in relationship with him. *We* sinned and broke that relationship and the multiple covenants God had given to us to attempt to restore that relationship. So now, Mark says, out of God’s great love for us, he is doing a new work that will permanently make salvation available for us.

In fact, Mark does something later in this chapter to make his point clear that God is doing something big and new for us. You might recall that Mark wrote about how after Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, that at once Jesus was sent by the Spirit into the wilderness where he faced temptation from the Devil. Do you recall how many days Mark tells us that Jesus was in the wilderness? Forty days. Forty is significant. How many days did it rain for Noah’s flood? Forty. God was pointing out that he was doing something new. How many years were the Israelites wandering in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land? Forty. God was about to do something new. Then in Mark, Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days. Mark is pointing out that Jesus was going through the wilderness for us, and that Jesus himself would enter a new Land of Promise for us that will be forever. Once again, God is doing something new for us.

The opening two words of Mark’s Gospel say “the beginning,” and it signals to us that God is breaking into the chaos and the darkness that is our lives, and is doing a work of a new creation in us that will bring us into a new, right, relationship with himself as our Creator and now as our Father.

So, Mark’s opening line says “the beginning”

### ***“...of the Good News...”***

Just five words into Mark’s account, we see that what he’s going to tell us is not just the beginning of a story, but that it is a new work that God is doing for all people that can restore our relationship with him. God is not a condemning judge but he is our loving Father. This is very, very good news. There is a God, my friends, and he loves you so much that he has given the life of his one and only son as ransom for you. Christmas is about the celebration of the arrival of God’s Son – the beginning of the work Jesus would do for you. That is very, very good news.

What our English-language Bibles call “Good News” – two different words in English – is actually only one word in Mark’s written language of Greek. It is the word, *euangelioun* (*you – on –gel – eeown*). It is from this one Greek word that we get our word, “**evangelize.**” That word for us is a “verb” – it is an action word, it is something we do. When we “evangelize,” we are sharing the Good News with others. And this news is very, very good (so why wouldn’t we want to share it with others!)! That’s a very good thing to do. But Mark doesn’t use the word as a *verb*; Mark uses the word as a *noun*. The way Mark is using the word here, it is not something we *do*; it is something that simply *is*. By saying this, Mark is giving us a description of the arrival of Jesus Christ and all that Jesus revealed about God. He is not a distant, angry, judgmental God who is waiting and watching for the moment we slip up or make a mistake, or heaven forbid, we sin. Jesus taught us that God loves us, listens to us, is willing to forgive us, works in our lives, and wants to set us free, heal us, and give us a future and a hope. If God would go to all the trouble to create a universe for us at creation, and then God would go through all the work of delivering his people from four centuries of slavery in Egypt to give them their own geographical paradise, then God will also willingly lay down his life for us so that we can have an even better world – one that is eternal in heaven to be sure, but one that is also available to us right now in our hearts, minds, and relationships. The Good News is a *noun* –and it is revealed in the whole story of God’s actions for us in Christ. It is a word to describe the whole of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And the *euangelioun* (*you – on –gel – eeown*) – the Good News is that God did this for every one and all of us, no matter who we are or how bad we are. In fact, the *worse* off we are, the greater the gift is for us.

On June 19, 2016, the Cleveland Cavaliers, led by their superstar LeBron James, clawed their way back from a three game to one deficit against the Golden State Warriors. They won three games in a row, and became NBA champs. I remember this because I didn’t want them to win (and I think the Warriors were robbed!). Anyway, after the seventh and final game, which the Cavaliers won 93-89, their head coach at the time referred to LeBron James when he declared, “Great things happen to great people.”

Well in the world of pro sports maybe that statement might be true. After all, LeBron carried his team through the final three games, averaged almost 30 points per game, and became the finals MVP.

But the Good News that Mark writes about is that Jesus offers a very different take on "great things happen to great people." The Good News that Mark writes about says, "Great things happen to bad people, unworthy people, little people, poor people, and unrighteous people."

This is the Good News that Christmas is all about: no matter who you are, no matter how filled with shame you are, no matter how worthlessly you think of yourself, no matter how bad the sin you've committed is or how undeserving you think you are, no matter how deeply addicted you are, no matter how deeply hurt or abused or abandoned you've been, God loves you and sent his Son to rescue you! God has done a work that will create order and peace and light out of the chaos and darkness of your life. This is very, very Good News!

The opening line of Mark's gospel is "The beginning of the Good News "

***...about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God."***

When Mark gives us this last part of his opening line, we learn what this Good News is. You see, Mark isn't just saying the Good News is *about* Jesus; he is saying that the Good News IS Jesus! The first line prepares the reader for an amazing ride as God invades the world in the form of His Son, Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

Now, if Mark had just said "the beginning of the good news about Jesus," and left it at that, his readers might have been confused. The name "Jesus" is the Greek version of the Hebrew name "Joshua," meaning "the salvation of Jehovah," but it was a very common Jewish name in the first century. So this tells us that God has become as common as every other human, and that he can relate to us in all of our commonness, right where we are.

But Mark didn't stop there. If Mark had not added the rest of the words, it would've sounded to the Jews like it would sound to you and me if it said "The beginning of the good news about John Doe." We might think, "Well, John Doe must have gotten some good news." John Doe's news wouldn't have anything to do with us. But Mark makes it clear about Jesus' uniqueness; he goes on to describe Jesus. Mark next mentions Jesus is "the Messiah." This term is a translation of the title, "Christ," which, contrary to popular opinion is *not* Jesus' last name! The Greek translation of the Hebrew "Messiah" is "Christos." It means literally, "Anointed One."

That sounds like a big deal to us, but even this term was a common term in the Old Testament. At the time that Mark wrote this, it did not carry this idea of the anointed one being God, like it does for us today. For the most part, the term was a description given to *any* man who would work to free the nation of Israel from her oppressors. In the Old Testament, even the very pagan King Cyrus of Persia was called an "anointed" one because he allowed the Jews to return from exile back into

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<sup>2</sup> David Smith, [Mark: A Commentary for Bible Students](#) (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007), 46.

their homeland (Isaiah 45:1).<sup>3</sup> Jesus was given a sort of descriptive name and title: Messiah.

But of course Mark doesn't stop there. Mark makes sure to clarify exactly who this "anointed one" is: this is the one who is coming to save us from our sins. This Good News is that Jesus the anointed one is the actual Son of God. Now Mark gets to the point; he is saying that Jesus is God Himself – not "A" God, but "THE" God. Mark wanted to make it clear that this was no ordinary servant or just a good man—this was the Son of God, who had come to take away our sins.<sup>4</sup>

The term "Son of God" is a term that Mark uses several times in his Gospel to make sure that we understand what it means. For instance, later in this same chapter, after Jesus is baptized, we hear the voice of God declaring,

"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well-pleased." (Mark 1:11).

Mark records God saying this again in Mark 9:7.

Every time in Mark's Gospel that the demons of hell run into Jesus, they are very quick to cry out specifically that Jesus is the Son of God. They can't help it – it is an involuntary reaction they have – not of praise – of fear. When the unholy demons are confronted with the Holy God in the person of Jesus they blurt out, "Jesus – the Son of God!" and then beg for mercy. (3:11; 5:7). Mark even quotes Jesus calling Himself the Son of God. When Jesus was on trial by the religious leaders, they asked him if he was the Son of God, and Jesus said:

"I am (the Son of God), and you will see me sitting at the right hand of God, and returning to earth in the clouds of heaven." (Mark 14:61–62)

Finally, Mark shows that even we humans figured it out after Jesus was crucified. When Jesus was hanging on the cross and then gave up his spirit and died, it prompted the Roman guard who was watching it to say:

"Truly this was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39)

Mark is telling his readers over and over again that the Good News that they'd been waiting for and hoping for was finally here: God is doing a brand new work that is as significant as creation and the deliverance of God's people into the Promised Land. Mark is telling them that the Good News is not a story; it is a person – a person who has come to deliver them. This person has come to forgive them of their sins and set them free, to restore them to the relationship that God created in the very beginning for humans. This person is the Son of God himself. This is the Good News! Mark is telling them that it's not a rumor; it is real. This is the Good News that has arrived, which we celebrate at Christmas.

Let me put it this way – this is what Christmas is like: Kids, imagine that you and your mom go to the grocery store; say you went to Walmart. But somehow you get

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<sup>3</sup> David Smith, [Mark: A Commentary for Bible Students](#) (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007), 47.

<sup>4</sup> Rodney L. Cooper, [Mark](#), vol. 2, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 7.

separated in the grocery store, and you start to get scared and panic and don't know which way to go to find her. So you run to the end of an aisle, and just before you start to cry, you see a shadow on the floor at the end of the aisle that looks like it might be your mom. Just being able to see that shadow makes you really happy, and you feel hope!

But which would be better: the happiness of seeing the *shadow* that might be your mom, or having your mom step around the corner and you see that it's really her!?

That's what Christmas is about; we are lost and in chaos, and we need more than shadows or stories. And now we have God in person. That's the way it is for us when we accept Jesus; that's what Christmas is. Christmas is the replacement of shadows and rumors and hopes with the real thing.<sup>5</sup> That's why we sing the Christmas carol that says, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight."

Mark's opening line is like a messenger coming down the Mountains with very, very Good News, and the Good News is the person Jesus Christ. Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas indeed!

*Pray*

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<sup>5</sup> John Piper, "Our High Priest is the Son of God Perfect Forever," *Desiring God* (12-8-96)