

“Have You Heard the News?”

Mark 1:1-12

Baptism of the Lord

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Westminster, Greenville

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With the new year, we are beginning a new sermon series this morning, the title of which is “The Fabric of Faith.” “Faith” is a word that gets used a lot in church...how many of you have ever heard the expressions, “having faith,” or “coming to faith,” or “growing up in the faith”?

I trust you have. We use those phrases a lot. But what do we mean, by that word, “faith”?

Our sermon series will look at faith from a number of scriptural perspectives: faith as seeing, faith as patience, faith as urgency, faith as friendship...and to start us off, on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, we begin with the earliest of the four Gospels, the Gospel of Mark.

How did the first Gospel writer describe...faith?

A number of years ago, the late writer John Updike gave a lecture at St. Mark’s Episcopal Church in NY City. His topic was **religious themes** in his own works of fiction—his novels and short stories.

There was a question and answer period afterward,  
and one person in attendance asked:

“Mr. Updike, what’s your favorite Gospel?”

Without hesitation, Updike responded:  
“Luke. Luke tells the best stories.”

And then he thought for a moment...and he added:

“Yes, Luke is my favorite—  
but I TRUST the Gospel of Mark.

“It was the earliest Gospel, and—  
it’s the Gospel LEAST prone to *wishful thinking*.”<sup>1</sup>

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The Gospel least prone to wishful thinking...  
I think I know what Updike meant.

To say that Mark is least prone to wishful thinking—is NOT to say that the other three Gospel writers have their heads in the clouds. It’s just that Mark has a way of telling the story of Jesus with the ROUGH EDGES of life and faith still intact.

We heard the first 12 verses of Mark’s Gospel this morning.

And I wanted to begin with Mark, because Mark has a fascinating take on what faith is all about.

He describes it...not so much as a pleasant journey with Jesus.  
He doesn’t describe it like Joel Osteen, as a path to wealth and wisdom and “becoming a better you.”

He doesn’t even use that beautiful and confident language found in the letter to the Hebrews:

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for,  
the conviction of things not seen.”

No, Mark describes faith...as a fight.  
As a battle.

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to the Rev. Dr. Tom Long for this story, which I heard at a Festival of Homiletics preaching conference many years ago.

According to Mark, it's going to be a struggle.

That's our first topic for this sermon series.  
Faith...as struggle.

Now where do we see that in our text for today?  
“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God...”

At first blush, it sounds like a straightforward introduction.  
The good news of Jesus Christ...

But as one biblical scholar writes, the phrase “good news” isn't quite a strong enough translation.

The Greek word that's used here is **euangelion**.

And *euangelion* “did not refer to just any sort of good news,”  
like the weather will be pleasant tomorrow.

“Most uses [of euangelion] in classical Greek refer to the news of a military victory...the most literal translation [of the first verse of Mark's Gospel] would be ‘good news of victory from the battlefield.’”<sup>2</sup>

In other words,  
planted within the word *euangelion*  
is the understanding that faith is a battle,  
that it's going to be a struggle...

Do you know anything about that?  
Have there ever been times in your life when having faith—

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<sup>2</sup> William C. Placher, *Mark*, in the “Belief” Bible commentary series (edited by Amy Plantinga Pauw and William C. Placher), Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

didn't mean peace and comfort and confidence—  
but presented itself...as a struggle?

When the late pastor, John Claypool, wrote about the death of his 10-year-old daughter, Laura Lue, he described the previous 18 months in which she battled cancer,

as a time in which he and his wife  
walked by her side  
with “horror” and “hope” and “fear”.

Shortly after she died, Claypool did not say it was all part of God's mysterious plan. Instead, he preached about his own anger at God, he shared his raw grief with his congregation in Kentucky. And he told them that he did not hesitate to shake his fist at the Almighty:

“Why did You let Laura Lue suffer so excruciatingly and then let her die?”

“Why [was she] cut down at the age of ten?”

And then Claypool said this to his congregation:

“There is more honest faith in an act of questioning than in the act of silent submission, for implicit in the very asking is the faith that some light can be given...”<sup>3</sup>

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It's that kind of vulnerability, that kind of honest searching,  
that I suspect most of us crave when we come to church.

Whether our struggle is with world events,

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<sup>3</sup> John R. Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler: Living and Growing through Grief*, Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2004.

or what's happening in a loved one's life,  
 how does following God, trusting God,  
 having faith in God fit in to it all?

There are no formulas.

But I appreciate what the Presbyterian pastor Tom Are does almost every Sunday. And as some of you know, Tom Are was Leigh's pastor when she was growing up.

So Leigh has probably heard him preach more than I have.  
 But I've heard Tom Are preach any number of times.  
 And I'm struck by something he does at the end of the sermon.

Right before he says, "Amen," he invites his congregation to pray.  
 And then he says this:  
 "Lord, I believe—help my unbelief. Amen."

Do you know where he got those words?

From the story about the father who asked Jesus to heal his son.  
 "Immediately the father of the child cried out, 'I believe; help my unbelief!'"

Do you know where that story is found?  
 Not in John's Gospel.  
 Not in Matthew. Not in Luke.

It's only found in Mark.  
 I appreciate very deeply—the struggle of faith—  
 that Mark does NOT hesitate to describe.

But the beautiful part about Mark's Gospel is that Mark isn't just adept at describing vulnerable faith or wavering faith. In fact, if that were all Mark had to say about faith, we would miss his point entirely.

Mark is also very VIVID when he describes the faithfulness of God.

Listen again to how Mark talks about the baptism of Jesus:

“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him...”

Matthew and Luke say that the heavens “were opened” to Jesus. And then the Spirit descended like a dove. A very gentle, very peaceful, very appealing image...

But not Mark.

Mark says that the heavens were “torn apart”! Like it's all part of a struggle, like there's resistance to what God is up to!

Why would Mark write “torn apart”?

Indulge me in a brief exercise.

Take your bulletin.

Now open your bulletin.

Now close your bulletin.

Good.

How many of you, after opening and closing your bulletin, can still use it?

It's exactly the same as it was before.

Can I get a volunteer...to tear your bulletin apart?

I can see you're reluctant to do it.  
Why are you reluctant to do it?

Besides the fact that it's a really weird thing for your preacher to ask you to do in the middle of a sermon!

You don't want to tear it, because that would PERMANENTLY CHANGE it. It becomes different, entirely different, than what it was before.

Which is fine when it comes to your bulletin.  
It just means you'd have to go through the hassle of getting a new bulletin.

But what about the hassle of receiving a new life from God?  
Because that's what faith is also about, according to Mark.  
In the struggle of faith, we receive new life in Jesus Christ.

And there's something in each of us that resists it!

Something in all of us that RESISTS God's activity in our lives, especially if it means that God is going to change us, and reassemble us, and provide us with different priorities than we would choose for ourselves, if God weren't meddling in our business...

How many of you have ever read anything by C.S. Lewis?

Lewis's writings have shaped the faith of more Christians throughout the past 8 or 9 decades than anyone can count.

He wrote for children. He wrote for adults.  
 But do you know how Lewis described his conversion to Christian faith?

“There was no strain of music from within,” Lewis wrote,  
 “no smell of eternal orchards at the threshold  
 when I was dragged through the doorway.

No kind of desire was present at all...”<sup>4</sup>

Dragged through the doorway...do you hear the struggle?  
 Who was doing the dragging?  
 It was God.  
 It was the love of God, in battle with C.S. Lewis,  
 refusing to let C.S. Lewis go his own way...

You see, Mark describes a God who will “tear apart” the heavens to get to us, to come to us, a God who promises NOT to leave us just as we are, but a God who promises to change us and mold us into the children of God we were created to be.

God even does it with Jesus. Right on the heels of his baptism, Jesus goes into the wilderness. Matthew and Luke say that the Spirit led him there...very gentle, very calm.

But not Mark.  
 Mark says that the Spirit “drove” Jesus into the wilderness.  
 Why would the Spirit have to drive Jesus there?

Maybe Jesus didn’t want to go.

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<sup>4</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*, Orlando, FL: Hardcourt Books, 1955.



Maybe Jesus didn't want to be in the wilderness with the wild beasts and with Satan.

Mark gives us a God who will stop at nothing to turn us into the children of God whom we were created to be.

That's what the good news—**the euangelion**—  
is all about.

It's about a battle to be sure, but the good news is that the outcome is not ultimately up in the air, nor is it up to us.

It's a message of victory.  
A message of hope.

The news that God has permanently and forever defeated the powers of death and sin and despair in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And what Mark wants to know is this:

**Have you and I heard this news, in the midst of whatever struggle we're going through?**

**Have we received the message,  
the euangelion,  
the news of God's victory from the battlefield?**

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I learned of someone just this week who's heard the news.  
A widow named Yong Cha Prince.  
She's 73, she lives in Denver, and she recently lost her grown son to cancer.

So Ms. Prince was going to shut down the motel that she and her husband used to run together, and go back to her childhood home of South Korea to spend the rest of her life as a missionary.

But then one night, a woman came by the motel.

This woman knew of six boys, migrants from Venezuela, who were sleeping outside nearby.

Could they stay in Ms. Prince's motel?

How much would she charge?

Ms. Prince said to bring them by, they could stay for free.

Soon there were more migrants.

Not just boys, but entire families.

People who had been turned away from city shelters that were already past full, which meant they were sleeping in parks and public spaces, trying to survive frigid Rocky Mountain winter nights.

Before too long, Ms. Prince found herself providing shelter for 300 people.

Up every morning at 4am.

Cooking 300 people three meals a day.

And taking donations from a group of Moms organized over Facebook.

It's not a permanent solution, by any stretch.

One day, Ms. Prince's finances will run out.<sup>5</sup>

But it's an act of faith in the midst of the struggle.

Because you know what Ms. Prince did, don't you?

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<sup>5</sup> I heard this story on NPR news, January 3, 2024. It can be found at [Migrants find warmth and safety in a widow's failing Denver motel : NPR.](#)

She took the belief that some children of God are less worthy of shelter than other children of God, less deserving of food and safety and love than other children of God...she took those beliefs, and she didn't just question them.

She tore them apart!

**Have you heard the news?  
That's what Mark wants to know.**

Not only the news that God tore open the heavens at the baptism of Jesus.

But also in your baptism.  
And at your child's baptism.

Oh, I know.

That's not how you remember it.  
You may not have seen the tearing take place.  
You may not have seen the Spirit descending at your baptism or your child's baptism.

But I promise you, that's what happened.  
The Holy Spirit was there.  
Because God will stop at NOTHING to get to you...  
To claim you and call you as God's own.

**Have you heard the news?**

The news that God can take even the most fearful or grieving or faltering follower, and turn that person into a rock, into a messenger of

God's love, someone who never dreamed of what God will do through them.

I'm reminded of something that the late Episcopal priest Robert Capon once said. He remarked that Christian faith isn't just in a battle with evil and despair these days.

It's also in a battle with "dullness."

"Good news is no longer good news, it is okay news.  
Christianity is no longer life-changing, it is life-enhancing.

"We have lost our astonishment."<sup>6</sup>

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Perhaps.

Let's find out.

How many of you have ever been ASTONISHED by something that God has done in your life of faith?

That sounds like euangelion to me.

For those of us who have heard  
the good news of God's victory,  
Mark has a follow-up question:

What are we going to do about it?

(Amen.)

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<sup>6</sup> I have lost the original source for this quote by Robert Capon.