

The Gospel of Mark?

Mark 1:1-3

The Rev. Dr. L. Gregory Bloomquist
Calvin Christian Reformed Church Ottawa
 January 4, 2015

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 2 As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way; 3 the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight -- " (Mark 1:1-3)

To a Roman living in the days of Jesus, Mark's Gospel would have sounded something like [THIS](#).

Well, OK, maybe not with that sound, but with that image. The imagery that it would have conjured up in his or her mind would have been of a Roman legionnaire charging up to the city gates on his magnificent stallion, probably accompanied by someone who would have had a loud horn to get people's attention, and then reading for the whole city to hear: Good news I bring to you today: Rome has been victorious in her victory over the Parthians at Dura, or Good news I bring to you today: For unto you is born in the city of Rome an heir to Augustus. Hail Caesar.

Sometimes, the legionnaire would be accompanied by a whole group of soldiers on their beautiful chargers, a whole "host" of those who announced the good news of Rome's victory or the Emperor's heir.

And throughout the cities of the Empire, people would have been poured out into the streets if not out of adherence to Rome, then at least to hear what all the fuss was about. As they did, they would have been surrounded by reminders of other good news of previous victories and births to Rome's leaders: there would be triumphal arches; there would be sculptures of Rome's leaders and their offspring; there would be buildings with inscriptions in Latin or in Greek praising generous benefactors from among the imperial ranks.

Good news. That's what the word "Gospel" means. It was a common word in the day of Jesus. It's one of the main words in the title of what we call "The Gospel of Mark" or better "Mark's Gospel".

But, when the people of Israel heard this word "Gospel" or "good news" whether it was in Greek *euangelion* or in Hebrew *bashar* they didn't hear trumpets, or see a beautiful Roman stallion with its mount, or the words, or any of the statuary... in their hearts they heard the echoes of the words that they regularly heard in their synagogues, words read in Hebrew or Aramaic so that no one else could understand them, the words of the prophets of Israel who had proclaimed to the people that God, the God of Israel, had been victorious over his enemies.

In their synagogues, the people of Israel had often enough heard words read aloud about the proclamation of the victory of God, the good news, like those found in Isaiah "Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!" Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him." "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of good, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."

These were the words that the people would hear when this book was announced to them: this is the Gospel, that is, the good news of the proclamation of God's victory. And that is what you have in your hands this morning.

Imagine, then, what you have in your hands! My friends, when you hear the word "Gospel" you must remember that what you are reading or hearing is much more than just a story, or a biography about a man named Jesus. It is first of all a proclamation of victory after battle or an event that will forever change the future. It's supposed to stir the heart.

So, is your heart stirred when you hear “Gospel” today? Perhaps it is a little bit now.

But, wait, my book says: Gospel of Mark, or Mark’s Gospel. Is the title really “Mark’s proclamation of the victory of God”? That’s not very stirring. Fortunately, that’s not the real title of this book. That was a title given to this book well into the 4th century by churchmen who needed to show the apostolic origins of all the texts found in the New Testament. According to tradition, the book was written by the erstwhile companion of Paul and Barnabas, a man named John Mark. But, we don’t know that that was the case. And even if it was, that wasn’t the title that John Mark, or whoever wrote the book, gave to it. But we do know what that title was, the title that the author actually gave to it.

Like all documents from antiquity, the title of the book is provided by the author in the opening words of his book. For example, the title for the first book of the Bible comes from the opening words -- In the Beginning (in Greek, Genesis). The title by which we know Mary’s great hymn of praise, the Magnificat, is in fact the first word of the Latin version her song “Let my soul magnify the Lord”. To this day, official documents of the Roman Catholic church are still known by their opening words, which are thus their title. For example, the first encyclical of Pope Francis is entitled *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Joy of the Gospel, because the opening words of that encyclical are in Latin *Evangelii gaudium*, which in English becomes “The joy of the Gospel ... fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus”. A beautiful title for a beautiful text.

So, too, the title of this book is not “Mark’s Gospel”. The title is found in the opening verse of this text: “the beginning of...” or better said “Here is where you start reading: “The Gospel of Jesus Christ”. That’s the title! “The Gospel of Jesus Christ”. Or better said, as you now know, “The good news of the proclamation of God’s victory in Jesus Christ”. (You’ll see in footnotes in most Bibles that that’s as far as the title goes.)

This is a much better title, wouldn’t you agree? I mean, if you think about it, it sounds quite pompous to think of someone like John Mark entitling his work: “My proclamation of the victory of God”. Imagine if I had written a Gospel and decided to call it “Greg’s Gospel”, or if Chad or Martin had done it and called their books “Chad’s Gospel” or “Martin’s Gospel” rather than what it is: the good news of God’s victory in Jesus. Much as I respect Martin and Chad, and I think I could do a pretty good job, too, those titles would be almost laughable, wouldn’t they?

But, there’s more. Because the title says: ‘the good news of the proclamation of God’s victory’ through Jesus Christ. You all know who Jesus is, right? But, if you were living in Jesus’ own day, what would you have heard when you heard the name Jesus? Jesus is a Greek name, and it was used for boys in Jesus’ day, but it’s not just a name. The name, Jesus, is the Greek translation for the Hebrew name “Joshua”. That’s right. Joshua: the man who succeeded Moses as the leader of the people of Israel. Remember: Moses had led the people out of Egypt and through the wilderness right to the edge of the promised land, but it was Joshua, known in Greek as Jesus, who led the people of Israel INTO the promised land.

Aha! So, for a Jewish person who heard this book announced, the title of this book is actually more like this: “The good news of the proclamation of the victory of God at the hands of Joshua...”. OK, now this sounds promising. It reminds us of the victory of God at the battle of Jericho and the great victory over all the cities of the land of Canaan.

And so does the word “Christ”. This is not Jesus’ last name. I once had a professor who said to me: “What was Paul’s last name? I mean I know that Jesus’ last name was Christ, but what about Paul?” We can laugh about it, but a lot of people think the same way. But “Christ” of course is not Jesus’ last name: it’s a title. “Christ” is our English form of the Greek word *christos* which means “anointed”. That word, “anointed” in Hebrew is *moshiach*, for which we say in English “Messiah”. Christ and Messiah both mean the same thing: “one who is anointed”.

So, here’s the title of the book that you have in your hands this morning: the good news of the proclamation of the victory of God at the hand of Joshua the anointed one.

Now as good Calvinists you know that there were three classes of people in the Old Testament who were anointed: prophets, priests, and kings. Which is Jesus? Well, next week we’ll find out, but given all the emphasis on victory and associated with the name of the conquering Joshua you can be pretty sure that it suggested to the people kingly power.

What an amazing title: “the good news of the proclamation of the victory of God at the hands of a new Joshua, the anointed one”. Isn’t that better than “Gospel of Mark”?

But, that’s just the title. What about the text? Let’s get to the victory part! We all want victory, right? When we first moved to Ottawa in the late 80s we were told that we should not expect to find many professional sports teams in Ottawa. I was surprised

and asked why. We were told: Because people in Ottawa only want winners. So, if a team doesn't win, out they go! I don't know if things have changed, but I do know that we all still like winners, we all want a victory, so if the Gospel wants to tell us about God's victory, we're all for that, and let's get to it!

And immediately Mark does take us there. But, not in the way that you might expect. Because the most striking thing about the opening of Mark's text, once we have the title clear, is that it is not Jesus to whom we are first introduced. As the title says, this Jesus will be the subject of this Gospel, but he is not introduced until vs. 9.

Nor is John the Baptist the first person introduced in this Gospel. John, as we'll see next week, will be introduced very soon, but only to make a brief appearance.

No, the first person to be introduced in this Gospel is someone else, someone with whom the people of Israel were very familiar: the prophet Isaiah.

Do you remember Isaiah? He prophesied from the end of the 700s BC to the early 600s BC. I know that those dates don't mean too much to you. But it will help if I tell you what was happening when Isaiah prophesied. Isaiah prophesied at the end of century and a half of civil war, when the glorious kingdom of David and his son Solomon had been torn apart by rival Jewish kings, those in the north, called Israel, and those in the south, called Judah. When Isaiah appeared, with both Israel and Judah weakened by their decades old war, things were looking especially bad because both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah were now threatened by the fierce empire of the Assyrians, one of the great empires of the ancient Near East. But, they were too weak to withstand Assyria. Israel tried to stand against Assyria, but it was easily defeated and conquered. The people of the north were taken into captivity and bondage. And just like the young Nigerian girls who were taken captive by Boko Haram, the Israelite women were given to Assyrian men as wives, thus destroying in the mind of Jews the purity of the race of Israel. One day, many years later, many of those offspring would return to Israel, but no longer as Jews, but as Samaritans.

The southern kingdom of Judah was smarter. It saw what happened in the north and made peace with Assyria. But, then a new king arose, pious king Hezekiah came to the throne. God seemed to honour his piety and God spoke to Hezekiah to arise and lay off the burden of submission to Assyria and their constant threats in his day from the Assyrian king Sennacherib. Here's what king Hezekiah prayed (Isaiah 37): ¹⁵ And Hezekiah prayed to the LORD: ¹⁶ "O LORD of hosts, God of Israel, who art enthroned above the cherubim ... ¹⁷ ... see; and hear all the words of Sennacherib [king of Assyria], which he has sent to mock the living God. ¹⁸ Of a truth, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations and their lands ... ²⁰ So now, O LORD our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that thou alone art the LORD."

God spoke to Hezekiah through the prophet Isaiah. Here's what Isaiah communicated to Hezekiah: ²¹ Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent to Hezekiah, saying, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Because you have prayed to me concerning Sennacherib king of Assyria, ²² this is the word that the LORD has spoken concerning him ... ²⁹ Because you have raged against me and your arrogance has come to my ears, I will put my hook in your nose and my bit in your mouth, and I will turn you back on the way by which you came.' ... ³⁴ By the way that he came, by the same he shall return, and he shall not come into this city, says the LORD. ³⁵ For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David."

With that encouragement Hezekiah declared to Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, that he would no longer accept Assyrian threats and submission. Naturally, the Assyrians turned their armies toward little, weakened Judah. But, when Assyria came against Judah before they could even attack a single member of the army of little Judah, 185,000 Assyrian soldiers were killed by what the Bible describes as the angel of the Lord. As a result King Sennacherib returned to Assyria and never again attacked Judah.

Gospel? Now do you see what it means: the good news of the proclamation of the victory... of God! Do you think that Isaiah knew something of Gospel? Do you think that Hezekiah did? Isaiah saw in what happened to Assyria something of what Moses, another prophet, had seen happen to the Egyptian army when it tried to lay hands on the people of Israel at the Red Sea. This is Gospel stuff!

So now, back to our Gospel, our proclamation. What do you think that the writer -- perhaps Mark -- is preparing us for by entitling his work: The good news of the proclamation of the victory of God... at the hands of a new deliverer, a new Joshua? What do you think is his reason for starting his work by quoting from the great prophet Isaiah concerning God's victory over Assyria, Isaiah who had seen and knew in his flesh just how powerful the hand of the Lord was? Isn't he getting us ready to see a new deliverance, a new victory of the mighty hand of the Lord by his servant Jesus? Isn't he getting us ready for the battle when he quotes Isaiah: 'Look, listen... Behold, I am sending my messenger before you. He is going to prepare your way. That is

the voice crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, the one true God, so that all roads will lead straight to him? Do you think, just possibly, that the people of Israel are again going to see the hand of God move in great power and victory against their enemies, the enemies of God, so that once again we can trumpet the victory of God to proclaim to all the world: our God rules? Of course they are.

So, this Gospel, this trumpeted proclamation of the victory of God, begins by announcing that something is stirring in the wilderness, where the people, following Moses, have wandered for some 40 years. Next week we'll hear how John the Baptist will again lead the people in the wilderness until one day he will see that new Joshua arise and he know will that the time has come for the people to enter the promised land and freedom and dominion. Where is he now? We don't know just yet, but a voice is calling out: come this way! look over here! And you'll see him.

If you feel your passion stirring, if you feel that we are just on the verge of something huge, not just at the start of a new year, but something that we haven't seen for centuries, or perhaps ever... then you feel something of what you are supposed to feel when you open this book and begin to read, starting with the title, and just the first two verses.

And if... your passion stirred, wanting to know as children who are captivated always want to know "what happens next?"... then come back next week. Because, the stirring just gets stronger and the possibilities just get better.