

WELCOME 29th November 2020 – 1st Sunday in Advent '20 B

Mark 1:1-8

Welcome again this morning! I'm glad you're here. I pray you experience God's grace in abundance in this brief time together. Please check our website for our weekly Zoom Bible Study times & other important information & updates.

We're continuing w/ our adapted worship...so as usual there are Group Study/Discussion resources right there in your hands. *Special welcome to those who have jumped in on-line. Please make your way through the songs we've linked to this morning so that you experience at home what we're experiencing here. Our aim is to equip you so God leads you into the fullness of His word & his work in your lives & then out into the city to share what God has done for you.*

Remember all the great things we need to do to keep each other as safe as we can in this unending season of "the virus." Hand sanitizer. Masks. Sign in. Distance.

Offering. Communion. Special thanks to our set-up/clean-up folks!

As we move into this week...

Fireworks Cancelled. Carols Events On-line? Photos with Santa. Socially distanced. Big family trips...maybe not. Christmas 2020 will be different in many ways. It's going to look/feel very different from a "normal" year. But maybe **THIS** Christmas reflects the realness/rawness of life that **IS** normal & confronts us every day. We know...Life **IS** messy, **IS** complicated, **IS** frustrating & sometimes **IS** isolating

The truth is...Christmas is more than our favourite holiday pasttimes... It's more than warm fuzzy expectations that don't seem to last longer than the wrapping paper. It's more than the familiar safe once-a-year stories & manger songs & scenes. Christmas is more life-changing. It's more power, more peace, more hope, more joy, more love, more life that comes to you in the normal grittiness & messiness & hard work of every day...

Christmas is the good news that God has planned, from before time began, to bring all things together in Christ to restore all things in his love & when that unfolded ^{b/4} our eyes it would blow the world wide open & transform everything it touched...and make all things new...CS Lewis says: "Once in our world, a stable had something in it that was bigger than our whole world."

We'll explore & experience together that Christmas is more.

Let's pray...then we'll get stuck into it.

PRAYER OF THE DAY:

Lord Jesus, Master of both light & darkness, send your Holy Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas. We who have so much to do seek quiet spaces to hear your voice each day. We who are anxious over many things look forward to your coming among us. We who are blessed in so many ways long for the complete joy of your kingdom. We whose hearts are heavy seek the joy of your presence. We are your people, walking in darkness, yet seeking the light. To you we say, "Come Lord Jesus!" Amen.

Let's sing & then we'll hear God's Word...

FAITH CHAT:

1. What do your Christmas preparations include? Are any different this year?
2. What does "repentance" mean?

BIBLES

1 Advent '20 B – CHRISTMAS IS MORE THAN...A STORY

Once upon a time... Call me Ishmael... It was the best of times, it was the worst of times... It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife... Famous first lines... Well known beginnings to great stories. And then there's... *The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God...* That's a fairly literal translation of Mk 1:1... The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. Talk about a plot spoiler...

A good first line isn't supposed to give you the whole story... It isn't supposed to give away all the secrets & inside info straightaway... A good first line should leave you hanging out for the rest of the story... except Mark makes clear from the first line... He isn't a story teller. He isn't spinning a yarn to amuse the kids around the campfire. He isn't reeling off a "tale told by an idiot full of sound & fury signifying nothing." *The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God...* Christmas, Mark says, is more than a story...

The words alone... good news... in Gk: εὐαγγελιον... gospel. In the Ancient Near East it was usually a military word meaning "our guys won!" A messenger would be sent from the battlefield w/ the "good news" of victory. But Mk knows the prophecy the promise of a larger more triumphant move of God... Is 52:7-8... *How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger who brings good news, the good news of peace & salvation, the news that the God of Israel reigns!* Mk, leans on the prophets as he proclaims what he knows is "good news." He directly quotes Is 40 & Mal 3 about the messenger preparing the way for the Lord's arrival... but **THIS** good news is of God's ultimate triumph over every counterfeit god & phony deity & fake divinity that human hearts have clung to since forever. That's the final chapter before the 1st sentence is done

This is not a victory of swords & soldiers & chariots... but of God once & for all laying claim to sinful humankind & the sin-blighted created order our rebellion has wrecked. Mk begins by declaring, "the end of all that wages war against human hearts & souls has arrived!" Mk begins by declaring the end to the daily war for our allegiance & devotion & worship that is won by God & **THAT** victory – **THAT** triumph is here now & **THAT** is good news. And the only question left unanswered as we read Mk's good news; Do you trust the good news, or are you holding out for something or someone greater?

And that good news has a name... a face & a place in human history: Jesus. But not just any Jesus... not just any Jewish Yeshua child born & named like countless others ^b/₄ him... this Jesus is Messiah - Christ - Anointed One. Those aren't Jesus' last name... those are titles... designations of honour & destiny & majesty.

Mk declares that from the beginning Jesus entered our world as King/Ruler. The promised Reign of God opens in his arrival. It's likely Mk writes 30 or so years after Jesus lived/died/rose/ascended to the Father... mid-late 60's AD... It was a time of increasing persecution of the early church. Mk's bold proclamation of a King greater than Caesar & a Kingdom more powerful & enduring than Rome would have been like fresh air in the lungs & lives of those struggling disciples. Are we any different? Really? Not persecuted by our gov't but certainly we have our addictions & struggles & stumbles hoping to remain faithful when so much squeezes the life & hope & joy & victory out of our days. We live too often shuttered by fear & anxiety & warnings... NSW Health rang...

In a world that declares "truth" a fluid or non-existent thing, Mk w/o reservation or restraint, declares the truth of God's intervention to rescue/redeem... Through Jesus God reclaims the world to himself & reunites all things in his love just as he planned from the very beginning... just as he promised throughout the ages by the prophets. Again not a political or military triumph but a victory over sin, death & the devil through the life/death/res of Jesus: *For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others & to give his life as a ransom for many.* – Mk 10:45 And the only question left unanswered as we read Mk's good news; Do you trust the good news, or are you holding out for something or someone greater?

How is that possible? That one life should ransom all of us? How can one life be given in exchange for a hell-bound creation? How is one life the payment for our freedom? One life the trump card the devil & death allied could not beat? Well... this **IS** *The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God...* So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus... *God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins.* – Rom 8:1-3

In many & various ways, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets. Now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son. God promised everything to the Son as an inheritance, & through the Son he created the universe. The Son radiates God's own glory & expresses the very character of God. He sustains everything by the mighty power of his word. When he had cleansed us from our sins, he sat down in the place of honour at the right hand of the majestic God in heaven. – Heb 1:1-3 Only in Jesus does God wear human flesh & blood & in that bestow to us his life his love his power his place as child of God... honour & destiny & majesty at one w/ Him **AND** our heavenly Father.

And the only question left unanswered as we read Mk's good news; Do you trust the good news, or are you holding out for something or someone greater?

Today's text again...Remember...Mk writes to people under fire...pressed by their world to turn to some other allegiance for their safety & security...some other refuge in distress...So Mk writes urgently...desperately...passionately...He doesn't take time for the genealogies of Mt or Lk or the high-flying theological intricacies of Jn. He leaves the birth/C-mas narratives for others because he wants you & me to allow our hearts & lives to be anchored in one thing & one thing alone...the forgiveness of sin & the restoration & reconciliation that is only offered through the Father's gift of His one & only Son. Mk wants us to see the ultimate failure of every other security every other allegiance every other devotion...everything else is void empty...leaves us dead/distant from the Father's embrace...But...the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God

I said we'd talk about the prophets...Mk links John the Baptist to Mal 3 & Is 40. It had been 400 years since Malachi spoke to God's people...He warned them of the dangers of failing to trust God over the long haul. He reminded them that God had not forgotten their suffering or their struggle to be faithful when all the odds were against them. He promised God would one day restore all things to his intended outcome & justice righteousness peace & joy would be God's gifts... Evil would be rooted out & oppression cease & those who worked evil destroyed.

John's voice broke that 400 year silence...You see, God is not slow in keeping His promises. We might think He's slow when we want something to happen right now, & it doesn't...But God's way & mine...God's timing & mine don't always match up. But when God promises, God delivers. The God who formed you for his love & for his abundance has not forgotten...will not forget...does not abandon...always comes to us to make us his...*For all of God's promises have been fulfilled in Christ with a resounding "Yes!" – 2 Cor 1:20*

Too often I think we retreat into the Christmas narratives...there is a familiarity & a comfortable soft warmth in the nativity stories & the children's Christmas pageants. We get tied up in the cuteness & cleverness dreaminess of lights & decorations & gift giving...But Mk/Jn/Isaiah won't let us go there. C-mas is more than a story.

Isaiah writes to a devastated & defeated people & his promise is that when God comes to being freedom & release our very geography will be transformed... Everything God touches is either made new or blown away by his power. Jn the Baptist says that is what God intends for us. We too will be made new by the work of the Spirit poured out on us through Jesus.

I will sprinkle clean water on you, & you will be clean. Your filth will be washed away, & you will no longer worship idols. I will give you a new heart, & I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart & give you a tender, responsive heart. I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees & be careful to obey my regulations. – Ezek 36:25-28

Christmas is the good news that God has planned, from before time began, to bring all things together in Christ to restore all things in his love & when that unfolded ^{b/4} our eyes it would blow the world wide open & transform everything it touched...and make all things new...including you...at the end of this beginning...

Later on, after John was arrested, Jesus went into Galilee, where he preached God's Good News. "The time promised by God has come at last!" he announced. "The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins & believe the Good News!" - Mk 1:14-15

And the only question left unanswered as we read Mk's good news; Do you trust the good news, or are you holding out for something or someone greater? Has that good news so captured you that you cling to it with all your might...from first stirring in the morning to your last breath...from your first thought to your last dollar...Does that good news...that gift of abundant life & eternal love drive every thought word & deed...has it so captured your heart that you share it with others...

Let's pray ^{w/} that in mind: **Lord Jesus teach us to trust you alone for our hope in this world and the one to come. Lead our hearts deeper into your love and grace so we can share with others the hope we find in you. Hold us close today and always...In your name I pray...Amen.**