

## The beginning of the good news

Mark's gospel is a whirlwind. Each little section we read today could be a whole sermon.

We're going to narrow our focus this morning on this idea of good news – or gospel. Mark centers his book in that – he calls what he's written the beginning of the good news. It seems likely that by that, Mark meant the whole thing – the entire book of Mark is the beginning of the good news.

The ending of Mark's gospel seems incomplete, but many think that's because the whole book is an invitation to readers to continue the story of the gospel...from the first century to the 21<sup>st</sup> and beyond.

How many of you make either formal or informal resolutions for the New Year? Or maybe at least set some goals?

I most often do. There's something about new beginnings that has always resonated with me. And when your birthday comes so close to the new year, it just seems to beg for reflection on the past year and making some goals for the coming year.

I usually have some sort of goal for my work as well as personal life. Goals for the church. Whatever the specifics are, it always has something to do with ways we can grow in our ability to follow Jesus.

This year of Mark, I'm encouraging everyone to read the book in its entirety. If you haven't already, maybe put that on your resolution list.

The goal isn't just to say we've read it. The goal is to really dive into what the stories reveal about the good news of God. And ultimately to let the good news shape how we live.

Here we encounter Jesus, who invites not just his first century disciples, but us as well, to follow him. To learn from him. To be a part of what God is doing.

Mark really kind of takes us back to the basics, which is never a bad thing. And I love that, today on the cusp of a new year, we start at the beginning.

So, let's dive in. What is the good news? What is the gospel?

When I ask that question of people I usually get an answer that is something about forgiveness of sins. More often than not, the next part is so that we can go to heaven when we die. That isn't necessarily wrong. But it's incomplete.

What did Jesus actually say is the good news? It's there in verse 15: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Eternal life does come up later in the gospel – and in fact all the gospels. We'll get to that in future weeks.

But what Jesus is saying here has nothing to do with going to heaven later. What Jesus says is that heaven is coming here – and is very close.

In Jesus' baptism, the heavens are torn apart. Already heaven and earth are no longer separate. The spirit has come down...God's voice has come down.

In Jesus, God's kingdom has already begun to unfold. Here. That's the good news. That's the gospel.

And it's still unfolding. God is still here, working in ways that continue to surprise us. How it's all supposed to come to complete fulfillment, according to scripture, is weirder than most of us are ready for. But we'll save that for another day, too.

Let's talk for a minute about this phrase – kingdom of God. We don't live in a world where kings rule...or emperors or really any kind of royalty. Most of the western world has moved to a different style of government – one we sort of lump under the term democracy. Whatever kings and queens there are are largely ceremonial. And of course in this country, we've never had a king or queen. It's not even something we can relate to.

So amongst modern day scholars, there have been attempts to come up with a better term. Paul sometimes used the term new creation. Sometimes that fits, but it captures something different than kingdom. I'll sometimes use realm of God or reign of God, but that doesn't really get us away from the royal titles.

In the end, I've decided there really isn't a term that I like any better. It's the one Jesus used. And in the context of Jesus' time, it makes sense.

Each year, we spend time in the Old Testament before we get to whichever gospel we're reading. The reason is that it helps us understand the whole of God's story of which Jesus is the culmination. The Old Testament helps us grasp God's hopes for creation.

It takes us through the story of the monarchy – the kings. We get a sense of how much hope the people put in having a righteous king, but also how dismally the kings performed. It takes us through the heartbreak of the exile and the disappointment after it.

And we feel the intense longing that people had for a king who would finally restore things – a king sent directly from God.

Then, the heavens are torn apart, and God doesn't just send a king. In Jesus, God comes to rule. In that context, kingdom is what makes sense.

Even in a democracy, the top leader sets a tone for the way a nation might see itself and therefore how it might conduct itself. There's a spirit at work in an influential leader that can inspire people to certain kinds of action. But earthly leaders still fail. And sometimes their way is downright opposed to God's rule. Rome's was – and that ended with Jesus on a cross.

So maybe a way to think about the kingdom of God is to think about what the underlying power or spirit is in God's rule versus that of worldly leaders.

Like all of us, earthly leaders and rulers are, at best, a complex mix of good and bad.

We live in a time when the kingdom of God – the power of God – is still intermingled with the powers of the world, including the evil ones.

That's where the word repent comes in. We have a choice to make. Do we follow the powers and rulers of this world?

Or do we follow Jesus and live in the kingdom, or power of God?

We're church people. So we're all probably going to say we want to live in the realm of God. But there are no signs with arrows that say God's way is this way.

So we are constantly heading off down the wrong path. We see something that we think – yeah...that's right. But it turns out not to be God's way. So we constantly need to turn back...change our thinking. That's what repent means – to change your mind...to turn around.

We are now the ones who step into the shoes of the disciples...we're the ones who hear Jesus' call to follow. We too are called to repent – to turn to Jesus. And to believe the good news that God's kingdom is here.

The disciples in Mark's gospel tend to come off as a little more dense and confused than in the other gospels. But maybe that's Mark's way of assuring us that we too can do this. It's another way of drawing us in to be part of the unfolding story.

Mark's gospel is a good starting point for us as we explore again how we do become a part of God's work. As I said, I've challenged all of you to read Mark's gospel in its entirety.

In each section you read, ask some questions. What is Jesus doing? To whom? How does it reveal the kingdom of God? How does it draw you to repentance and faith?

That's our best way of knowing, in a tumultuous world, in a world of many paths, which one is the way of God's rule. We're not trying to get to God. God already comes to us. This isn't about following the right path so we get to heaven.

This is about understanding that we already live in the kingdom of God. It's about following the winding roads in that kingdom to do our part to make the world we live in more like that kingdom.

It's about trusting that God's rule continues to reveal itself in surprising ways. And it's about trusting that ultimately God is bringing us and all of creation to a new beginning.