

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, **2** as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way”—

3 “a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”

4 And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **5** The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. **6** John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. **7** And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. **8** I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Good News or Bad News?

What do you want to hear? Good news or bad news? Sometimes that’s the only choice you have, even when you’d rather not hear the bad news, now you know there is bad news. Most people (78% according to the internet) want to hear the bad news first, followed by the good news. Most people believe they will feel better if they get the bad news out of the way and sometimes the bad news just makes the good news that much better.

But John Mark - the author of the Gospel of Mark starts off with the good news and yet it doesn’t sound like good news. The term gospel didn’t have anything good associated with it when Christianity claimed the word as their own. The Good News - the Gospel usually came as a report from Rome, a report from the front lines. Good news for Rome was generally bad news for God’s people.

Do you want the good news or the bad news? You’re going to hear both. In our world full of wildfires, war, and failing health, there will be bad news. The good news isn’t only partially good, “You got a promotion without a pay raise.” The good news is great news. That in spite of all of bad news around us and the bad we’ve brought upon ourselves we have a savior - a God who is well aware of all news, a God active and among his creation. That’s good news even when life is very bad.

But the word Gospel - euangelion wasn’t always, “Good.” In the 1st century Roman context it carried specific connotations. It implicated an important victory won by Caesar. News of war victories traveled around the empire on the tongues of evangelists who were paid for

good news and punished for bad news. When one Caesar succeeded another, gave birth to an heir, or did any other thing deemed incredible by the Roman elite, they spread the euangelion, the gospel, the good news.

But there was no good news when Mark wrote the Gospel. An external source says that John Mark records the memoirs of Peter, which would mean a date in the 60's at the earliest. James the apostle had already been put to death. If you believe tradition Matthew died by the sword. James the brother of Jesus was tossed from the temple and then beaten with clubs. Bartholomew was flayed by a whip. Andrew was crucified on an X shaped cross. Thomas was stabbed by a spear in India. Matthias was stoned with rocks and beheaded. And Paul was beheaded by Nero in 67 AD. On top of that the "Good News," report from Rome records the victories starting in 66 AD, the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, and the capture of Masada in 73 AD.

There doesn't appear to be anything good on the horizon, only bad news. But there is news. What's making headlines in Mark's Gospel isn't the nativity, silent nights, cattle lowing, babies no crying, the all calm, the all quiet. It might surprise you but the Christmas story was of little importance to the early Christian church. Only one records the familiar Christmas story. Instead John is out in the wilderness making headlines. Eating locust, wild honey, clothed in camel's hair. His primary intention was not to draw attention to himself, but to the one he prepared the way for. He is the fulfillment of Isaiah 40:3, "*The one... preparing the way.*" Proclaiming the news, "*All people are like grass and all their faithfulness like the flowers of the field.*" That doesn't sound very good.

What do you want first, the good news or the bad? Doesn't make much a difference does it? Nobody likes bad news - unless you're in the new business then bad news pays because people like to see that they are better than others. But good news is generally the only thing we want to hear when it comes to something very personal - me, myself, and I. It doesn't matter how you sugar coat it. There will be bad news.

The doctors discover a lump that shouldn't be there. Another infection. The mechanic pulls you aside with good news for him and bad news for you. People don't always walk away from car wrecks. Where is the good news? Mark points us back to an odd ball out in the desert eating locust and wild honey. The good news isn't that life is going to get easier and you will get a bigger paycheck if you just plant the seed money and test God in this. The good news isn't that your health will suddenly take a change for the better and you will be miraculously healed. The good news isn't about you but it is about God for you.

How often don't we make it about ourselves? We are Christian because we want blessings and benefits. We think God owes us a good life. It's the spiritual entitlement mentality that is often associated with Christmas. Christmas is all about God giving me what I want

(which is far from true). But, why should the world revolve around us rather than around God. If we look at the God's standards and consider our record then we shouldn't be surprised by any bad news. Rather we should be surprised by the fact that God allows so much good to happen in an among us. Suffering and death are a natural consequence and just judgment of God on our sin. Considering our record we can't even claim we deserve a life better than the one we have. The condition we suffer from is worse than anything a doctor could describe. It's an infectious disease that's terminal. We can't get better. We've actively brought this bad upon ourselves.

That's the bad news.

There is good news though. John tells us, "*After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.*" John makes the one coming after him divine. In fact Isaiah in verse 3 says, "Prepare the way for the LORD." This one who is coming down isn't just anyone. It is the Lord himself. God in Christ comes down. God degrades himself. He steps down from his heavenly throne to save us. The God who fills heaven and earth came down to our level, "to be sin for us."

Not to be the bearer of bad news, "*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him*" (John 3:17) Jesus not only heard the bad news he experienced bad news. It's one thing for a pastor who has never suffered to tell his members, "I know what you're going through." It's another thing for a pastor who has gone to hell and back to reassure you, "I know what you're going through." I haven't been there. I haven't experienced half the problems you have but Jesus has. Jesus fully embraced the bad news. He took up the human condition and knows by experience what it means to suffer and die.

The good news is that John *came preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*. The bad news, you're not able to repent in and of your own. Repentance is literally a change of mind and God is the only one who is able to change hearts and minds. The good news is that God working through his word, John's word, and John's baptism brought about a change of mind, repentance among the people. Everyone went out to see him. They were baptized confessing their sins. That doesn't mean they confessed their sins and then were baptized. The Greek won't allow that. The people came to be baptized - confessing their sins came later. This baptism caused and created repentance. It was God's Work. Repentance is God's Work. Forgiveness is God's Work.

In the middle of devastation, despair, and certain destruction, those to whom Mark writes hear this good news. God is here. God suffered just as you do. God is victorious. You have peace with God. While we wait to hear these words from the angels we hear these words at the

beginning of Mark as John prepares us for Jesus and Jesus' baptism. Jesus baptism pours out the Holy Spirit. Through God's Word and Sacrament he pours out the holy Spirit giving us a new heart, a change of mind. The beginning of Mark brings good news upon good news.

This news is '*almost too good to be true*'. And yet, God forgives us for only thinking of ourselves, for demanding the good life, and expecting blessing upon blessing. He's like a store owner who gives money to those who are broke so they can shop in his store. The good news is that it costs you nothing. The bad news is that it cost him everything. He gladly gave up everything for you.

We don't know why bad things happen but we do know it's not because he doesn't love us or care for us. Jesus came because of his great love for us. He didn't come to condemn the world but to save the world. He didn't come with his angel armies he came for a cross and nails. He came to take our place, our punishment, and our sin so we no longer have to fear death. We may suffer, we may struggle. We will grow old but that's not the end of life. We have a home and we are just passing through.

That is the good news we proclaim. We make known God's Son this season of Advent. Like the witness of John Mark and John - we proclaim, "*This is the beginning of the good news, the gospel from God.*" So what do you want to hear first? Good news or bad news? In Christ, it's all good. Amen.