THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS

Mark 1:1–20

Key Verse: 1:15

“‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’”

To start something new may look easy, but actually it’s really hard. It might be moving to a new place, starting at a new school, starting a new relationship, a new business, or having a new child. A new beginning changes our lives. Lots of preparation usually goes into it. So people say, “I don’t even know where to start!” The main theme of today’s passage is beginnings. It tells us how Jesus’ ministry actually started. New start-ups can often turn out to be flops. But the beginning of Jesus’ ministry repeatedly is described as “the good news” or “the gospel” (1,14,15). As we read today’s verses, they’re written simply, but they’re way more than just dry facts. As we reflect on each verse, it’s almost like a list of ingredients for a recipe. So as we go through the passage we want to think about a few questions. What can we learn here about Jesus? What does it mean to follow him? And what are the essential elements for the gospel to really begin, or to restart, in our lives? May God speak to us through his word today.

**First**, the good news. Read verse 1. As we’ve said, this passage repeats the words “good news” three times (1,14,15). Verse 1 tells us that the good news is “about Jesus.” Verse 14 says it’s “the good news of God.” And verse 15 says it’s the good news of “the kingdom of God.” Basically, Mark is saying that Jesus came from God, to open the way to the kingdom of God. It’s really good news! Later we’re going to think more about what the kingdom of God means, but for now, the main idea of the good news is Jesus himself. Sometimes we say that such and such a person is “bad news.” But Jesus is good news for everyone.

Verse 1 also tells us some important things about who Jesus is. It says he’s “the Messiah” and “the Son of God.” These might be one and the same thing. It tells us that Jesus is a very special person. The Messiah means “the Anointed One,” the King God had promised to send through the descendants of David. Jesus the King came to bring God’s salvation. He’s the hope of the people of Israel, and the true hope for people of all the nations. He’s the King of God’s kingdom. Jesus is also more than a mere man. He’s the divine “Son of God.” He came to bring us back to God. He’s the one we need to learn to put our faith in, to follow, and to worship. The coming of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, is really good news.

**Second**, the gospel begins with prophecy. Read verses 2,3. Isaiah the prophet was lived about 700 years before Jesus. God inspired Isaiah through his Spirit to predict the coming of Jesus someday. The book of Isaiah contains a lot of amazing prophecies about Jesus. Here Mark quotes from Isaiah 40. That chapter has quite a few predictions about Jesus, but the chapter opens by talking about a forerunner who would come before him. There were other Old Testament predictions about a forerunner who would appear just before the Messiah’s coming. Malachi 3:1a says, “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me” (cf. Mk1:2). It’s amazing that prophecies made hundreds of years earlier were actually fulfilled. Why did God predict that there would be a forerunner before Jesus? It was to help us believe. Because God predicted it long before it happened, and because it was fulfilled exactly as he had said, it helps us believe. So, the gospel of Jesus began with prophecy. It tells us that the gospel is not a man-made idea or philosophy—it’s from God himself. In another, more general sense, it also tells us that the gospel can begin in our lives when we start listening to the word of God.

**Third**, the gospel begins when somebody prepares the way. Read verse 4. It’s striking that John “appeared in the wilderness.” He pulled away from all the noise and distractions of human society, to bring a real focus on God. The wilderness also suggests the spiritual condition of the times: it was like a wilderness, meaning that people had been living far away from God for a long time. That’s surprising, because the Jews had quite an elaborate religion, with Scriptures, a temple for worship, many local synagogues, religious leaders and lots of rituals and religious holidays. Still, the times were like a spiritual wilderness, because these things failed to bring people any closer to God.

We also see in verse 4 that John was “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Mark doesn’t give us any further details about what John actually said. He only says that John was telling people to repent so that they could receive forgiveness. If they were willing to repent, he baptized them. It’s a strong word: “Repent!” Sometimes we may think it sounds like criticism or being judged. But at its core, to repent simply means to turn around, to turn to God, to come back to God. Basically, John was saying, “Come back to God, and he’ll forgive you.” He was asking them to publicly declare their repentance by being baptized. It was like making a new life commitment to God. Being baptized didn’t earn them forgiveness, but the true repentance that should accompany the baptism would prepare their hearts to receive God’s forgiveness. The message to repent wasn’t anything new; so many Old Testament prophets had been telling the people the same thing. But this time, it was to prepare people to be ready for Jesus. To really receive the good news of Jesus, we all need to repent (cf. 1:15; 6:12). We all need to really turn away from ourselves, from our sin, from the world, and turn to God. It’s not just a once-in-a-lifetime thing; as we live in this world we need to continually repent to have a new mindset that’s focused on God and his kingdom (Ro12:2). The gospel always begins with real repentance.

How did people respond to John’s message? Read verse 5. It’s amazing that so many people went out to the wilderness to hear John preach and to accept his message. What does this tell us? It tells us two things. It tells us how spiritually thirsty the people were. All their old religious traditions couldn’t satisfy their souls at all. Material possessions and the small pleasures of life couldn’t satisfy them, either. Underneath the surface, people’s souls are still yearning for God. This widespread response to John the Baptist also tells us how powerful he was. John’s preaching was very unlike the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees. They talked a lot about keeping many religious rules, whereas John got down to the core issue. He was saying, “Hey, come back to God!”

And people believed him because he was authentic. Read verse 6. The camel’s hair garment and the leather belt were the outfit of a prophet, especially of the famous Old Testament prophet Elijah (Zech13:4; 2Ki1:8). Elsewhere God had promised that he would send Elijah before he would send the Messiah (Mal4:5). So by wearing these things John was making a statement, that he was the fulfillment of that prophecy. John was the Elijah who was to come (9:11–13). But the camel’s hair garment and leather belt, the locusts and wild honey, were also indicative of John’s lifestyle. He was living against the self-indulgent trends of the world. He was living a simple, pure life so that he could totally dedicate himself to his mission, to prepare the way for the Lord. His lifestyle gave credence to his message. When people heard how John was living out in the wilderness, they took his message of repentance seriously. If we’re hypocritical or superficial, people won’t take us seriously. But if we’re totally dedicated, and our life shows it, people will notice. So the gospel began when somebody like John fully dedicated his life to challenging people to repent. The same is true today. The gospel begins when somebody is totally dedicated to preparing the way for Jesus.

And there’s one more thing to notice about John. Read verses 7,8. John was so powerful, so popular, but it didn’t go to his head. He wasn’t vain, gloating over his success. He was so humble, and so focused on Jesus. He was very aware that compared to Jesus the Son of God he was less than the least slave. The gospel begins when somebody is truly humble before Jesus and truly focused on Jesus like that. We also learn something important in verse 8. John only baptized with water. It was only an outward ritual. It had no magical power to do anything. But Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit. That totally changes a person, from the inside out. When we’re baptized by the Holy Spirit, we have the deep assurance that all our sins are forgiven. We also gain the power to actually stop sinning. Only Jesus, the Son of God, baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

**Fourth**, the gospel begins when people work together humbly. Read verse 9. As we saw in verse 1, Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. He had no sin in him, nothing to confess. But he still went to John to be baptized. It was to publicly affirm that John was God’s servant, and to affirm John’s ministry. It was also, in a sense, to pick up the torch of gospel ministry from John. John the Baptist was so different from Jesus (Mt11:18,19). But Jesus still accepted him and was willing to work with him. So many people don’t want to be under anybody else; they want to do a one-man show. They want to take credit for everything. Sadly, even in Christian ministry co-working has always been and still is such a serious problem. But Jesus, in humility, worked with John the Baptist. The gospel always begins with such humble co-working.

**Fifth**, the gospel begins with God’s approval. Read verses 10,11. Verse 10 tells us that as Jesus launched his ministry, God was ready to break in to the human experience. The Spirit represents the mighty power of God. But paradoxically, he descends on Jesus “like a dove,” representing peace, gentleness, innocence, and ultimately, hope. What is key here is in verse 11, the voice from heaven, the voice of God the Father. It is not as though Jesus didn’t already know that he was God’s Son, or that God the Father loved him. God still gave him these very personal words of affirmation. It was because of all the hardship Jesus was about to go through, the temptations, the criticisms, the misunderstandings, the loneliness, the ultimate rejection. Despite all this, God wanted Jesus to remain strong in knowing who he was and in being sure of his love and approval. Why was God so pleased with Jesus, even before he did anything? Of course it was simply because Jesus was his Son. But in this context, it also seems to be because of his obedience. When Jesus went to be baptized by John, it was his act of obedience to his Father’s will. God was so moved by this act of obedience that he declared how pleased he was. This tells us that the gospel begins not with gaining people’s approval, but God’s (Gal1:10).

**Sixth**, the gospel begins with resisting temptation. Read verses 12,13. We would think that once the Spirit comes on us, life would be peaceful and trouble-free. But here the Spirit led Jesus in the wilderness for forty days to be tempted by Satan. The Spirit led Jesus to do spiritual battle. The forty days in the wilderness fulfills the Old Testament imagery of Israel being tested in the wilderness for 40 years. Mark doesn’t mention the kinds of temptations Jesus faced. But the Bible tells us elsewhere that Jesus “suffered when he was tempted,” and that he “was tempted in every way, just as we are” (Heb2:18; 4:15). Why did he have to be tempted before he began his ministry? We can find the answer in the enigmatic words he would utter later: “In fact, no one can enter a strong man’s house without first tying him up. Then he can plunder the strong man’s house” (3:27). The “strong man” he was referring to was Satan. Jesus went first to tie up Satan by resisting his temptations, so that he could enter the “house” where people are living under Satan’s dominion and get them out. To resist Satan’s temptations wasn’t easy even for Jesus. Spiritually speaking it was like a bloody boxing match. Angels came and attended him. But in the end Jesus resisted them all. Jesus went through all these temptations so that he could empathize with our weaknesses (Heb4:15) and help us overcome temptations (Heb2:18). The gospel begins with overcoming Satan’s temptations. If we’re going to spread the good news of Jesus, we first have to overcome temptations.

**Seventh**, the gospel begins with the message of God’s kingdom. Read verse 14. In the first part of this verse we notice something really sad: John the Baptist is put in prison. What a dark time it was, when an obviously righteous man had to undergo such an injustice! What a terrible abuse of worldly power! But what did Jesus do? It says he went into Galilee “proclaiming the good news of God.” What a contrast! How fearless Jesus was, knowing what darkness he was facing! But what good news could there be, since John the Baptist was suddenly silenced? Yet from God’s point of view, there really *was* good news, because Jesus had come. This makes us realize that the good news of the Bible is not like human good news. Human good news is that people’s problems seem to get solved, that our life seems to be getting better. But God’s good news doesn’t mean that; sometimes it can even mean that life gets worse. We can suffer. We can lose. Then what is “the good news of God”?

Read verse 15. The good news is that “the kingdom of God has come near.” What does that mean? “The kingdom of God” refers to God’s reign as King. It also refers to God’s salvation. It means to be saved from the kingdom of Satan. In the kingdom of Satan, Satan rules people. He keeps people enslaved to sin through temptations. He keeps people deceived. He keeps people feeling powerless, empty and hopeless. He keeps people full of guilt and fear and darkness. But through Jesus, who defeated Satan, the kingdom of God “has “come near.” Now, through Jesus people can be ruled by God. He gives us freedom from sin. He shows us the truth. He gives us power, meaning, and hope. He gives us grace, courage and light. It’s “righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Ro14:17). The kingdom of God starts now in our souls, and one day will be fully realized when Jesus comes again and ushers in God’s eternal kingdom. “The kingdom of God is near” is the best news there is. People mistakenly think Christianity is a religion of morals. While it is moral, it’s way more than that. It’s an experience of God’s kingdom, his gracious rule, right now. It’s entering into a real relationship with God as our gracious, loving King, and having real hope in him. It may seem unrealistic to talk to people about God’s kingdom. But the gospel starts in people’s lives with this message of Jesus.

How can this good news become real for us? Jesus said, “Repent and believe the good news!” As we said earlier, to repent means to turn to God. When we turn to God, we need to believe this good news of God. It’s what God really wants to give us. It’s available to anyone who repents and believes. It’s really that simple.

**Eighth**, the gospel begins with calling disciples. Read verse 16. Jesus saw two ordinary, working-class brothers, Simon and Andrew, fishermen in Galilee. They probably had heard the preaching of John the Baptist, as well as Jesus’ message. Now he stops and calls them. Read verse 17. They were nothing but ordinary fishermen. Why was he calling them? It was because he saw them with hope. He saw not what they were right now, but what they could become. He saw that God could help them grow until they could bring many other people to his kingdom. He was calling them to a life of much greater significance than just struggling to catch fish all their lives. Jesus from the start was ready to live with disciples and work together with them for God’s kingdom. The gospel still begins with calling disciples.

How did they respond? Read verse 18. They knew it right away what this meant; his words “follow me” meant that Jesus was calling them to be his disciples. They must have been so moved that Jesus was calling *them.* Also, they must have felt meaningless just struggling as fishermen. They didn’t hesitate; they made an immediate decision. The gospel begins today when people respond to Jesus’ calling like that.

Read verses 19,20. Jesus called two more ordinary fishermen, James and his brother John. This time, what’s emphasized is that they left their father and the hired men in the boat and followed Jesus. It tells us they were in the midst of a family business that was relying heavily on them. It was so hard to just walk away from it all and follow Jesus. But they did. The gospel begins when people make such a radical decision.

Today we learned that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through him, the kingdom of God is near. We learned that to follow him means to repent and believe the good news, and to make a radical decision to leave everything else behind. We also learned in several ways how the good news of God spreads. May God inspire us to be part of the good news spreading in our time.