

## “Good News in the Wilderness”

Introduction: If you had the chance to spend any time with our eRetreat this past week, you will have noticed that the theme we are exploring during Advent this year is summed up by the phrase, “Restore us O God!” It’s the cry of the heart of the psalmist, as we heard in our call to worship, both this week and last. It’s the cry of the prophet, as we heard in Isaiah last week: “Oh, that you would rend (‘rip open’) the heavens and come down!” And it’s the cry that lies behind the opening verses of Mark’s account of the good news, as we heard it read this morning.

Mark, as you will have noticed, doesn’t begin his account of the life of Jesus with choirs of angels in the heavens, or with shouts of the shepherds as they leave the manger. Rather, Mark takes us to the wilderness, the place where human beings can feel helpless and all alone, the place where we cry out. He takes us to a road in the wilderness, a road on which the Messiah who hears our cries can be seen in the distance, making his way toward us. And Mark brings us a word in the wilderness, a word of preparation from a man named John the Baptist, a word that directs and encourages us to undertake road construction so that the Messiah might have an uninhibited path to our lives and the restoration we long for. Jesus, Mark wants us to know, meets us in the wilderness of our lives. The question is, are we ready to receive him? How are we to receive him?

Let’s begin by thinking about the nature of the good news that Mark is talking about. Then, we’ll consider the wilderness into which this good news comes. Finally, we’ll look at how we are to go about making straight paths so that we can receive the good news that the Messiah, Jesus, has brought.

### I. The Nature of the Good News

A. Now, the phrase “good news” actually translates the word “gospel.” And “gospel,” though we may associate it with Jesus, was a well-known and well-used term in Jesus’ day. It meant “news that brings joy,” and it stood for history-making, life-shaping news, as opposed to just daily news. So, for instance, the term was used to describe a great military victory that was through to change the course of a war, or the birth and the coronation of a new emperor whose assumption of the throne, it was believed, would change the world. Such a celebration was probably not unlike the feeling some have at the inauguration of a new president. His coming to power, we think, will change everything for the better. It’s good news; it’s gospel.

B. But as the biblical writers often do, Mark takes a word which everyone in his day would have understood, and he redefines it. In effect, he says that the news that really brings great joy, the truly good news, the ground-breaking, history-making, life-shaping event for the world was what took place when Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, arrived on the scene. In Jesus, Mark was saying, God has “ripped open the heavens and come down” (cf. Isa. 64:1).

C. So what has he come down with? Tim Keller is very helpful here when he distinguishes good news from good advice. Advice gives you something to do; news reveals something that has been done for you. Keller asks, how does it feel when you’re given good advice on how to live? Someone says, “This is how you ought to love your child, or do your job, or hit a golf ball.” Maybe they even include the story of some great person who has done

this. Initially, you may be inspired. But as time goes on, the burden of having to perform, and falling short, likely returns. Good advice only gets you so far. The essence of the major religions of the world is good advice. It tells you how to live in order to earn your way toward, and be accepted by, their deity. But the essence of Christianity is good news. It tells you what God, through his Son, Jesus, has done in space and time and history—in his birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension—to redeem and restore the world, and then through his Spirit, to empower you to live differently, in a God-pleasing, life-giving way, in response to what God has done.

D. Note also that the gospel, or good news, as Mark reveals it, is not just having our sins forgiven and going to heaven when we die. That's good news, to be sure, but it's only half of it. Mark includes the gift of the Holy Spirit here, who Jesus poured out after rising from the grave and ascending to the right hand of the Father. The good news, therefore, isn't just about what Jesus did on the cross to keep us safe in the future at our death; it includes the gift of the Spirit and the power to live a new life, now, a life that looks more and more like the one Jesus lived, in the present.

If that's the history-making news of great joy that Jesus has brought, where does he bring it?

## II. In the Wilderness

A. Jesus meets us with this good news, Mark tells us, in the wilderness. The wilderness is an incredibly inhospitable place. I've had occasion, while in college, to explore both the Sinai and the Judean wilderness; it is a tough and desolate territory. I'm very glad our group could get in, and out, by means of an air conditioned bus! In the Bible, the wilderness is often used as a metaphor for all that is overwhelming and fear producing in our life. It stands for that which makes us feel helpless and alone. It is the place we find ourselves when we have come to the end of ourselves, when we find that what we have looked to as our savior to rescue or deliver us from the sin and brokenness and pain and failure in our life cannot come through. Significantly, that place where we cry out, "Restore me O God" is where Jesus meets us.

B. To make this point, Mark highlights quickly and briefly three desperate occasions when Israel found itself crying out in the wilderness, and was met by God. In a kind of shorthand way, he blends three OT texts together, summing them up as being attributed to Isaiah:

I will send my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way. A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight paths for him.' (Ex. 23:20; Isa. 40:3; Mal. 3:1).

It begins with the Exodus event. God has rescued his people from slavery in Egypt and brought them through the Red Sea to escape the onrushing armies of Egypt. Then what? Then God promises to lead them to the Promised Land that he has prepared for them, guarding them along the way. Once settled in the Promised Land, God's people disobey and thoroughly reject him. After several centuries of this, God gives them over to foreign invaders. But he does not forget his promise to the world, or to them. They had paid for their sin—double, in fact—and God would bring them back from their exile, through the wilderness, and into the land once again. Finally, during the Second Temple period when the Israelites, now back in the land, recognize that it still feels like they are in the wilderness because they are simply still an insignificant tribe dominated by various pagan empires, God promises to send a messenger who would prepare his way to come and do something extraordinary in their midst.

C. In this wilderness, Mark wants us to know, God meet us, he fulfills his promises. He is the God, as Sharon revealed to us a couple of weeks ago, who hears our cries and comes to our aid. The messenger who comes to prepare the way for the Lord's coming is identified as John the Baptist, a distant relative of Jesus and one who is dressed like a prophet of old. "God is coming," John declares, "to lead you out of the wilderness." And then the part we don't want to miss: "make straight paths for him."

### III. Making Straight Paths

A. The reference to making straight paths, found in the Isaiah text, is likely a reference to the way an ancient people would prepare for the visit of a king. They would engage in road construction so that the way would be smooth and uninhibited for the king to arrive. And so we hear in Isaiah, in verses made famous by Handel in the opening of his marvelous work, *Messiah*: "Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain."

B. John sums this road construction work up in one word: repentance. Repentance, we might say, is the bulldozer that clears the way for God to come to us. The engine of this bulldozer is started with confession, an acknowledgment that we are in the wrong, a naming of what is off center and sinful and needs to be fixed. Confession, if it is real, leads to repentance, to the bulldozer actually moving us, away from our own will and toward God's will. Repentance is a turning away from our self-centeredness, and a turning toward the loving and healing purposes of God.

C. Using the images found in Isaiah, we might say more particularly that such repentance involves filling in the valleys of selfishness, leveling off the mountains and hills of pride, and smoothing out the ruts and rocks of unrighteousness. Importantly, confession and repentance is a one-time act, through which we receive forgiveness of our sin, enter into the realm of God's love, and become adopted into God's family. But it is also a daily action through which we constantly and continually tweak and tune our hearts toward the heart, and the life, that is Jesus.

So, how do you feel about the need for road construction in your life? A good exercise this week might be to sit with these images and ask where in your life the bulldozer of repentance might need to get to work so that you can enter more fully into the heart of God and he into yours. What might need to be filled in, leveled, or smoothed out so that God, in his Son, can meet you? Is there an area of your life where you might be resisting such? Why might that be? Can you trust that if you confess your sin, God is faithful and just and will forgive your sins, purify you from all unrighteousness, and pour out the gift of his Spirit? It's all wrapped up in the gift of the good news Jesus has come to bring. May you receive it and rejoice in it.