

The Coming of the King: The King's Call

Mark 1:14-20

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Two weeks ago we started a new series in the Gospel of Mark, and that's where we are going to be again today. So go ahead and grab your Bible and open to Mark 1.

Now, of all the Gospels, Mark is the shortest and the earliest. He wrote between 60 and 70AD and then Luke and Matthew and John read Mark and used his Gospel as one of their sources when they recorded their own accounts.

And each of the Gospel writers had their own agenda for writing. So Matthew wanted to connect with his Jewish audience, and John wrote to inspire belief, and Luke wanted to show that Jesus' salvation was for the whole world. But because Mark was first, one of his main reasons for writing was simply to preserve the account of Jesus.

So, in about 33 Jesus was crucified and resurrected. And then, in the immediate decades that followed, the 12 Apostles became the dominant leaders of the church. And this meant that anyone who had questions about who Jesus was or what He did could just go and ask their pastor. That was a pretty unique time.

But by the 50's and 60's the church had exploded all over Rome and the original disciples were starting to die off. And all of a sudden the story of Jesus began to morph towards legend. People started making stuff up. And so guys like Mark and Paul and Peter and some of the others recognized the danger and began keeping written records to preserve truth. And a lot of the New Testament was written from this perspective.

So for example Jude opens his letter saying:

Dear friends, I had been eagerly planning to write to you about the salvation we all share. But now I find that I must write about something else, urging you to defend the faith that God has entrusted once for all time to His holy people. I say this because some ungodly people have wormed their way into your churches (Jude 1:3-4)

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Truth was under attack in the first century. On one hand groups like the Pharisees and Essenes were calling people to legalistically follow the rules. And on the other side people like king Herod and the Sadducees were preaching loose sexuality and irreverent idolatry with every ounce of their beings – that was first century Rome.

But jump forward 2000 years and surprise, surprise there is nothing new under the sun. Truth is still under attack from all angles which makes Mark incredibly relevant.

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Mark wrote to keep Jesus from being adapted into everyone's agenda. And the reason this was so important to him was that only the real Jesus has the power to challenge and transform the people who meet Him. And this is the Jesus he preserved for us.

Now I don't know if you are someone who needs to be challenged and transformed by Jesus, but I sure am. And people like us need an encounter with the real Jesus. And we come with that intention as we turn our eyes to Mark.

So would you stand with me as we come to the word of God? We will pick it up in Mark 1 starting in verse 14. Hear now the word of the Lord:

[Read Mark 1:14-20]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

So just a little trivia here. Jesus was about 33 when He died. But with the exception of a few stories about His birth and youth, everything we know about Him is from His last 3 years of life.

And then, these years aren't covered evenly. In fact, a third of both Mark and Luke, and half of John deal only with the last week of Jesus' life. Other than that, all we get are some highlights: So Jesus walks on water; Jesus preaches His Sermon on the Mount; Jesus feeds 5000 people; a few others, and that's it! Why do we know so little about the life of Jesus?

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Well, it's because people weren't preserving their lives on Facebook in the first century. So there are no selfies of Jesus and His buddies getting slurpies from 7-11 or blowing out birthday candles. Those kinds of things happened, they just weren't significant, so nobody recorded them.

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And here's what this means – everything we get in Mark and the other Gospels is significant. And today's text is particularly important because in verse 15 we get the first words of Jesus ever written down – or at least the first words we have.¹ And in these words He tells us what He thinks His mission is all about. Are you interested to know what Jesus thought He was here to do?

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As we dig in I want to start by pointing out three things from these verses that are significant, but easy to miss.

First, look at the context in verse 14. Mark says it was after John the Baptist was imprisoned that Jesus went into Galilee. Jesus was waiting for this moment.

So 470 years earlier, God had spoke through the prophet Malachi saying:

¹ Not counting 1 Corinthians 11:24-25 which was written about 10 years before Mark.

“Look, I am sending you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the LORD arrives. (Malachi 4:5)

And elsewhere Jesus tells us John the Baptist was this Elijah. And so, when he got locked up, it was the final rejection of God’s warning through the prophets. Now God would stop sending messengers and send Himself. And this is Jesus’ cue – I’m up!

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Now we will come back to John the Baptist in chapter 6. But the big take away here is that every word in Mark has meaning. There are no throw away lines. And so we need to read carefully.

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Second, there is a word that comes up three times in this chapter and twice in these verses that hits us as totally normal but wouldn’t have hit anyone in the first century this way.

And so, in verse 14, Jesus heads into Galilee proclaiming His gospel – His good news. And the word “good news” is a very special word. And it’s a word Mark uses three times in this chapter as a way of saying “This book I’m writing is a gospel – this is the kind of literature it is.” So in verse 1 we read:

This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. (Mark 1:1)

And then we get verse 14. And then in verse 15 we find out that Mark used this word because Jesus used this word to describe what He was all about. He said:

The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!
(Mark 1:15)

And this would have leapt off the page at any first century reader because in culture this was a political word of proclamation not a religious word.

So when a king would hear that an enemy was coming to attack he would muster his forces and head out to meet them. And if he was victorious he would send runners back to his city to tell the gospel.

And the good news would be “We won! You are free. You aren’t going to be killed. You aren’t going to be made into slaves. The king is victorious.”

And Jesus loved this word because it captured the essence of what He was about. You see every other religious system is about doing the right things in order to arrive at the desired place. So follow the Eight-Fold Path to gain enlightenment. Or do the 5 Pillars to earn Allah’s acceptance. Or obey the 10-Commandments to be in a right relationship with God.

But following Jesus isn’t about what we do but about what has been done for us. The message of Jesus is that God doesn’t accept you because you’re awesome – in fact you’re not awesome! But God accepts you because Jesus is awesome, and He has won the victory on your behalf.

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The third thing that would be easy to miss, but that we need to unpack if we are going to understand the real Jesus Mark preserves for us, is the word “kingdom.” And this word sits at the very center of verse 15 and at the very center of the way Jesus describes His good news.

Jesus’ good news is that the kingdom of God has come near and if we are going to participate in it we need to repent and believe. And this is important because of what kind of salvation Jesus is bringing. You see Jesus didn’t sign up to be a firefighter or a lifeguard on Galilee’s beaches as noble as that might have been. Jesus came to bring a very specific kind of salvation. And in order to understand what the real Jesus came to do we need to understand His concept of kingdom.

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Here it is: in Genesis God creates a perfect world that He describes with the words “It is good.” And He places humanity in this world such that every relationship we have is good. So all our relationships with each other and with God and with nature were good. And all this harmony and perfection existed because we were living in God’s kingdom and God was king.²

Well that continues for about 2 chapters until Adam, in a classic human trick, decides he’d rather try his own luck at being king. And when this happened our relationship with God unraveled – obviously there can’t be two kings. And when that relationship unraveled then every relationship humanity had with each other and with nature unraveled.

And this is the human condition. When we become our own kings, when our ideas about what is right and wrong are the standard, then everything breaks. When this happens all we are concerned about is “Am I being treated right? Am I getting everything I deserve? Are my rights being protected.” All we can think about is ourselves. And ironically the more we focus on me the less happy we become.

And we know this – humanity is broken – so we write stories for ourselves about a prince who is going to come and slay the dragon, and free us from our tower prison, and break the curse with a kiss. At least these are the stories that get played in my house these days. But really these fantasies are peeks into the desire that God put in our hearts – the King is coming. And when He gets here everything is going to be alright.

And then Jesus says “The kingdom of God has come near, I’m the King, and victory has been won for you if you will accept it.”

And of course we know that the first time Jesus came He came in weakness to die for our sin, but after He rose again He promised He was coming back. And when He does it will be in power to make all things right.

² Outline for this section adapted from Tim Keller <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/called-to-be-disciples-5442/> (Accessed January 20, 2021)

And this means there is an already and a not yet to Jesus' kingdom. So yes, there is something more coming than what can be experienced now. One day we will live with God in a world free from all injustice, sickness and death – we long for that and it's not yet. But if we will come under Jesus' lordship right now we can experience some of His kingdom. And that's because God's kingdom has come near.

And this is an essential thing to note in the polarized world we live in today. The already and the not yet of the kingdom show us Jesus is neither a conservative nor a liberal. Jesus' kingdom brings a challenge to both the right and the left.

So the liberal perspective, within society and the church, is that we can make our world into heaven right now. And so all sorts of efforts have arisen to rid the world of racism, injustice and inequality. And of course these are good things.

But when the world sets out to accomplish this the result is ironically wickedness. When broken patriarchy is replaced with broken feminism and racial subjugation is replaced by minority elevation the result isn't perfection but more oppression. When materialistic capitalism is replaced with godless Marxism the result isn't heaven, it's just more hell. So the left doesn't have the answer.

But the right doesn't either. In conservative ideology, both within culture and in church the idea is let's preserve what we've got which equates to keeping the brokenness of patriarchy and racial oppression along with all the materialistic evils we know. And in the church the thought has been "hey, I'm going to heaven anyway so lets fill this place up with fossil fuels and deforestation because I'm out of here.

Neither of these positions are anything close to what Jesus was about. But get this, Jesus wasn't in the middle either. Jesus was about something totally different – the redemption of the world. And His call is for us to follow Him on His mission.

And when this happens all our relationships start to realign, with each other, with society, and with nature. And there are implications for this in the already as well as the not yet. So yes, there is a time coming when all injustice and immorality and inequality will be dealt with – that's good news. But the good news doesn't end there.

Other religions say the material world we live in is bad and only the spirit is good. And so their answer is to leave the physical behind. But in Christianity God created a good material world and He's redeeming it. And this means salvation isn't an escape from the material but a renewal of it. And so poverty and injustice and forgiveness is all part of God's agenda here and now. And we are invited not simply to believe this, but to participate in it. The kingdom of God has come near.

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And this is why the first thing Jesus does after proclaiming His good news is call His disciples. And His call is both drastic and full of grace.

So in verses 16 to 20 we get Simon, who Jesus names Peter, and Andrew his brother as well as James and John who Jesus calls the sons of thunder. Four blue collar guys who are dedicated to their jobs and their families. And Jesus' word to all of them is "Come, follow Me." And Peter and Andrew leave their fishing boat and James and John leave their father.

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Now we know from the rest of the story that all these guys fished again and talked to their parents again. But as they responded to Jesus' call in this moment, they shifted their allegiance from career and family to Him. And that's the offensively drastic call Jesus makes.

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Now in our culture, saying goodbye to parents isn't a big deal. Even secular society bemoans when 30-year-old kids still live in mom's basement playing video games. So we say "great job" to James and John. "Dad can take care of himself."

But our culture has a pretty hard time with Jesus' words to Andrew and Peter – leave your careers behind. And that's because in Canada what you do is tied to who you are and what you are worth. And so Jesus' call to put your livelihood on the back burner and make Him the center is offensively drastic and even fanatical.

And fanaticism is a scary notion because our world is full of fanatics on both the left and the right and it's all ugly. It's all self-righteousness, condemnation and attack. And Jesus' call certainly isn't interested in any of that. But He also doesn't call us to the middle.

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I read a book once that talked about the 5 "F's of life – Faith, family, friends, finances and fun. And the premise was that by achieving balance among the five happiness can be attained. And to the world that looks like logic. But Jesus is constantly saying things that aren't anything close to balance. So he says:

"If you want to be My disciple, you must, by comparison, hate everyone else— your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be My disciple. (Luke 14:26)

There's no balance there. Jesus wants to be God in your life. He wants us to give ourselves 100% to living for His glory. Jesus says if there are any conditions on following Me then I'm out. So don't come to Me in order to find success with your finances. Money's not God, I am. And don't come to Me in order to find success in your relationships. Love is not God, I am. Instead follow Me because I'm the King.

That's the call and it's drastic. The call to follow Jesus is the call to make everything else secondary. But here is where the world, and arguably a lot of the church, doesn't understand what it means to follow Jesus.

The world thinks that fanatically following Jesus is a problem, but the so-called 'Christian fanatics' who are causing problems actually aren't being fanatical enough. The reality is they are fanatically committed to their own causes not to Christ.

You see the things Jesus was fanatically committed to were the glory of God and the forgiveness and redemption and love of His enemies – all of us. And ironically the more fanatical you get about any of those things the less fanatical you look to the world. Not many people would call Jesus a fanatic. And yet nobody has been more passionately committed to their cause than Him.

And Jesus says when God's glory is your focus then everything else in life will start to reorder itself. And that's what He calls His disciples to, and that's what He calls us to participate in. And we see this in verse 17: "I will make you fishers of people."

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In the Bible the sea is a picture of chaos and evil. And so Jesus' call for His followers to become fishers of people means His salvation isn't just for us, it's for us to give away. Just like Jesus made Palestine a better place when He showed up 2000 years ago – people were getting healed physically, emotionally, relationally and spiritually. So Jesus' call is for His followers to do what He did. We are the light that Jesus has ordained to shine into our world.

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And that's a high call. In fact it's so high nobody can do it. None of us have the strength to love our enemies, or forgive those who oppress us, or leave behind all our addictions, or heal the idolatries we are all drawn to. We simply aren't strong enough.

But this is what the good news is all about. And in the rest of Mark we will see this again and again: Jesus accomplishes the victory on our behalf. Jesus defeats the wickedness we are tied to. Jesus overcomes our demons. And we are called to participate in this by repenting of trying to be our own gods and believing in Jesus by making Him King in our lives.

And when we do this, we find ourselves moving into the reality of His kingdom which has come near. And it's a kingdom that's for us, and it's for us to give away. And it's a kingdom of justice and equality and morality that we can taste right now and yet there's always more to come. So will you acknowledge Jesus as your King and will you join Him in fishing for people?