

## **December 31, 2023 Sermon: Look up (Mark 1:1-11) – Pastor Heather McDaniel**

Good morning, and happy New Year's Eve. Does anybody else here feel a mix of emotions as you stand on the brink and look over into 2024? I come to this new year with a good deal of excitement, but also uncertainty – maybe even fear. It will be a year of profound change for my own family. Our oldest daughter, Anna, will graduate in June and go to college in California, and our youngest, Eliora, will live in France for an entire year with the Rotary Exchange program – which means for the first time in 21 years, Luke and I will be empty nesters. This church is also in the midst of great change, as we implement our five bold moves and prepare for a building renovation. And our nation is heading into a crazy and momentous year, as we gear up for a big election in November. I know that each one of you is entering the new year with your own burdens, anticipation, and uncertainties.

Today, we stand at a transition point, looking back at 2023 and – ready or not – about to be thrust into 2024. And I'm so grateful that we have this space to pause and listen and look up to receive the words of God that re-ground us in what's solid and true. And so before I begin the next chapter in our "Love in Action" series, I'd like us all to simply take a deep breath together, to fill our lungs with the life and breath that is always a gift – and as we slowly exhale, to let go of our fears and anxieties and uncertainties and simply be in this space, ready to listen and receive.

Please pray with me.

*Everlasting God, you go before us, you come behind us, and you lay your hand of blessing on our heads. Thank you for sending your son Jesus to walk with us, and your Spirit to rest upon us. May we have the courage and faith to look up to you, now and always. May we see and receive your grace, love, and wisdom. Amen.*

Today we begin our exploration of Jesus' story – the beginning of the Good News as told by Mark, whose gospel we'll be reading from now until Easter. Mark is the shortest of the four books in the Bible that tell the story of Jesus, and most scholars think it was the first written. Its author never actually names himself within the text, but early Christian tradition identified him as John Mark, a man who accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey and was active in the early church.

If you like action stories that don't waste words, Mark is the gospel for you. He writes with urgency, using just 11 verses to cover the ground that Matthew and Luke each spend three chapters on. Mark's gospel is gritty. He portrays Jesus in his full humanity, subject to physical weakness and occasionally overcome with emotion, and he emphasizes the failures and faith struggles of Jesus' followers. There's a sense of mystery throughout the first half of Mark, as people try to figure out exactly who the miracle-worker among them is, while Jesus himself guards the secret. His true identity, as the Messiah and savior-king that Israel has been waiting for, can only be properly revealed and understood in context of his servanthood, suffering, and death as a ransom for many – and that finally becomes clear as the second half of Mark unfolds.

Many scholars think that Mark was written in Rome around 65-70 CE, either during or right after a vicious persecution of Christians by Emperor Nero. If that's true, the community first receiving this gospel was fragmented and scarred – they would have lost beloved family members, and perhaps some of them had even buckled under persecution and made decisions they were ashamed of. Mark wrote his gospel as a raw story for traumatized people who knew, from firsthand experience, that life isn't easy, that the world is full of brokenness and injustice, and that they themselves were broken and in need of good news and redemption.

There are two different ways we can read and experience the gospel of Mark, and I want to invite us to use both of them in the next few months. The first way of reading is to put ourselves in the place of Jesus' often bewildered disciples, who are on ground level trying to piece together who this man is and what it means to follow him as life rages around them – who get tossed around by a storm and wonder if Jesus still cares about them, who jockey for positions of power and influence in a kingdom they can't wrap their minds around, who stumble through the dark after all their hopes and expectations shatter. Much of Mark is written from this ground-level viewpoint, and I think we can all find ourselves there – I know that I can.

But there's a second way of reading Mark that I'd also like to invite us into, because Mark breaks into his narration every now and then and helps us look up so that we can see what's really going on from God's point of view. He gives us the interpretive keys to understand what the disciples don't, to see through the eyes of faith and hope, confident of the redemption and new life to come.

And a couple of those important keys are given to us in the first 11 verses of Mark: insights to carry not just through the rest of his gospel, but into our own lives and stories, as well. Listen again to Mark's introduction: "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God..."

I want to linger with the term "good news" for awhile, because by using it, Mark echoes Jewish prophets *and* throws political shade on the Roman Empire. On the second Sunday in Advent, we heard from the prophet Isaiah, who spoke to God's people in exile and said "You who bring **good news** to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout...say to the towns of Judah, 'Here is your God! See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power'" (Isaiah 40:9). To those who've been waiting for Isaiah's prophecies to come true, Mark proclaimed that long-awaited **good news** had finally begun – through Messiah Jesus, God is here with us, and God's reign of peace and liberation is breaking in.

But Mark is doing something else by using the Greek word *euangelion* for "**good news**" – he's being subversive. *Euangelion* was a political and military term – echoing the language of the Roman imperial cult that proclaimed the emperor as a god. The Priene Calendar inscription, which was discovered in modern-day Türkiye, is an edict from 9 BCE declaring that the province's new calendar would begin on the Emperor Augustus' birthday – it read that Augustus Caesar had been sent "as a savior, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things...the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good news (*euangelion*) for the world that came by reason of him." Jesus was born during the reign of Augustus Caesar, and by proclaiming that the beginning of the good news is about Jesus the Son of God, Mark was making a powerful and subversive political proclamation. In the face of Roman imperial power, Mark is saying that the true ruler of the world, the one who will bring peace and arrange all things, is not Caesar, and never will be, no matter how much strength Rome appears to wield. Jesus is Lord, and the good news belongs to him alone. He is establishing a new, anti-imperial, upside-down kingdom that Rome will never be able to control or co-opt. I can imagine that for a community who had been victimized by the power of Rome, this was a truth they needed to cling to.

Mark invokes Isaiah in verse 2 to ground this new beginning in the ongoing story of God's relationship with Israel and to introduce us to John, who we met last week, the promised messenger who would prepare the way for the coming Lord, going before him in the spirit and power of Elijah. This herald was not to be found in places of religious or political power such as the Jerusalem temple or the Roman Forum, but off-grid in the midst of the wilderness, dependent on it for food and clothing. Throughout Israel's history, the wilderness had been the setting for their wandering and testing, judgment and punishment – but also a place of repentance and forgiveness, of grace and deliverance, of new beginnings. And now, because of John's ministry, the people of Israel were returning to the wilderness, from Jerusalem and the whole Judean countryside, leaving possessions and routines and positions of power and coming empty-handed to be submerged in a baptism of repentance.

Ritual washing was common in Judaism at that time, but that was something routine and repeated. The kind of baptism John practiced was unique. It was a one-time initiation event in the Jordan River, the ancient boundary between Israel's life of slavery in Egypt and the new land of freedom that God was leading them into. John's baptism was a reorientation towards God and God's values, so that the person baptized would be prepared to see and receive the powerful and holy one who would come after John. John's baptism prepared people to encounter God and begin a new life of freedom.

Even with John's baptism, nobody recognizes Jesus when he appears in verse 9. Like everybody else there, he comes to the wilderness to seek John's baptism, an unassuming man from a podunk town in Galilee. And in Mark's telling of the story, nobody except Jesus saw what happened next – as Jesus “was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’” (Mark 1:10-11)

In the person and life of Jesus, the separation between heaven and earth, between God and humanity, is torn open, and God is now with us. God's kingdom has broken in and is breaking in. This is the time of salvation, the beginning of the good news, the event that all creation has been longing for. But in order to notice, you had to look up.

In these few condensed verses, Mark gives us a gift – he invites us to look up with Jesus, to see the heavens torn and the Spirit descending and hear God’s words of love and affirmation, and to carry this clarity with us throughout the rest of the story, to hold it close, as I’m sure Jesus did, as he experienced the long road of suffering that was to come.

But I believe that Mark isn’t just inviting us to look up in this one instance, so we can understand Jesus’ baptism better. Mark is reminding us that there’s always more going on than we see at first glance, and he’s calling us to our action verb of the week – to look up. We live at ground level – buffeted by storms and unable to escape the brokenness of the world and the brokenness in our own hearts and bodies. But there’s a greater, often hidden reality that’s also at work – what C.S. Lewis calls the “deeper magic from before the dawn of time”. God is here, with us, and God’s Spirit is moving. God’s work of healing and redemption and liberation is ongoing in our world. Death and evil will never have the final say. When we look up, we see Jesus as he is, and we also see who we have become through him – sons and daughters of God, deeply loved and affirmed no matter what, called to join Jesus on his mission of restoration. When we are overwhelmed with life and anxiety and sorrow, we are invited to look up and remember.

I think that looking up and reorienting ourselves to the good news is going to be particularly important in the midst of our coming election year. We will hear so many messages about how crucial the right political leaders are – for us, for our nation, and for the world. And while I agree that our leaders matter and that it’s important to vote thoughtfully and wisely, let’s not get confused about where we should look for any kind of salvation, whether it’s spiritual or political. The real good news can never be controlled or co-opted or withheld by people with political or military power. If we want to see good news, we look not to our nation or any human leader, but up to Jesus, the suffering servant who made himself nothing and became obedient to an unjust death on a cross. The good news is that this humble man has inaugurated an upside-down kingdom without national boundaries in which the powerful are brought down from their thrones and the hungry, meek, and poor are lifted up. And no matter who ends up winning the election, Jesus will still be Lord and the good news will continue to grow and spread in surprising places and among people who are far from the halls and institutions of power.

To really look up and see, though, I think we have to step away. Like the people who came to John in the wilderness, we have to leave our busyness and the noise around us and find some quiet and stillness so we can see and hear. And we have to be intentional about it – it rarely just happens. Looking up might look like joining a small group, coming regularly to this worship service, meditating on Scripture, practicing the Sabbath, listening to music, journaling, or inviting God to join you as you take a walk or sit in silence for a few minutes. Looking up isn't just what we do, though, it's the posture we take. We look up with an openness to encounter God and a desire to reorient ourselves towards God's upside-down kingdom – a readiness to repent, enter, listen, see, receive, and follow. We look up with open hands that let go of expectations.

I confess that sometimes I am afraid to look up, and so I avoid it – my brokenness and failures weigh heavily on me, and I'm afraid that if I look up, I'll encounter God's disapproval or disgust. But that has never been the case. When I dare to look, God's face towards me, and I believe God's face towards all people, is one of unfailing love and faithfulness. There is no fear in love, and that is good news.

I want to acknowledge that some of you may already be in the wilderness. Through no choice of your own, you've been thrust into in a place of testing and suffering, displacement and wandering. And if this is your reality, I want you to know that Jesus is with you. He knows the pain and disorientation you are experiencing, and he invites you to look up with him, to see the hope that is solid and true. The wilderness is also the place of deliverance and new beginnings. The good news has begun, but the story isn't over yet. We're walking in it and the road can be hard, but Jesus Messiah has gone ahead of us, has finished the work, and is with us now. We are safe. All shall be well.

As I close, I want to repeat the words that Jesus heard his Father speak over him at his baptism. But this time, I invite you – all of us – to look up as Jesus did, and through him, because of what he's done for us, to hear these words spoken to us as God's children and receive them as our own, letting ourselves sink into the love and affirmation of God: "You are my child, whom I love. With you I am well pleased". May you carry that love and affirmation into the world as you plunge into 2024, eyes lifted to Jesus as you live into his good news. Amen.