

We are starting a new series through the Gospel of Mark entitled *The Gospel of Mark: To Know and Follow Jesus*. I want to ask one simple question...Who is Jesus?

Who is Jesus? For centuries this question has been posed, challenged, and debated. I believe that this question may be one of the most definitive and decisive questions that has ever been asked.

Almost ten years ago, in October 2012, *Life Magazine* ran a cover story of an illustrated biography of Jesus. A visual journey through the life of Jesus that detailed both historical and modern art and photography from across the world, all in search of the understanding of who is this Jesus? Rewind even further to August 1988; *Time Magazine* ran a cover that asked a very similar question.

The cover was spurred by the release of Martin Scorsese's movie *The Last Temptation of Jesus*. A film that rightfully ignited controversy at its release for its false depiction of Mary and Jesus having a sensuous relationship. But that controversy ignited the age-old debate on who is Jesus? In the cover article, the author details the "search for the historical Jesus" and the supposedly "embellished accounts in the Bible." It detailed the ways that academia has wrestled for years across the spectrum of how to understand this Jesus. Was he just a teacher or was he divine? Was he who he said he was?

The debate on the identity of Jesus that is detailed in this edition of *Time* detailed the Modernist/Fundamentalist split in the evangelical world that largely questioned the validity of the divinity and humanity of Jesus.

Or even most recently, thoroughly secular historian Tom Holland's new book, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*. In the book, which I have not fully read, he argues that nearly every single value and characteristic in the modern western world we claim is intrinsic and instinctive to human values is not natural but rather the by-product of Christianity and its influence in the western world. For Holland, the influence of Jesus on the west is ubiquitous and unavoidable.

Who is Jesus?

This question, "Who is Jesus?" is a question that people have been asking since Jesus' birth. It is a question that necessitates an answer. It is a question that causes strife, division, hope, and encouragement. It is a question that quite literally divides history

itself. And for us this morning, we come and gather with millions all around the world who have declared that this Jesus is the one true Lord and king of the universe. And in making that declaration, we gather to learn and understand our lives entirely reoriented around that claim.

But this question of who is Jesus is the question that, at some point, we must all answer. And it is the central question that the Gospel of Mark seeks to address

The Beginning

First, Mark is one of four biographies of Jesus. It is the account that was written the earliest of the four accounts, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And while Mark is rightfully in line with the other gospels, it is also utterly distinct. It is the shortest of the four accounts and moves at breakneck speed. We lose some of this in our translation, but the word "immediately" occurs frequently as a way of grabbing the reader's attention and forcing us to think of the urgency of this message.

Second, the Gospel of Mark is subversive in its message. It is meant to startle us. It is meant to shake us out of our complacency in how we have come to grow apathetic to the radical call to follow Jesus. Throughout the text, you see the "insiders," Jesus' disciples, consistently miss the mark, while the "outsiders" seem to get it quicker. His intent throughout is to shake up our preconceived notions of us having it figured out.

The disciples fail to listen; they rebuke Jesus, deny him, and abandon him. The story is very much about their failures and Jesus' consistent faithfulness to the Kingdom of God. In this way, the Gospel of Mark will confront us and challenge us in the way that we fail to listen to Jesus.

We will see a Jesus that will require us to think carefully of his teachings, to constantly challenge the ways our lives have been more greatly shaped by our cultural norms than the norms of the kingdom of God. As one commentator writes,

Audiences that claim a Christian identity but have grown complacent and have accommodated to social patterns of their surrounding culture will be brought up short and confronted by Mark's portrayal because it is anything but comforting...It is for churches who have heard Jesus's teaching and have grown lax in giving attention to it, with the result that their social dynamics and community patterns have gradually been shaped by cultural values of power-seeking, prestige-questing, and social-credential

accumulation. Mark aims to jolt such communities back to a faithfully kingdom-oriented reality. Tim Gombis

This is the Gospel of Mark, and for quite some time, we are going to sit with our Rabbi Jesus and simply ask the question, "Who is he?" Who is this Jesus?"

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, Mark 1:1

Right here, from the opening lines of Mark's biography of Jesus, we have a fascinating beginning. A sort of climactic beginning. Now in the ancient world, unlike ours, paper was an expensive commodity, so it was difficult to obtain. This meant for a writer like Mark and the other New Testament writers, it had to be treated as a commodity. Every word, every sentence has depth and meaning. So as we read the intro line to Mark's gospel, there is a world happening beneath the surface.

Packed into this one single line—seven words in Greek—is the entire summary of the book of Mark. This is maybe something akin to how we would understand and use titles for particular articles or books today. Which means all of Mark's gospel is packed into this opening line. Therefore, if you can get your head around this particular line, you can get your head around the entire book of Mark.

The plan for the rest of this message is to unpack this opening line and see if we can begin to understand all that Mark is doing in his biography of Jesus. There are four things that Mark is making a point of in this opening line.

"The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God," - Mark 1:1

So, let's begin in the beginning—a pretty good place to start. The beginning...*arché*, or even more literally, to translate the Greek text...beginning. More than just being the first lines in this story, the opening line Mark chooses to use in his gospel is "beginning." For those of you who have been reading the Bible for some time, where does your mind go when you read the word beginning? Yes, to Genesis chapter 1. Mark is intentionally mirroring the opening words of the Bible to make a point. In the *Septuagint*, which is the Greek translation of the Old Testament, it is the same word that is used there in the Greek—beginning.

Mark, right from the intro, is grabbing the attention of the reader by saying, "Pay attention! This story has something to do with creation. But not necessarily about the old creation, but about a new creation." And throughout Mark, we will see it filled with all sorts of creation imagery because Mark is a brilliant writer who uses allusions, nudges, and winks to draw the readers' minds into a much larger narrative that is taking place.

So Mark is opening our eyes and imaginations to the fact that the Jesus event is about creation; it is about what we talked about a few weeks ago on Easter. That in Jesus, the Old Creation is

reaching its culmination, and the New Creation (age to come) is breaking into the present. You could break the story of the scripture into three basic phases: creation, decreation, and recreation.

Creation - In the Beginning

The creation is beautiful and humming with life. Everything is in its proper place and ordered and flourishing. Humanity and God are together bound, in communion, co-ruling over creation. God is giving Adam and Eve commands to cultivate creation and develop a beautiful created world. And you get tastes of that harmony/shalom today in the smile of a child and the laughter of good friends, and a good meal together. You see it in the creativity of an artist or the work of justice being done. God and humanity are in harmony, flourishing, and co-ruling over creation.

Desecration - The Fall

Adam and Eve are representative of all of humanity. They have turned away from God and are ruling for their benefit, bending the created order inward for their own selfish purposes. Something is wrong with the world; it is no longer in sync, no longer in harmony—poverty, war, violence, and pandemics. Again we spoke about so much of this on Easter as well, but this is the story that we live in and that we all feel. And the problem is not just the world out there, but it is you and I. In the same way that Adam and Eve chose rebellion, they are representative of the rebellion that we, too, would choose. We are all contributing to the devolution of our world. The human condition and the human heart are bent away from the things of God.

Jesus Messiah - The New Creation

But the gospel is that in Jesus Christ, a new creation is being born right here and now. A new world is being launched into this moment. A new world is coming to birth. Jesus is the beginning of the recreation of the Garden of Eden; he is inaugurating, launching, and initiating a new created order! This is what was spoken of throughout the scriptures and throughout all of Israel's history. A day is coming when all things will be made right and new, and the kingdom of God will be "all in all." This is the startling electric way in which Mark opens his first few lines—"The beginning"

Mark continues

"of the good news" *euaggelion*

Now, with all of that in mind, Mark transitions us to thinking about the beginning of what? "The Good News." Some of your Bibles may have this translation, or it may have the translation that says "gospel." The translation "good news" is a good one because that is exactly what is meant by "gospel." It is good news about an event that took place in the past. This is one of those words that we are very familiar with, yet I would imagine if I were to survey all of us in the room, we would all come up with several different expressions of it. Now, we'll get into this more

in a few weeks when we get to Mark 1:14-15. But for now, I just want you to see two things that Mark is doing right here by using the phrase “the gospel.”

The first seems simple enough but notice that Mark uses it at the beginning of his entire story of Jesus. Meaning this line is the first of his gospel account, which includes his entire life, teachings, healings, death, resurrection, and ascension. That entire story is the gospel, not a small section of it—not only his teaching, not only his life, not only his death, not only his resurrection.

“The Gospels are the Gospel” (Scot McKnight). Meaning that everything from this verse in verse 1 to the end of chapter 16 in Mark is “the gospel.” The next large hint that I will preach on in a few weeks that Mark gives in regards to what is the gospel comes directly from Jesus’ mouth in verses 14-15 in chapter 1.

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God [euangelion]. ‘The time has come,’ he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” Mark 1:14-15

The gospel is based on the very message that Jesus came and preached, the arrival and availability of the Kingdom of God. It is not merely about his death—it is about that—but his death for our sins is part of a much larger story and narrative that is going on, and that narrative is about the arrival of the Kingdom of God. This leads us to the second thing that Mark is doing.

Second, interestingly enough, the word “gospel” was not originally a religious word. It is not a word that the gospel authors invented. For us, it is certainly not a word that we use outside of the church, but its origins are outside of the church and religious circles.

In the ancient world, it was a political word used to announce a rise of a new power or the victory of some sort of military battle. It was used by the empire to announce the good news. And this message was brought throughout the Roman empire by a herald or a preacher. Listen to what one Greek scholar writes,

The word euangelion was not invented by the gospel writers but was already in use in the Roman world...It referred to an announcement of ‘glad tidings’ regarding a birthday, rise to power, or decree of the emperor that was to herald the fulfillment of hopes for peace and well being in all the world.” William Mounce

It was a word used to celebrate the arrival of a new emperor or the birth of a new coming king. Or it was used to spread the good news of a strategic and decisive military victory. This was a gospel

These would usually go along with the worship of the empire. Here is what has become known as the “Priene Calendar Inscription” that was recovered in Western Turkey. As you read,

notice how familiar some of this language sounds. The stone is an inscription that reads,

It seemed good to the Greeks of Asia, in the opinion of the high priest Apollonius of Menophilus Azanitus: “Since Providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a savior, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance (excelled even our anticipations), surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings [*euangelion*] for the world that came by reason of him,” which Asia resolved in Smyrna.” Priene Calendar Inscription

Does any of this language sound familiar? “the beginning of the good tidings for the world...” That word at the end there, “good tidings,” that is the word gospel. You see, this was the usage of this word. It is an announcement of some massive event that has taken place, a shift of power and move of who is in charge.

Mark is nearly using a direct quote, but not by way of agreement but of direct contrast. For Mark, this is the true gospel that is not about Rome or Caesar but about Jesus, the Christ. And so, while Rome’s gospel is about their own might and power, Mark and the other gospel writers flip the script. You see, Mark’s gospel is not about Caesar or about Rome or about any of that; Mark’s gospel is about Jesus of Nazareth. It is about Jesus becoming the Messiah and ushering in the Kingdom of God; this is the gospel.

Now, this begs the question. If Rome was claiming the status of a gospel, if they were heralding “good news,” what other stories of “good news” are out there, and have we bought the myth of these parody gospels? Because there is no reason to mince words, our world is selling and dealing with all sorts of gospels.

The gospel of consumption

The gospel of indulgence

The gospel of fame

The gospel of power and prestige

The gospel of money and workaholism

The gospel of the perfect family

All of these are stories that our culture tells to try and make sense of the broken problem in the human condition. These stories and these “gospels” offer a vision of the good life, but they are mere parodies. They always over promise and under deliver.

Messiah and Son of God

So when Mark opens his story with “*The beginning of the gospel...*” and he is using New Creation type language, our ears should

start burning. There is something about this gospel, something about this Jesus that seemed to get the truth of the gospel.

This entire book, all of it, start to finish, is the “gospel.” The gospel is not simply one section of Jesus’ life but is his life, death, resurrection, ascension—all of it. And this comes through all the more clearly in the next line that Mark writes, “...about Jesus the Messiah.”

“...about Jesus the Messiah,”

Now, I am guessing that some of your Bibles may use the word Christ here or, as mine does, the word, Messiah. This is important to get; it comes from the Greek word *Christos*, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Messiah. The word Messiah, I believe, is a better capture of what is going on here for our ears. Because for many modern readers, we have reduced the name Christ to Jesus’ surname or last name. But in doing that, we miss that Christ is actually a title, not a name. So it really should be said as “Jesus The Christ.” Both Messiah and Christ are the right translation. They both mean the same thing, but we have simply lost our understanding of what the title “Christ” means.

Now, Christ (or Messiah) isn’t just any title; it is a Jewish title. And throughout the entire scriptures, we read about the hope of a “coming King or Messiah” or “Anointed One” who would come and put the world to rights and usher in the Kingdom of God for all. And this longing had been a long time in the making. All the way back to the beginning that we spoke about earlier. But this title is narrower; it is Mark pointing out that Jesus is the culmination of Israel’s story. This can be hard for us to fully grasp because we are hyper individualists who almost can’t think communally.

Jesus doesn’t drop out of nowhere; no, Jesus is the climax of Israel’s story. It was what had been building and building as God’s people were looking for the Messiah to come and for God to fulfill his promise. This is why, immediately following this title or introductory verse, Mark immediately quotes both the Hebrew Prophets, Malachi, and Isaiah. It is Mark’s way of saying that all of what has been spoken about since Genesis is being fulfilled in Jesus the Christ. And this is the gospel that Mark is declaring, this Jesus—the culmination of Israel’s story has arrived.

From Genesis to Malachi, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and Moses, David, and the Kings, through the post-exilic writings and hopes and prophets, all of it has been leading up to Jesus. Jesus is the fulfillment of the story of Israel. The longing began in Genesis after the desecration and the fallout of sin. It moved forward through the tower of Babel, and then God chose Abraham to be the beginning of the family that would eventually give birth to the Christ, and then through this family lineage, God would heal the world and Israel. But Israel had a tenuous past; they continually screwed up and failed.

“...the Son of God.”

Now, once again, we come to a word that we think of by default as a religious word, and that is correct. But this language, again, was not new to the gospel writers. In Mark’s day, it was language that was used by Caesar to speak of their own claim to divine authority.

A Roman coin from around the time of Mark’s writing has the image of Caesar’s face on one side and the inscription Caesar Augustus, and on the other side, the inscription in Latin “DIVI FILIUS” which means “Son of God.” In Mark’s day, Caesar was considered the “Son of God.” Caesar was the mediator between humanity and the divine. The Caesars of the time were making all sorts of claims about themselves and the “gospels” they would bring to the world.

But for Mark, he is opening his story, his account of the gospel, with language that is deeply evocative about the world, saying, “Jesus is the true Messiah. Jesus is the true Son of God—not Caesar and not Rome—Jesus and the Kingdom of God.

Mark does something fascinating with this idea of Jesus’ identity. Throughout the text, Mark keeps a secret as to the identity of Jesus as the Son of God to all of the human characters in the story, with the exception of Peter’s declaration that he is the Messiah in the middle of the story. But we find that even when he declares Jesus is the Messiah he completely misunderstands what that means and fails to see Jesus as the Messiah hoped for in the past literature. That is, until the very end of the gospel when we read this in chapter 15 immediately following the death of Jesus.

“And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, ‘Surely this man was the Son of God!’” (Mark 15:39). Mark bookends his account of the life of Jesus with a sharp contrast to the claims of the Roman Emperors who claimed divine authority. But through his account, he reveals them to be the parody that they are and, in doing so, thrust Jesus into the position of authority as the one true Son of God.

To believe this gospel would be a dangerous story. It is a story that subverts and reorders everything we think about the world. For those that were in lock-step with the Roman empire, to preach this gospel would have been an act of treason. Because if Jesus is Lord, and the Kingdom of God is here, that means that Caesar is not, and Rome is not. No wonder they were threatened by the authorities, and ultimately the 12 disciples would give their lives as martyrs for this story.

There it is, the beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. The culmination of creation’s story, Israel’s story, and Rome’s story. All three of these stories finding their fullest expression in Jesus the Christ, God incarnate.

To close our time, I want to return to the question I asked at the very beginning of this message.

Who is Jesus?

This is the central driving question for Mark. And as Mark has claimed right here in the first verse of his account of the gospel is that Jesus is the culmination of creation, of Israel, and of Rome, Lord over all of creation.

Who is Jesus? Jesus is the central figure in a deeply subversive gospel that looks at the ordering of the world and says, not Rome, not Caesar, not America, not Biden, not Trump, not Obama, not Bush, not any world leader is the Son of God. No, this true King of the universe is Jesus, and he is present, ruling over the created order.

And the reasoning for Mark's strong claim of who is Jesus, is what he will go on to detail between now and the end of his gospel. He will account for these claims by demonstrating all that Jesus brought to pass.

I'm reminded of that section in CS Lewis' *Mere Christianity* where he wrestles with the claims of Jesus as the Son of God. Remember, Lewis was an atheist who came to faith later in life after recognizing the inconsistency of the claims of Jesus to be merely a human teacher. In his classic book, *Mere Christianity*, he writes,

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him [that is, Christ]: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse...You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. CS Lewis, *Mere Christianity*.

Jesus is either a liar, a lunatic, or he is, in fact, Lord. And all of us must reckon with that reality at some point or another. I say let's let Mark have his say and see who Jesus claims to be. Because if Jesus is who he says he is, then that changes everything, and everything must then align with that reality, or we live against the grain of the universe.

Who do you say that he is?

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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