

Not Another Thing to Do!

First in a Series on the Christmas Gospel

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Mark 1:1-15 (also Luke 1:5-25)

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This is the beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, God's Son. It happened just as it was written about in the prophecy of Isaiah:

Look, I am sending my messenger before you.
He will prepare your way,
a voice shouting in the wilderness:
*"Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight."*

John the Baptist was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. Everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and were being baptized by John as they confessed their sins. John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. He announced, "One stronger than I am is coming after me. I'm not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

About that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."

At once the Spirit forced Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among the wild animals, and the angels took care of him.

After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee announcing God's good news, saying, "Now is the time! Here comes God's kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!"¹

I have something for you to do.

Actually, I have something for you not to do! If you've got too much on your plate these days, having something not to do is good news!

¹ Mark 1:1-15 from the Common English Bible, with some modifications.

Want to hear more good news?

"Daddy came home!" "The window coverings came down." "I ate a banana for the first time." "We could get married." "I bought a farm." "No more bombings." "Nazism is finished."²

Each of these is different. What does eating bananas have to do with getting married? Or buying a farm with closing the bomb shelters? There was one thing that made them all true. What was it?

World War II ended.

Each person could describe what that great news meant for them. Their stories are vital expressions of this one, central truth. They radiate from it.

Because the War ended, Sam's daddy came home to Belfast. (Sam is Barb's father). Ethel Grose married veteran Lew Hornsby. Food rations lifted. The government gave loans to help returning soldiers buy farms.³ Throughout Britain, blackout curtains weren't needed, because there would be no more bombings, because Nazism was finished.

The good news "No more war!" birthed all these particular pieces of good news.

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Willa read the beginning of Mark's account of Jesus. Mark goes on from there to tell of people's experiences of meeting the Messiah. If later, you could ask each of them what it meant, you might hear things like.

"Jesus turned my life in a whole new direction." "The evil that had hold of me, he broke it!" "He healed me!" "Now I can walk!" "He forgave all my sins!" "He called me to follow him! Yes, even someone like me!" "He saved me from drowning." "He raised my daughter from death." "He cured the bleeding I'd suffered from for years." "He fed me when I was starving." "He taught me things I'd never imagined." "I can see." "I can hear." "I am blessed."

Each of these pieces of personal good news radiates from the one Good News at the centre. Mark starts his account with it. *"This is the beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, God's Son."* A bit later, Jesus himself proclaims, *"Now is the time! Here comes God's kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!"*

² I've adapted this illustration from John P. Bowen, [The Unfolding Gospel: How the Good News makes sense of Discipleship, Church, Mission, and Everything Else](#) (Minneapolis MN: Fortress, 2021), 16f.

³ www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/veterans-land-act

"Here comes God's kingdom!" This is Jesus' Good News announcement. God's rule has begun. God's will is being done. God's Kingdom is here, because Jesus is here.

Good news! This is what our word "Gospel" means. It's an Old English word meaning "good story!" The first Christians used a Greek word for a royal announcement (*euangélion*). It is the evangel, the gospel, the good news announcement of what God has done.

III

Here comes God's Kingdom!

It is an announcement. This is very important. The Gospel is an announcement. It's not admonishment. It's not advice.

An admonishment tells us to do something. *Clean up your room! Clean up your life! Follow the commandments. Help the poor. Turn your cheek. Love your neighbour.*

Nothing wrong with these. Take the last one. Jesus tells me that I must *"Love my neighbour as if they were me."* Beside *"Love God with all that I am,"* this is the most important commandment. Loving God and loving neighbour centres all the others. Jesus said it. It's good! But, it's not the good news-gospel. In fact, on its own it can be quite a burden. Love my neighbour as I love myself? Have you met my neighbours? They are quite nice actually. But can I love them that much?

What about when Jesus commands us, *"Love your enemy?"* Try doing that! It's good, but good news? Guess what! You have to act with love toward . . . everyone! . . . Yay?!?

Jesus' Gospel is not an admonishment, something you need to do. It's not advice either. *Pray often.* Good advice. Good news? *Don't let the sun set on your anger.* Good advice. Good news? *Listen to your minister.* Good advice, maybe. Good news?

Anything that begins with something for you to do might be good: good advice, good admonishment. But it's not a good announcement. An announcement tells us something that has already happened. *She asked me to marry her!* Or that is happening now. *It is a beautiful day!* Or that will be happening. *Zechariah, your wife Elizabeth will birth your son. . . . He will bring many back to God!* These are announcements. Jesus' Gospel is an announcement.

IV

This can be hard for us, including us church folk. We're so used to doing things. Something needs doing, a problem needs solving, an injustice needs righting, and we start doing. All good! But not the Gospel.

The Gospel announcement is not something for you do to. Just receive. Accept it. Trust the announcement, that it is true. It is about what God has done. What we can never do ourselves. God is the subject. God is the actor. God is the doer.

Jesus brings God's Kingdom.

Jesus, who is God-with-us, has done this. It's his action, his initiative, his doing. This is the Gospel we announce, because it changes everything. We trust it, and entrust ourselves to it . . . to Jesus.

As when the War ended, and as when people first encountered Jesus, this central Good News means something particular and personal for each of us.

- *Jesus brings God's Kingdom . . . so I know I belong to God.*
- *Jesus brings God's Kingdom . . . so I finally have a family.*
- *Jesus brings God's Kingdom . . . so I can see God's purpose for my life.*
- *Jesus brings God's Kingdom . . . so I know I am forgiven.*
- *Jesus brings God's Kingdom . . . so I have been healed.*
- *Jesus brings God's Kingdom . . . so I can pray, and trust God hears.*
- *Jesus brings God's Kingdom . . . so I can work for a better world, with hope.*
- *Jesus brings God's Kingdom . . . so I can love my neighbour.*
- *Jesus brings God's Kingdom . . . so I can love my enemy.*
- *Jesus brings God's Kingdom . . . so I love God.*

There are still things for us to do. But these are not the Gospel. We can do them in a new, hopeful, energized way because of the Good News: *Jesus brings God's Kingdom.*

V

These weeks of Advent, this is what I'm going to talk about. The Good News. *Jesus brings God's Kingdom.* "Kingdom" sounds medieval. So we need to flesh it out. What does Jesus mean? And how is this far bigger than anything we can imagine? And if it's true, what do we do?

Jesus brings God's Kingdom. So good old Zechariah gets the news. *A baby! For him! And Elizabeth! Their son is God's gift. He'll get everyone ready for the Kingdom-Bringer, for Jesus.* The angel announces it. What does Zechariah need to do? Go home to Elizabeth and, well, you know. But besides that . . . just be quiet, for a while. Just receive the good news.

Jesus brings God's Kingdom. What does that mean for you? *Jesus brings God's Kingdom . . . so you . . . what?* What has that meant in your life? Or, what promise do you hear in that, a promise that speaks particularly to you? As the waves radiate from what Jesus has done, how do they hit you?

Let me assure you of this. It is not another thing for you to do.

Yes, even in December, when we're piled on with so much to do. Too often regretting that we can't get them done. These days, grieving about things we can't do.

Are you ready for Christmas yet? How can you be? You don't need to be. Because it's not for you to do. It's done. Just announce it!

Get this! Jesus has brought God's Kingdom!

Praise be to God! Amen.