

**Advent 2 / December 10, 2023**

**Mark 1:2**

**“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”**

### **Behold, My Messenger**

Mark begins his gospel with the good news of the beginning of the unveiling of the gospel of Jesus Christ, as he says, “The Son of God.” The gospel in general is the good news of God’s love expressed in His kindness to all things living, His providential care for the earth and the humans who inhabit it. The psalmist sang, “The Lord is good to all, and His mercy is over all that He made.” The gospel is God’s love in creating Israel, the people through whom He began to reveal Himself to the world in the Old Testament. The gospel is the good news of God’s desire to forgive and have mercy on all people.

God expressed His mercy and forgiveness first and foremost towards His people Israel, who often forgot their purpose and Him who had created them. The psalmist sang, “He does not deal with us according to our iniquities...as far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us.” The gospel in its clearest form is the good news of God’s love in His Son Jesus Christ, whom He gave to be our Saviour; through whom we receive the grace of forgiveness, the blessing of peace with God and the promise of resurrection to a new and everlasting life.

John the Baptist was the messenger who announced the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, but many people proclaimed the gospel before him. Noah is called a preacher of righteousness. He warned his generation of the disaster to come. He called them to repent, turn to God and with Him, find refuge in the ark. Abraham was the man through whom God began to create a people for Himself, who would make His name and His love known in the world. He shared the message of the knowledge of the Most-High and His love that reaches out to all people with his family, household and the peoples among whom he sojourned. Noah, Abraham, his descendants Isaac and Jacob, were messengers who made God known in a way that was unknown in the world. They made God known as love. The gospel is the message of God’s love.

That may not sound like a big deal to us, but ancient peoples didn’t see their gods as loving, kind and forgiving. On the contrary, they imagined their gods like the forces of nature; necessary to survival, sometimes kind, sometimes exceedingly cruel. The gods of the Canaanites, whom Israel was sent to dispossess from the Promised Land, demanded cruel human sacrifices. The gods of the Greek and Roman world into which Jesus was born, were generally seen as trouble makers. They stirred up contention among people and sat back to watch. In contrast throughout the Old Testament and especially in the psalms, we find statements of the steadfast, faithful love of the Lord. The psalmist sang, “with you there is forgiveness therefore you are feared.” The nations feared their gods out of fear. Many people think the same about God today. Israel feared the Lord out of deep respect for His love expressed in forgiveness. The gospel is a message of love expressed in forgiveness.

The prophets were messengers of the good news of God’s love in the promise of the coming Saviour, Jesus the Son of God. The prophets said the Saviour would come through the lineage of David, in fulfilment of God’s promise of a king and a kingdom that would never end. Micah announced the place of His birth. Centuries before Jesus was born Micah sang, “But you Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from days of eternity.” As Mark said, He would be both the son of David and the Son of God. Isaiah celebrated His birth centuries in advance singing, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder, and His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” The prophets were messengers of the coming of Jesus, because as Revelation says, testimony to Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. In Him God speaks the good news of His love in our salvation.

Of all the Old Testament prophets Isaiah spoke most clearly of the sacrifice Jesus would make by which He would show Himself our Saviour and make peace for us with God in the forgiveness of our sins. In chapter 53 Isaiah sings, “But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed.” The heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God, is that He made peace between God and humans by the sacrifice of His sinless self on the cross. On the cross He bore the burden of our guilt and paid the debt of our sins. Forgiveness is not God simply overlooking our sin and pretending it isn’t there. The forgiveness for which God is honoured with a holy fear, is that He gave

His eternal Son to share in our humanity, bear its guilt on the cross and pay its debt with His death. Jesus is God's forgiveness. He is the embodiment of the gospel, the good news of God's love for us and for every human soul.

John the Baptist came as the last prophet of the Old Testament. He embodied the austere life of the prophets in the clothing he wore, the food he ate and place where he preached. He came in the spirit and power of Elijah to call the children of Israel to return to God in the season of His favour. He called the descendants of Abraham to live with God in the faith of Abraham. Abraham believed God and for that reason God counted Him as righteous. John the Baptist showed the lost sheep of the house of Israel their sins, so that when Jesus appeared, they would see their Saviour and in Him receive forgiveness and refreshment from on High. Through the law we are made aware of our sin, so that through the gospel we may see Jesus our Saviour, believe in Him and have life in His Name.

John is the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God. He prepares the way for the Lord to enter our hearts, by knocking down the obstacles of sin that prevent His entrance. Through the proclamation of the law John levels the pride in our hearts that prevents us from seeing our sin, so the Spirit may prepare our hearts to receive Jesus our Saviour. John prepares the way for the Lord by showing us our sin and sinfulness, so that through the gospel the Holy Spirit may bless us with faith to receive and believe in Jesus as our Saviour and King. John is the beginning of the gospel. He points us to Jesus and prepares us to receive Him. Jesus is the gospel in its fullness. In Him we receive the forgiveness of sin, have peace with God and the promise of sharing in His resurrection to eternal life in a world made new in the righteousness of God.

John the Baptist spoke a message of repentance, so that when Jesus came, people were able to see and receive their Saviour. John was the messenger. Jesus is the message. One of the most beautiful passages in the gospels is the eleventh chapter of Matthew, where Jesus calls, "Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest." It is the most beautiful passage when we feel the weariness in our spirits that comes from longing for God and feel the burden of our sins. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, they shall be filled." Through prophets like John, God makes us aware of our spiritual hunger and our thirst for his righteousness, so He may refresh us with His grace through faith in Christ Jesus.

John the Baptist prepares us to celebrate Christ's birth by showing us the purpose for which Christ was born; to take away the guilt of our sin through the blood he shed on cross; heal us of its wounds in forgiveness, and save us from its consequences in the gift of the resurrection to eternal life. John is the messenger. Jesus is the message. When we see our sin and feel its burden there is no sound more beautiful to our ears and comforting to our spirits than the voice of Jesus calling us to come to Him for rest, refreshment and peace. This is the gospel of Jesus Christ. God grant us faith to receive our Saviour in repentance that we may celebrate His birth at Christmas and see His face in eternal life. In Jesus' Name. Amen