

Well, it's time to say goodbye to the Gospel of Mark. Next week the church year will end with a reading from the Gospel of John and so this Sunday is our last reading from Mark. The next time we hear from Mark's gospel will be in Advent of 2020.

And with today's reading Mark brings his gospel full circle. The first verse of the first chapter is: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God." And verse ten of our reading today is Jesus telling us that, "The good news must be proclaimed to all nations."

What we heard today sounds like bad news! Temple destroyed, conflict among families, believers brought to trial and be beaten, and some will die. Jesus warns that every stone of the Temple will be thrown down, and that not one will be standing on another. Where is the good news in that? If your whole world as you know it is utterly destroyed, and the Temple where you used to worship is gone, how do you go on?

This is precisely what Jesus wants his disciples to know. How do we continue to be disciples of Jesus in times of trouble?

An obvious parallel for us today is the town of Paradise in California, and the other places where deadly fires have been burning in California in the deadliest fire year in California history. The death toll is up to 76 as of this morning and the missing are numbered at over 1000. A thousand people missing? God willing, many will be found to be living elsewhere, but that is a lot of people. And this is a horrible disaster.

About half of the churches in Paradise burned along with thousands of other structures. One pastor said that he's seen a picture that shows that a metal cross on a rock is still standing in front of his church. He declared that the Church of God is still standing because of that cross still there. But what if that metal cross was not still standing? What happens to our faith and to our life if every single thing is demolished? Things can get pretty hopeless.

Imagine what it would be like to drive through our towns and look at street after street of houses incinerated. The pictures we've seen are just incredibly awful. Not one stone is left on stone. How can one believe in a God who would let these things happen to innocent people?

These are the moments in our lives when we either become convinced in the presence of God to help us pick up the pieces and start over, or we turn away from God because we thought that we would be saved from tragedy by God's protective care for us. Let's look at what God tells us in our scripture passages for the day.

The Gospel of Mark, written right around the time of the destruction of the Temple, is the earliest written as I've said many times before, and so it is the rawest Gospel, and unencumbered by the additions of stories and concerns of the new Christian communities.

Jesus gives important instructions to the disciples. He warns that those who believe in Jesus will be persecuted and will have to speak their truth before Jewish leaders just as Jesus did at this trial. They will have to preach the good news in spite of persecution, and the Holy Spirit will be with them to guide their hearts and give them the right things to say.

The job of the disciples, Jesus tells them in this important warning, is to stay the course, don't follow false prophets, and don't let others be fooled by them, and hang in there because there is work to do, and the reward will be that God's reign will come. People will get the good news.

We heard The Song of Hannah this morning as our Hebrew scripture reading. It would take another form in Luke's Gospel as the Song of Mary which we sometimes call the Magnificat. Hannah (another powerful testimony of a named woman in the Hebrew writings) had been childless, and when she is finally able to conceive and bear a son, she sings this song which is believed to be an ancient song of the Israelite people. Perhaps sung after battles, or after natural disasters. The song speaks of the bows of the mighty having been broken. And of a barren woman having seven children. So, this is probably not just Hannah's song, but the song of all who put their trust in God.

So as we say farewell to Mark, let's just briefly remember what we learned in this Gospel over the last year:

- * Remember that it is our shortest Gospel. You can read it in an afternoon. And you should!
- * It is a very fast paced account. The word immediately is used 28 times in its 16 chapters. Interestingly, though, not in this chapter we heard today. Once Jesus arrives in Jerusalem for the passion (or arrest and death and resurrection) the story slows down so that we can focus on the details of what happens to Jesus.
- * There is no birth narrative in Mark's Gospel because what is important is what Jesus did in ministry, not what his birth and childhood were like.
- * The ending is as abrupt as the beginning. There are no post-resurrection experiences of the risen Christ by the disciples. The women who saw the empty tomb ran away because they were afraid. It's the LIFE of Christ that is important to Mark.
- * And, importantly, Mark writes this Gospel so that the disciples can learn to focus on discipleship and maintaining a spiritual life: prayer apart in a deserted place, learning to teach, heal and forgive from Jesus. Be careful to have compassion not to have hardness of heart like the leaders of the Jews. And in spite of everything that the Jesus, the disciples and we go through, God has given us news to deliver.

God has Good News for us: With God's never-failing care, we are the ones who care for and save others from destruction and despair. One day, when God's rule is complete, there will be no more sin and the unjust and unloving structures of our society will be torn down and replaced with complete love and just action, and trust in God despite disasters.

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done.

