



Roanoke, Virginia

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## *“The Voice to Trust”*

*Mark 1:1-15*

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The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

<sup>2</sup> As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;  
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.’”

<sup>4</sup> John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup> Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup> I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

<sup>9</sup> In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

<sup>12</sup> And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. <sup>13</sup> He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.



<sup>14</sup> Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, <sup>15</sup> and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Only three weeks have passed since we celebrated the birth of God in the form of a baby. So much has already happened to disturb the peace we proclaimed on Christmas Eve. So much so, that it is difficult to recall the multitude of heavenly hosts singing, *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those whom God favors*. Today our promised and proclaimed peace is deeply disturbed—just as it had been for this gospel’s first audience. Current scholarship suggests Mark’s gospel was written right around the time that the Jewish army revolted against Rome. That insurrection resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, a building which had, until then, been a symbol of unity for Jews throughout the Roman empire.

This context may partially explain why Mark’s gospel does not open with a birth of Jesus story, but rather with an oddly abrupt, even rushed opening line. It is not even a full sentence. Good news was needed immediately. Good news is needed today. So, let’s listen to the highlights of this story again now that you know the context.

Hear the voice of the gospel writer say, *This is where the good news starts, with Jesus Christ, God’s Son.*

Hear the prophet’s voice cry out from the past—*God is on the move--make a straight path for God to travel upon! Turn away from those things that get between you and God and be restored, forgiven, set free.*

Now hear the voices of the multitude of people thronging to the river, ready to repent. They know they have strayed, and they want forgiveness. They want to get back on the right path—God’s path.

Hear a scruffy, locust-and-wild-honey eating baptizer say, *Come on into this water, yes, be baptized, but know that someone stronger than me is coming, someone who will bring God’s holy presence straight into your heart and soul and mind.*

Now see Jesus step into that water and hear the voice that renders a tear between heaven and earth saying, *You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased.*

Now hear the rush of the Holy Spirit driving Jesus into the desert. Hear the voice of evil call for his attention, tempting him to listen and follow. Hear the voices of the beasts and angels minister to him.



Now, hear the voice of Jesus as he emerges from the wilderness saying, *The time is now, all things have come to a head, the reign of God has drawn near. It's time to change your mind and **trust** in this good news! The reign of God is among us.*

So many voices ring out through these verses! Every one of them has something to say to us today—every one of them could be its own sermon. But these voices, and Jesus' voice in particular, are so easily silenced by all the other voices in our lives. The talking heads on our screens, the breaking news alerts on our phones, the political parties demanding our loyalty, the ideologies that declare themselves to be the absolute truth. Yes, the voices are especially loud right now, but the truth is, whether we are in a time of national crises or not, so many voices collude to silence the **one** voice we need to hear—the voice of the one proclaiming: *God's kingdom has come. Change your mind and trust in this good news!*

God's kingdom, also known as God's reign, has come, Jesus said. For decades I have wrestled with understanding what this announcement means. As I mulled over this text the answer showed up in a new way. Think about the images and art you have seen depicting Jesus' baptism. It is all pretty much the same, isn't it? Most of the art features a dove coming down from the sky to alight on Jesus, which is a lovely image. It is a peaceful image. And even though I know that dove represents the Holy Spirit, even though I know the presence of God's Spirit is exactly what we need, this image is not particularly helpful for me right now as I see violence, chaos, and a deadly virus continue to spread. God's reign has come—really?

But then I found a representation of Jesus' baptism that was new for me—yet quite old, never-the-less. Look at the image on your bulletin cover (or on the screen). This portrayal from an Armenian Gospel book published in 1455 shows Jesus and John standing in the Jordan river with a dove coming down from the sky. But notice what Jesus is standing on—a serpent.

We know that serpent. That serpent told Adam and Eve, the first stewards of God's creation, that they could not trust God. They chose to listen to the serpent. Consequently, their intimate and trusting relationship with their Creator suffered a desperate blow, and the humans could not find their way back home on their own.

But now, on the banks of the Jordan river, a voice tears through the veil that marks the boundary between heaven and earth to say to the Human One, the Son of Man, *You, Jesus, you are my beloved. With you I am well pleased.* The beloved son then goes into the wilderness of temptation to face evil and return with a message for everyone: *Turn around. Stop running away from God. Come back. Change your mind and change your allegiance. Here comes God's reign. Here I come.* And this 15th century Armenian priest shows us what God's reign looks like: Jesus standing on the serpent. Jesus, silencing evil because he would not heed the voices that tried to seduce him into taking power for himself. Jesus, overcoming evil because he was unafraid to challenge those authorities and institutions that dehumanized others. Jesus, defeating evil because he was willing to suffer and



experience rejection so that others could find their way back home to God. Jesus, living and dying as one of us so we could understand what living within God's good reign looks like.

I know it is not easy to see, to trust, to believe in the good news that God's reign has come near. Not during a pandemic. Not when our nation's capital is taken over by insurrectionists. Not when leaders care more about holding onto power than upholding truth and justice. Not when we find ourselves further alienated from friends and family whose views and experiences are so radically different from our own. And yet, as Bible scholar and Bishop NT Wright says, "a good deal of Christian faith is a matter of learning to live in a reality that we cannot see". But we don't learn to live within this reality for the sake of escape. We live within it so we can become vehicles for God's transforming Spirit to do what God does best—redeem what is broken and resurrect what is dead.

God's reign has come near, Jesus said. And then he came closer to show us what God's reign looks like. He healed diseases of the body and mind, he brought dignity to women and immigrants. He challenged the civic values and religious practices that created boundaries between people. He welcomed everyone to the table, and he spoke out against those who created circles to define who was in and who was out, who was worthy and who was worthless.

If we are hoping for God's kingdom to come—and let's acknowledge this is a request we make every week when we pray the Lord's Prayer—if we are asking for the extension of God's reign here on earth, as it is in heaven, our hope is in learning to align our lives with Jesus' life. When Jesus said *repent and believe in the good news*, he was telling people to change their minds about their social and political agendas, to turn away from rigid ideologies, to desire God's will above their own. His call for repentance, for a turning around, was not new. God's will has always been clear: Do not murder, do not kill, do not do even think about harming or destroying another. Seek justice for the oppressed. Draw the outsider close. Befriend the stranger. Love people more than causes. Do not worship a false idol.

No, this call to turn toward God's will was not new news. What was new, and what made this news so good, was that Jesus came to show us what turning back to God looks like. In showing us the way, Jesus became the way for our return to intimacy and trust with our Creator. I baptize you with water, John said, but Jesus will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. And when we are baptized into Christ God says, to you and to me, those same words Jesus heard: You are my beloved, with you I am well-pleased.

And still, many voices will continue to call us away from repentance, from turning back home to God's love. A love that knows no bounds. A love that calls us to love others in this same way. These voices that call us away are afraid. Afraid of losing power. Afraid of being disrespected. Afraid of change. These voices grab our attention because we fear these very same things. But remember this: any voice that increases our fear is not coming from God. God's message has



always been clear. Do not fear. I am with you. I have come, and I will keep on coming. I will never leave you nor forsake you. I have triumphed over evil and death. Believe in the good news and live a life that bears witness to your belief.

The reign of God came near through a human body fully aligned with God's will. This body, fully human and fully divine, did what no human could do on their own—remember the Armenian priest's portrayal of Jesus standing on the serpent. But we have been baptized into Christ's body. God's Holy Spirit is with us and in us. When we pray like Jesus, when we listen like Jesus, when we act like Jesus, by the power of God's Holy Spirit the reign of God spreads on earth as it is in heaven.

On this third Sunday after Christmas, during a time of great turmoil, division, and unrest, it is fitting to close with these words from Howard Thurman, pastor, scholar and spiritual mentor of Martin Luther King, Jr.:

“When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, the work of Christmas begins: to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among the people, to make music in the heart.”

