



Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church
Sanford, North Carolina

Dr. Mark E. Gaskins
Senior Pastor

The Lord's Day
January 11, 2009

www.jhbc.org

© 2009

Good News!
Mark 1:14-15

Have you been keeping up with the news lately?
There are plenty of ways to keep up with it, aren't there?
A lot of radio stations give the news every half hour.

Several of the television stations associated with the major networks begin with local news at 5:00 in the morning, followed by the so-called network morning news shows (a lot of what they do isn't really news). Then there's the noon news, and the 5:00 news in the afternoon, followed by the 6:00 news, followed by the network news. Then their sister stations that don't have their own news teams give the news at 10:00 p.m., and the network stations give it again at 11:00!

And if that's not enough, you can always turn to the 24-hour cable news networks. And there are always newspapers and the internet!

If we want to know what's going on, what's news, we can usually find somebody somewhere telling it—whether it's accurate or not!

Well, we've heard a lot of news lately, haven't we? And it seems like most of it's *bad*.

The economy is bad. We're officially in a recession. We keep hearing about layoffs and businesses closing down. Just this week the news came out that the most recent national unemployment rate has risen to 7.2 percent. According to an article in *The Sanford Herald* this past Wednesday, here in Lee County it's pushing 10 percent.¹

Israel and Gaza are at it again. Russia is flexing its muscle over oil. Unrest continues in a number of countries in Africa. Christians are being persecuted in Africa, India, southeast Asia, and China. And the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are far from over.

Right here at home, it seems that nearly every week we hear about a shooting or murder or robbery or some other violent crime in our area. And all over the United States we've had one natural or man-made disaster after another—tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, mudslides, drought, wildfires, blizzards and ice storms, earthquakes—you name it, and we've just about had it somewhere in our country over the past year!

Bad news abounds. In fact, it seems like most news *is* bad news. The year 2008 was a tough one in a lot of ways. And unless we completely isolated ourselves from any media, we heard about it over and over and over. Given the recession, the blizzards, the windstorms, the mudslides, and the wildfires we've heard about just this week, 2009 is off to a similar start.

¹ Erin Zureick, "Jobless rate at Almost 10%," *The Sanford Herald*, January 7, 2009.

Bad news in Jesus' day

While there were no newspapers or radio or TV broadcasts or such in Jesus' day, it was pretty much the same as today. Most news was *bad news*.

Israel was occupied by Roman soldiers and under Roman rule. Times were hard. Most people were poor. The people's situation left a lot to be desired—it really made it look like we're on easy street, even with our recession.

In the midst of all this bad news, the hope of deliverance by a coming Messiah grew stronger and stronger in the hearts of many Jews.

Mark's Gospel begins by telling us how John the Baptist was out in the Judean wilderness at the Jordan River, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The common people had flocked to him, so much so that Mark says that "the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him," and that "confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River" (1:5).²

Even Jesus himself came one day to be baptized by John—not because he needed to repent, but to identify with those who did.

When he was baptized, Jesus saw the heavens opened and the Spirit of God descending on him in the form of a dove. In the ancient world, this was a sign of divine favor. Jesus also heard a voice from heaven—God's voice—saying, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased"—words from the Old Testament about God's Son and chosen servant. Then the Spirit drove Jesus out in to the wilderness to be tempted by Satan for forty days.

But then came more bad news.

John was arrested by Herod Antipas, one of the sons of King Herod the Great who Matthew tells us had tried to do away with Jesus when he was a baby. Mark tells us more about John's arrest in chapter 6; it had to do with his standing up to Herod about his immorality, and eventually led to Herod's order to have John beheaded.

This was no doubt a blow to many of the Jews, because most regarded John as a prophet. Some thought he might even be the Messiah, even though he made it clear that he had come to prepare the way for the Messiah (1:7-8).

Followed by good news

Soon after John was arrested, Jesus began his public ministry in Galilee, "proclaiming the good news of God" (1:14). It was "the gospel" (KJV, RSV, ESV, NASB). The Greek word for *gospel* means *good news*. And good news was what Jesus came preaching! But it wasn't just any good news, mind you; it was good news from God about his kingdom, his rule and reign!

His message was simple and straightforward: "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe in the good news!"³ *Jesus proclaimed the good news of God's reign, calling people to respond with repentance and faith.*

Jesus' declaration

Think about his message for a minute.

It consisted of a twofold declaration and a call to action.

First, Jesus declared that "the time has come," or more literally, "the time has been fulfilled."⁴ Many Jews had been waiting for God to act, to send his Messiah to deliver them.

² Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

³ My translation.

⁴ My translation.

They had been longing for it and looking forward to it. And now Jesus said, “The time has been fulfilled!” It was time!

His second declaration was that “the kingdom of God is near” (or “at hand,” RSV). It was right on the verge, about to break in on them.

Now what did Jesus mean by “the kingdom of God”? He was talking about God’s rule and reign over all his creation, including all humanity. Humans may choose to resist his rule and rebel against it, but that doesn’t make him any less king—it just makes us rebels when we do! His kingship depends not on who acknowledges it, but rather on who he is!

I like the way Dr. George Beasley-Murray once put it when he said, “We can’t stop God’s kingdom; the worst we can do is miss it.”⁵

Now the form of the verbs that Mark uses to tell us what Jesus said is important. They’re in the perfect tense, which in Greek carries the idea that something has happened or been completed that continues to have effect on what is happening or will happen afterwards.

In other words, Jesus was saying that a world-changing event was taking place—that in God’s time, the right time had come for the coming of God’s kingdom!

The New Testament presents Jesus to us as God’s Son, the King through whom God rules his world. So when Jesus began his ministry, God’s kingdom had drawn near, and things would never be the same again!

Back in the late 1980s and early 1990s, communism fell in eastern Europe. Perhaps the most powerful symbol of that was the fall of the Berlin wall. Can you imagine what that must have been like for those people who had lived under the oppression of communism for so many decades as those governments gave way to freedom? That was indeed good news!

But the good news that Jesus proclaimed was even better! It’s the good news that God rules, that he can set us free from our sins and forgive us and rule in our lives! This good news is that *God’s rule has come near in Jesus Christ!*

Jesus’ call to action

So how should we respond to this good news?

Jesus put it bluntly: “Repent and trust in the good news” (1:15).⁶ *The only appropriate response to this good news is repentance and faith.*

John had preached repentance because the Messiah was coming. Jesus called people to repent and believe, because in him, the kingdom was near, right on the verge! God was doing something about the situation, just as he had promised in the prophets. Because it was God’s doing, they could be sure he would accomplish it.

As Christian Beker has put it, they could believe it, and participate in it in joy and anticipation.⁷ Rather than trying to conquer their sin and change themselves in their own strength, they could trust God to do for them what they couldn’t do themselves, that he would win the victory over evil, and they could share in that victory as they lived under his reign! To participate in that victory would require *repentance and faith.*

In other words, because we humans, before we trust in Christ, are in rebellion against God and his rule, we have to have a change of heart and mind, and turn from our own way to God and his way, putting our faith in him, trusting him to set us right with himself.

⁵ Quoted from a class lecture at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, NC, spring semester 1989.

⁶ My translation.

⁷ Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2000), 7, summarizing Christian Beker.

Or as my seminary New Testament professor Dr. Malcolm Tolbert liked to put it in his lectures: “Since the kingdom of God is at hand, the only appropriate response is to repent and believe!”

So that’s what Jesus calls us to do.

Years ago, not long after we were married, Jo Ann and I were going to some kind of church meeting down in Brunswick County. We cut through the back roads from our home over to Highway 130 going toward Shallotte. To get to the church where we were going, we were supposed to turn off of 130 onto a side road. The church was a few miles down that road.

As we drove, we kept looking, but somehow we never saw the road we were supposed to take. We kept saying to each other, “I sure thought we’d be to that turn by now,” and “This is a lot farther than I remember it being.” We were driving along, looking, and all of sudden, out of the darkness, the headlights picked up a green sign that said, “Shallotte City Limits”!

I was so embarrassed! How could I have missed that turn? But I did! We were supposed to be at the church; we were going to miss participating in the meeting, unless . . . Well, what do *you* think we did?

Friends, listen to the Gospel! *In Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God is near.* God’s rule has come in His Son! He came to live for us, to die for us, to rise from the dead for us, so that we might be saved, be forgiven of our sins, be set right with God, and share in his kingdom. He has done for us what we can’t do for ourselves. We can’t earn it, we can’t achieve it. We can only believe it and receive it.

So repent and trust in this good news!

Have you?

†MEG