

## **Jeff's Reflection on Mark 1:1-11**

This week's scripture reading from the beginning of the gospel of Mark, seems particularly relevant in light of the attack on Capitol Hill this past week.

Unlike the gospels of Matthew and Luke, the gospel of Mark does not begin with any story about the birth of Jesus.

Mark's story begins by telling everyone that this is a political story.

The Greek word 'gospel' means good news -news that should cause people to rejoice. Beginning with Alexander the Great and continuing into the Roman Empire, gospel was the word used to describe empirical announcements of a great accomplishment – usually a military conquest, a political victory, or perhaps the construction of a new colosseum or aqueduct.

This 'good news/gospel' was really a kind of Infomercial for the power of the Roman Empire and the greatness of the Caesar.

The writer of Mark's 'Gospel' begins by saying he is writing good news – but this is the good news of Jesus the Christ, the anointed one of God, the Son of God – knowing that 'Son of God' was a title applied to the Roman Emperor.

This is an alternative good news. This is a gospel that is in opposition to the good news of Roman conquest and military-enforced peace!

Having announced that this is good news about Jesus Christ, the writer of Mark immediately connects this current good news to the voice of a prophet from the past, recalling how Isaiah assured the Jewish people, when they were exiled to Babylon, that one day they would return to their homeland:

'that a messenger would prepare a way for them, and they would cross the miles of wilderness to return to their homes.'

This good news of Jesus is a continuation of the good news about God– that God is aware of the sufferings and the injustices inflicted upon people, and that God will provide a new way, a way to lead people home to God.

Then the story shifts back into the present, to John the baptizer – John who dresses in

clothes made of camel skin and wears a leather belt – a dress code reminiscent of another former prophet, Elijah. John has set up shop by the Jordan river. The Jordan River had history for the people. It was the Jordan River that the Hebrews, who had left Egypt under the leadership of Moses, crossed to enter the land to which God had led them – about 1600 years previously. It was an ancient memory, but a powerful one. The land of Jordan was now under Roman control, but John was inviting people to enter the Jordan River, then return to their homes. John was stirring up the memory of this land being their land, not Rome's land.

John baptized people – probably submerging them into the River then pulling them out of the water, a symbolic act of being reborn, of being washed clean, of repentance, of changing attitudes, actions, lives – a symbolic act inviting them to reimagine their lives and this world as being given by God, dedicated to God, saved by God.

To Roman officials, John probably seemed dangerous – he was stirring up memories of a history of ownership, awakening an understanding of the world in which neither Egyptian Pharaohs nor Roman Caesars could withstand the dream of the God of Moses and Elijah and Isaiah.

Jesus joins the pilgrims coming to the Jordan, coming to John. Jesus comes from Nazareth. We don't have exact details about Nazareth, but archeologists and historians think that at the time of Jesus, it was a village, of perhaps about 500 people – not particularly significant or prominent.

Jesus is baptized. We are told that as Jesus emerges from the water, the heavens are torn apart – torn, forcibly ripped apart. We will find the same language used when Jesus dies on the cross, and the heavy curtain or veil in the temple in Jerusalem – the curtain across the entrance to the Holy of Holies, the place where God dwelt - is torn in two.

In the ancient worldview, many believe that there was a kind of dome in the sky, separating the earth from heaven.

This sky-dome, the heavens are torn apart, the veil is ripped – that which separates God and humans, heaven and earth, the holy and the ordinary – suddenly has a portal, an opening.

The spirit descends like a dove – symbol of peace, reminder of the dove who brought an olive branch to Noah declaring that God was ready to renew life on earth.

Jesus hears a voice, a voice projected through the torn heavens, declaring to Jesus, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Jesus, this unknown labourer from an obscure village – is the son of God! Wait, isn’t Caesar supposed to be the son of God!! What’s going on! This is good news unlike the usual imperial good news – this is news that God doesn’t show up with an army, with military standards, with power and privilege and pageantry – God shows up in the obscure, on the margins of power, in the shadows, amongst the poor, in the most seemingly insignificant of places and people!

Good news – having heard this voice from the heavens, Jesus would become this voice to others – telling the poor that they are blessed, that they matter to God; befriending the lame, the blind, the disfigured – those who could not contribute to the economy; noticing the beauty and wonder of lilies; saying that forgiveness, not judgement is the defining character of God; affirming that not only was he, Jesus, son of God, but everyone was son, daughter, child of God.

Good news that whoever you are, from whatever village, neighbourhood, city...you are loved by God, you are an expression, an embodiment of the sacred.

This good news reinserts God into our imagination, urging us to begin to see the world saturated with sacredness, to see each person as part of God’s creation, to love the world as God loves.

The good news is that there is no divide between heaven and earth, no barrier between God and humanity, no chasm between the sacred and the earth; the good news is that we dwell in God, God dwells in us.

And that is a sacred story, and it is a political story, because it is a story about relationships between people and politics is about how we shape and nurture societies.

And this story is relevant to this week’s attack on Capitol Hill in Washington, because that attack revealed a sick spirit. It was an attack led by supporters of Donald Trump who is a President who wants to be treated as an emperor, who wants to have power and to retain power regardless of the results of a legally and repeatedly proven to be fair democratic election, and who believes that threats and intimidation are valid uses of power and expressions of relationship.

The gospel of Jesus the Christ is NOT about self-proclaimed patriots being able to impose a rule of entitlement, racism and fear. The gospel of Jesus the Christ is about students of the sacred, about people created in the image of God being agents of healing, of affirmation of the sacredness within all people, of creating societies of welcome, compassion and vulnerable love.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God, is the beginning of seeing the world as God's world and rediscovering the love of God flowing through our lives.

This new year of 2021 is as good a time as any for the good news to be heard again and to be proclaimed again and to begin...again!

Thanks be to God. AMEN