

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, First Sunday of the Epiphany, January 7, 2024.

Today's lesson from Mark's Gospel (**Mark 1:4-11**) begins at verse 4 of chapter 1. What happened to verses 1 through 3 of chapter 1? Why leave those out? Well, as a public service, let's ponder this question. Here are the missing verses:

Verse 1 - The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Verse 2 - It is written in Isaiah the prophet: I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way.

Verse 3 - A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'

The one being described in these verses is John the Baptist. Fair enough. Certainly he was critical in the identification of Jesus as the Son of God. But John's work was confined to the first century AD. You and I weren't there. We didn't hear John.

Well, if we ourselves didn't hear John the Baptist, whom did we hear? How is it that you and I are even aware of Jesus Christ, the Son of God? Well, the short answer is "Lots of people over many years." The more complete answer is "Lots of people over many years thanks to God the Holy Spirit."

Some of those people are the subject of today's Lesson from the Acts of the Apostles (**Acts 19:1-7**). Twelve people to be exact heard about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, from a man named Paul. Paul himself had direct contact with Jesus on the Road to Damascus. The transmission of the Good News was underway.

And, remarkably, that transmission didn't stop. Authorities tried to stop what we know now as Good News. But the authorities weren't successful, and they still are not successful. The Good News is durable. So durable, that you and I have received it and are in the process of sharing it. Our reception and sharing experiences vary considerably. But they have one thing in common, and that is that the News of Jesus rising from the dead has touched our hearts and minds and souls in a way that makes us want to share this Good News.

Twenty centuries later. And the Gospel, the Good News, is alive and well. And, to today's point, you and I are part of that remarkable run. Our individual experiences with the Good News vary considerably. But they have one thing in common, namely that we want to learn more and share more and grow more ourselves.

There is no human explanation alone as to why the Good News has prospered. Something else is going on. Or, more to the point, Someone else is going on. The on-going Good News, the Gospel, is not an accident of history. It is the deliberate act of a Loving God. It is the extension of today's Genesis passage (Genesis 1, the Creation Story). "Let there be light." And, so there was "light," and so that "light" has continued "both day and night." Stanza 2 of The First Nowell.

You and I are part of this "continuation" story. We have heard the Story. We have been intrigued by the Story. We have adopted the Story for ourselves. And we have committed, out of joy and thanksgiving, to sharing the Story (Genesis 1:3). Can you imagine a life, a Reality, without this Story for ourselves and those we love and those whose lives clearly need some Good News?

We're here today for a purpose. That purpose is to be reminded of our role in the whole Good News enterprise. That purpose is to receive and to share. God the Holy Spirit will handle the rest. It's a purpose that has been in play for twenty centuries, and shows no sign of slowing down. Especially if we take our transmitting role seriously.

And we do, don't we? We're here. We're here to receive and to pass on and to be confident that others will receive and pass on. That whole transaction is in play, thanks to a Loving God. And to a cast of characters, including you and me, who want to share the Good News of God's love for us and Jesus Christ.

And now a reminder to all of us. We shouldn't assume that this transmission process will continue without us. Oh yes, God will find a way. We know that. We won't stop the Creator from doing whatever the Creator wants. But, why rely on others to do the heavy lifting? Why take the Holy Spirit for granted? Why not enjoy participating in this great adventure of Good News transmission and reception?

It's fun, after all. It's reassuring. It's a highlight of any year. It puts us in reach of the Creator of the Universe. We just have to receive the Love. It's as if God has extended a hand to you and me, and we simply have to receive that hand.

You know the Michelangelo painting of God's finger about to touch Adam's finger. Well, think of God's love touching you and me in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. As God reaches, there is an opportunity for us to respond, to accept the Gift. In our case, the gift of Jesus.

What an offer on God's part. What an opportunity for us. And what a very special gift to those with whom we share **our** experience. From today's Psalm (**Psalm 29:11**): "The Lord shall give strength to his people; the Lord shall give his people the blessing of peace."

"God's peace" is strong. Indeed nothing is stronger. But receiving and sharing that Peace isn't automatic. We have a role to play, not only to receive, but to share. That's where you and I fit in.

Think of the traditional Christmas tree in a home. Your home. Our home. There is excitement in selecting a tree, bringing it home, giving it water, assuring its security, enhancing its beauty, placing gifts of love under it, and enjoying the smiles of family and friends. But there comes a time to put all of that to bed for another year, with lots of hard work in the course of that new year.

It's a cycle, which we value very much, including the hard work. And it's an experience that we hope new generations will pick up and carry on. Kind of like the Good News of Jesus. A birth to remember, a life to honor, and the reality of new life to savor and to pass on.

Isn't it true that the best kind of work is hard work. And, to today's point, work that, if embraced, makes all the difference in the world. What's not to like?

Thank you God the Father. Thank you God the Son. And thank you God the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Service of Holy Communion
First Sunday after the Epiphany – January 7, 2024

Hymn 124, stanzas 1-3 – What star is this with beams so bright

What star is this with beams so bright, more beautiful than the noonday light?
It shines to herald forth the King, and Gentiles to his crib to bring.

True spake the prophet from afar who told the rise of Jacob's star;
and eastern sages with amaze upon the wondrous token gaze.

The guiding star above is bright; within them shines a clearer light,
and leads them on with power benign to seek the giver of the sign.

Page 355

Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
And blessed be his kingdom, now and for ever.

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no
secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy
Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name;
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Page 356 - Song of Praise

Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth.
Lord God, heavenly King, almighty God and Father,
we worship you, we give you thanks, we praise you for your glory.

Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father, Lord God, Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world: have mercy on us;
you are seated at the right hand of the Father: receive our prayer.

For you alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord,
you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the father. Amen.

The Lord be with you.
And also with you.
Let us pray.

Collect for First Sunday of Epiphany

Father in heaven, who at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan proclaimed him your beloved son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit: Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*

First Reading – Genesis 1:1-5

Psalm 29

Second Reading – Acts 19:1-7

Hymn 126, 3 stanzas – The people who in darkness walked

The people who in darkness walked have seen a glorious light;
on them broke forth the heavenly dawn who dwelt in death and night.

To hail thy rising, Sun of life, the gathering nations come,
joyous as when the reapers bear their harvest treasures home.

To us the promised Child is born, to us the Son is given;
him shall the tribes of earth obey, and all the hosts of heaven.

Gospel – Mark 1:4-13

Sermon

The Rev. Charles Rowins

Nicene Creed – page 358

*We believe in one God,
the Father, the almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is seen and unseen.*

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.*

*Through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.*

*On the third day he rose again In accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father,
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.*

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.*

Prayers of the People Form IV – page 388

Let us pray for the Church and for the world.

Grant, Almighty God, that all who confess your Name may be united in your truth, live together in your love, and reveal your glory in the world.
Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

Guide the people of this land, and of all the nations, in the ways of justice and peace; that we may honor one another and serve the common good.
Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

Give us all a reverence for the earth as your own creation, that we may use its resources rightly in the service of others and to your honor and glory.

Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

Bless all whose lives are closely linked with ours, and grant that we may serve Christ in them, and love one another as he loves us.

Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

Comfort and heal all those who suffer in body, mind, or spirit; give them courage and hope in their troubles, and bring them the joy of your salvation.

Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

We commend to your mercy all who have died, that your will for them may be fulfilled; and we pray that we may share with all your saints in your eternal kingdom.

Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

Confession and Absolution – page 360

Let us confess our sins against God and our neighbor.

*Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.*

*We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us;
that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.*

Almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you all your sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen you in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life. Amen.

The Peace – page 360

The peace of the Lord be always with you.

And also with you.

Announcements and Preparation of the Table

Eucharistic Prayer – page 361

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give him thanks and praise.

It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. Therefore we praise, you, joining our voices with Angels and Archangels and with all the company of heaven, who for ever sing this hymn to proclaim the glory of your Name:

*Holy, holy holy Lord, God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.*

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest.

Holy and gracious Father: In your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death, you, in your mercy, sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to you, the God and Father of all.

He stretched out his arms upon the cross, and offered himself, in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world.

On the night he was handed over to suffering and death, our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had given thanks to you, he broke it, and gave it to his disciples, and said, "Take, eat: this is my Body, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me."

After supper he took the cup of wine; and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you: this is my Blood of the new Covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, do this for the remembrance of me."

Therefore we proclaim the mystery of faith:

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

We celebrate the memorial of our redemption, O Father, in this sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. Recalling his death, resurrection, and ascension, we offer you these gifts.

Sanctify them by your Holy Spirit to be for your people the Body and Blood of your Son, the holy food and drink of new and unending life in him. Sanctify us also that we may faithfully receive this holy Sacrament, and serve you in unity, constancy, and peace; and at the last day bring us with all your saints into the joy of your eternal kingdom.

All this we ask through your Son Jesus Christ. By him, and with him, and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit all honor and glory is yours, Almighty Father, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Lord's Prayer

And now, as our Savior Christ has taught us, we are bold to say,

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy Name, thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.*

Breaking of the Bread

Alleluia. Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us.

Therefore let us keep the feast. Alleluia.

The Gifts of God for the People of God. Take them in remembrance that Christ died for you, and feed on him in your hearts by faith, with thanksgiving.

Communion

Post Communion Prayer – BCP pge 365

*Eternal God, heavenly Father, you have graciously accepted us
as living members of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ,
And you have fed us with spiritual food in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood.
Send us now into the world in peace, and grant us strength and courage
to love and serve you with gladness and singleness of heart;
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Hymn 460 – Alleluia! sing to Jesus!

*Alleluia! sing to Jesus! his the scepter, his the throne;
Alleluia! his the triumph, his the victory alone;
Hark! the songs of peaceful Zion thunder like a mighty flood;
Jesus out of every nation hath redeemed us by his blood.*

*Alleluia! not as orphans are we left in sorrow now;
Alleluia! He is near us, faith believes, nor questions how;
Though the cloud from sight received him, when the forty days were o'er,
Shall our hearts forget his promise, "I am with you ever more"?*

*Alleluia! Bread of Heaven, thou on earth our food, our stay!
Alleluia! he is near us, faith believes, nor questions how:
Intercessor, friend of sinners, earth's Redeemer, plead for me,
Where the songs of all the sinless sweep across the crystal sea.*

Dismissal

Alleluia! Alleluia! Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Alleluia! Alleluia!

Lessons for Epiphany 1 – January 7, 2024

Collect: Father in heaven, who at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit: Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*

First Reading: Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

The Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

Psalm 29

Ascribe to the Lord, you gods,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his Name;
worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.
The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders;
the Lord is upon the mighty waters.
The voice of the Lord is a powerful voice;
the voice of the Lord is a voice of splendor.
The voice of the Lord breaks the cedar trees;
he Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon;
He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
and Mount Hermon like a young wild ox.
The voice of the Lord splits the flames of fires;
the voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh;
the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
The voice of the Lord makes the oak trees writhe
and strips the forests bare.

And in the temple of the Lord

all are crying, "Glory!"

The Lord sits enthroned above the flood;

the Lord sits enthroned as King for evermore.

The Lord shall give strength to his people;

the Lord shall give his people the blessing of peace.

Second Reading: Acts 19:1-7

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism." Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied – altogether there were about twelve of them.

The Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

Gospel: Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 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. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

The Gospel of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*