

What Is the Gospel?
Isaiah 52:7–10; Luke 4:16–30
Saturday, July 16, 2023

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, speak to us as you spoke then, that your word might be fulfilled in *our* hearing. Amen.

A while back, I was at a party. I was talking to one of the other dads, and we had never met, so we were just making small talk, getting to know each other. And he asked me what I do for a living. (Something you need to know real quick. When a pastor is at a party, and someone asks us what we do, the party is about to be *over*. Either they just kind of say, “Mmm,” and that ends the conversation, or they *really* want to start talking to us about religion. Most of the time, they try to hide their drink in their hand. And it’s like, “I don’t *care*, but you know I can still *see* it, right?”) So I tell this guy that I am a pastor, and he asks what church. I tell him, and he says, “Is that PC(USA) or PCA?” I think, “This guy knows a little more than the average person. Maybe this won’t be so bad,” and I say, “PC(USA).” He kind of laughs, looks me dead in the eye, and says, “I hear you’re more likely to hear a sermon about gun violence than the gospel in a PC(USA) church!”

Now, I have never met this man before. He doesn’t know a thing about me or this church. And he has just attempted to belittle my faith tradition. So there’s a whole lot I *want* to say in response. But, you know, the whole pastor thing, I’m not going to be rude. He is my brother in Christ. And he knows *which* church I pastor, so I don’t want to say anything that reflects badly on *us*. So I say, “You know, the word *gospel* means, “good news,” and in a time when so many people live in fear of mass shootings, a sermon on gun violence might be good news to a lot of people.”

Well, he didn't like that anymore than anything *else* I could have said, so the conversation ended. But it got me thinking, and here's why I'm *telling* you this story. He said, "You're more likely to hear a sermon on *this* than you are to hear the *gospel*." What does that word *gospel* mean to him? In a very literal sense, I know what the word *means*. Like I said to him, it means, "good news." A lot of people think it means, "truth," and we hear expressions like, "That's the gospel truth." But it *doesn't* mean, "truth." The word *gospel* comes from the Greek word *euvangelion*, which means, "good news." So I know what it *means*, but what does it mean to *him*? What does it mean to *us*? If someone asked *you* at a party, "What *is* the gospel," what would you say? What is the *good news* of our faith? That seems like a question we should really know how to answer.

I know how the guy at that party would have answered it, because I know his faith tradition. I know what he *meant* when he said that. Had I asked him, "What is the gospel," he would have said something along the lines of, "We are all sinners, but Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose from the dead, and if we place our faith in him, our sins will be forgiven, and we will live eternally with him." That is the way that many Christians today understand the gospel. And that is 100% true. Jesus lived, died, and rose again so that *nothing*, not sin, not death, could ever keep us from God again. That is *good news*!

*But...*that is only *part* of the gospel. It is the most simplified expression of the gospel, but it's not the *entirety* of the good news of our faith. It is part of a much bigger picture of what God is doing, not just in *me* or in *us* but in *all of creation*. And we can begin to *see* that when we look at where that word *gospel* comes from.

The word *gospel* is not originally a Christian word. It was in use long before us. And it was a word that people living in the Roman Empire would have been *very* familiar with. Because the Greek word *euvangelion* was most commonly used by the Roman Empire to announce the birth of a new emperor, the ascension of a new emperor to the throne, or a military victory where a people had been conquered and brought under the rule of Rome. The announcement would begin, “*Euvangelion!* Good news! We have an emperor who has brought peace to the world!” So this *euvangelion*, good news, always pertained to the power and authority and rule and reign of *Caesar*. It was good news for the *Romans*, but not always for the people who were being *conquered*. And that included the people of Israel. So what happened was, that word *euvangelion* began to be used in subversive ways.

Like in our reading from Isaiah. Isaiah was originally written in Hebrew at a time when Israel had been conquered by Babylon. But around the time that the Roman Empire was rising to power, the Old Testament was translated into Greek. So look at what Isaiah says here. “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings *good news* – *euvangelion* – who announces salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’” Isaiah is describing a vision of God taking power, ruling over the nations, ruling over heaven and earth, and saving God’s people. So for Isaiah, this is something that is not happening *yet*, but it is *going* to happen in the future. God will deliver the people of Israel from their enemies.

The good news doesn’t have to do with Babylon or Rome or any of these other conquering empires. The good news that Isaiah proclaims here is that the God who created the world, the God of Israel, is at last taking power and reigning and putting right all that has gone wrong. Isaiah goes on to describe a new heaven and a new earth in which God reigns as the ultimate authority, redeeming the world from all its troubles. This is a vision of the kingdom of God, the

realm of God's rule and reign, in which there is no more pain or suffering or violence or war but *peace, true peace*, not the peace that results from violent conquest, but *God's peace*.

So Isaiah shares this vision and announces this good news, and then Jesus picks it up. The first time we see Jesus in the book of Mark, it says, "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the *good news of God*, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news!'" In the book of Matthew, when Jesus begins his ministry, it says, "From that time on Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!'" It keeps talking about how Jesus is going around "proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God."

And in Luke, our reading from today, Jesus begins his ministry by going to the synagogue at Nazareth, where he grew up. He stands up to read scripture. And what does he read? Isaiah. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring *good news* to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." This is part of Isaiah's vision of the kingdom of God, when God takes power and sets right all that is wrong with the world. Then Jesus says, "Today this scripture, this vision of the kingdom of God, has been fulfilled in your hearing."

He is saying, "The kingdom of God that you have been hoping for and longing for has finally arrived, and it is *me*." Then he goes on to tell these stories about Elijah and Elisha helping people who were not Jewish as a way of saying, "God's kingdom is not just for the people of Israel but for the *whole world*." Because the good news of *God* is good news for *everyone*.

The early Christians picked this up and ran with it. The Roman Emperor Caesar was commonly referred to as the Son of God, the Prince of Peace, the King of kings, the Lord of lords. A common saying in the Roman Empire was, “Caesar is Lord.” The early Christians said, “*Caesar* is not the Son of God. *Jesus* is the Son of God. *Caesar* is not the Prince of Peace. *Jesus* is the Prince of Peace. *Caesar* is not the King of kings and Lord of lords. *Jesus* is the King of kings and Lord of lords, even of *Caesar*. *Caesar* is not Lord. *Jesus* is Lord. *Caesar* does not have the *euvangelion*, the good news. *Jesus* is the *euvangelion*, the good news of God. Because in *Jesus*, the Kingdom of God has come, the rule and reign of God has begun. In *Jesus*, God has begun this work of redeeming the world, healing all that is broken, and setting right all that is wrong.”

The *gospel* is not just a message *about* *Jesus*. *Jesus* is the *gospel*, the good news of God to us. Part of that good news is the forgiveness of sin and the promise of eternal life, but that is part of this larger picture of God redeeming all of creation and making all things new. Author N.T. Wright says it this way, “The crucified and risen Christ rules and reigns over heaven and earth, and he summons people everywhere to live under his lordship, which means turning away from idols, repenting from sin, and trusting him.”

So if someone asks *you* at a party, “What is the *gospel*,” you can say, “*Jesus* is the *gospel*. *Jesus* is the good news of God, that God rules and reigns over heaven and earth, that God is the ultimate power and authority in this world, and that God is working to heal this broken world and set right all that is wrong. *Part* of that healing work is forgiving us of our sin, but there is *so much more* in this world that needs healing. The good news of our faith is that God *can* do it, and God *is* doing it.”

The *challenge* is, when we look at the world around us, we don't always see *evidence* of that. God is healing the world? *Really?* When there is still war and violence and sickness and suffering and death and destruction and hatred? There is a lot of *bad news* in the world, but where is the *good news*?

Well, that's *our* job. In Jesus Christ, we have been given a glimpse of the Kingdom of God, a foretaste of what life will be like when God's kingdom is fully established on the earth. As followers of Jesus, we have pledged to live our lives under the rule and reign and power and authority of God. Our job is to show the rest of the world what that looks like; what it will *be* like when God's kingdom finally, fully comes to earth.

And so *we* are called to be people, not of *violence*, but of *peace*. We are called, not to be people who sow *division*, but who nurture *love*. We are called to be people who live, not in *fear*, but in *trust*. We are called to be people who bring about *healing*. We are called, not to *conquer* or *control*, but to *serve*. We are called to be people who work for justice. We are called to help those who are poor and sick and hurting and oppressed and scared and suffering. We are called to show the rest of the world what life in the Kingdom of God is *like*, so that all the ends of the earth can see the salvation of our God.

A lot of Christians are really good at sharing *bad news* and *judgment*. But what is the *good news* that the world needs to hear today? That this world is not just a series of random, chaotic events. The God who created this world reigns in power over it, and *that* God *loves* us and wants us to love *each other*, so that we can *all* live life *together*. Jesus has shown us that it is *possible*, and by the power of his Holy Spirit, gives us everything we need to do it. And *that* is *good news*. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.