

Good News
Mark 1:1-15
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Imagine it's the year 69 of the Common Era. The crucifixion of Jesus occurred almost forty years before. Christianity is still in its infancy—a small movement that has been spreading across the Near East and the Roman Empire.

During those forty years conflict has increased in Judea as the people reacted to their Roman occupiers and the local elite who were allied with the Romans. Banditry has been on the rise. Revolutionary movements have increased. A decade before a prophetic figure appeared in the wilderness, drawing a large following. They prepared to march on Jerusalem where the leader had declared that he would stand on the Mount of Olives and order the city walls to crumble. The Romans intercepted these marchers and slaughtered them.

And finally three years ago war broke out. A provisional government was created, free of Roman oppression and withstood the first assault by the Roman army. But there has been no united Jewish front. This has been as much a civil war among various elements of the local population as a war on Rome, with multiple individuals and groups battling for control. The Romans returned in might and have slowly been subduing the country.

Meanwhile Rome itself has experienced chaos. Nero's unpopular reign ended in his suicide. That next year three different men served a short time as emperor before Vespasian, fresh from his victories in the Jewish War, became Caesar.

All this chaos has been born most heavily by the peasant class, many of whom have lived as refugees and exiles.

Maybe it was one of those exiles who fled into Syria who sat down to write "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

While Mark tells the story of Jesus, it is written a generation later and to an audience in the midst of chaos and war. It is written to bring them good news.

A vast gulf separates us from the initial audience of this gospel. We live in a radically different age with different cultures and politics and economics. Our technological and scientific understanding far exceeds those who first read these words. We also read this text after two thousand years of accumulated interpretation and theological discussion which can both enrich our understanding but also get in the way of the original meanings of the story.

But most different is that we read from a different socio-economic location. We are citizens of the globally dominating empire who experience lives of advantage and privilege compared with most people around the world. Most of us are not the peasant working class of a remote province. We are not refugees from war. We aren't subsistence farmers robbed of our livelihood by decisions from far away capitals.

Though in 2018 we are less ignorant of those concerns than we once were. We live at a

time of one of the greatest refugee crises in world history. In the sixties of the first century the refugees fled into Syria, today they flee from it.

We've also witnessed the outraged politics of working people who feel left behind by the centers of power and influence. Our age is also one of violence, chaos, and resentment when populist movements find opportunities for growth.

We are challenged by lies and equivocations, fake news and alternative facts. What is true? What is real? Are there any facts we can agree upon? NPR host Brooke Gladstone wrote in her recent book *The Trouble with Reality* that "the nation seems to be waging civil war over reality itself."

Samuel Wells, the vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London has written that "To navigate these bewildering times, we need a renewed story."

And so, like those exiles from the ancient war, we will turn back to the story of Jesus as told to us in the Gospel of Mark for here is the good news that we need.

The leader strong enough for our needs in dangerous times happens to have been a carpenter the Romans executed. He is the promised deliverer, the true king, who heralds the coming of God. This Jesus has shown us the way to build a new order in the ruins of the old. A way that, if we follow, will be our salvation.

It all began with John who went out into the wilderness to create a new Israel away from the centers of economic, political, and religious power yet drawing upon the great episodes in the people's history. John, who was a new Elijah, the forerunner for God's invasion of the world.

And to him all the people came, dissatisfied with the failures of the status quo, seeking something new.

One who came to him was Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee. A nobody from Nowheresville. And yet it is this one for whom the heavens ripped open and the Spirit of God descended. This one is God's child. This one will lead the way. And the scriptures quoted about him make it clear that he will be the one to challenge the rulers and powers of this world.

Scholar Herman Waetjen wrote, "In effect, [Jesus] drowned." In his baptism "he embraced the reality of his death" and so became "wholly unobliged" to the status quo. His baptism was his break with his past—"the structures and values of his society" would hold no power over him anymore. His power would come from his direct relationship with God.

And then the Spirit drove him into the wilderness where he was surrounded by the wild beasts, an illusion to the prophecies of the Book of Daniel where the great empires of the ancient world are symbolized as great monsters—the lion with eagle's wings, the great bear devouring human bodies, the leopard with four heads and four wings, and the terrifying beast with ten horns which made war upon the saints. These dreadful beasts are defeated, according to Daniel, by "the Son of Man" the "Truly Human One" and after their defeat the rule of the earth shall be given to the people, to the holy ones, and that reign shall be everlasting.

And, so, this Jesus, fresh from his wilderness triumph over the evils of the earth, returns to the Galilee, to the outer provinces, away from the centers of power and influence, and there he proclaims the good news that the time long promised has been fulfilled. This reign of the people has come near, so it is time to repent and cast off your old way of life and believe in the good news.

Jesus is calling on the people to join him in remaking humanity and reordering society. And it is to this idea that Mark turns a generation later as his world is overtaken by chaos and violence. The only lasting solution is to embrace the work that God began with Jesus and reorder the powers of this world for the benefit of all.

And here in 2018 in our own disorienting time, we are called once again to be the people who follow in the way of Jesus, the people with good news to share. God has invaded earth, defeated the powers of death and evil, and is remaking the world so that all might share in abundance of the earth. For this good news to be true, we need only repent and believe.