

**Southport Presbyterian Church**  
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**What is “The Gospel”?**  
**Mark 1:1-15**

I want to pose a simple question for us to mull over a bit together. Here’s the question: *What is the gospel?* What do we and others mean when we use that term, *the gospel*? And perhaps most importantly, what does Christian Scripture mean when it speaks of *the gospel*?

There’s a profoundly moving story-within-a-story in C.S. Lewis’s book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, that may help us get at this question. The story—an important subplot—is about Edmund, one of four siblings in England during WWII who suddenly and unexpectedly slip into the land of Narnia through a wardrobe in the house of an old professor they’ve been sent to stay with during the bombing of London. Shortly after they arrive, Edmund mocks his little sister Lucy for claiming she’d discovered a place called Narnia. Then, even after Edmund stumbled into Narnia himself, he pretended in front of their older brother Peter and sister Susan that he still didn’t believe Lucy, crushing her spirit and calling forth his brother’s rebuke.

By this time, it’s clear that Edmund isn’t just playing the part of an irritating brother, however. He’s met and come under the influence of the White Witch, who in savage cruelty afflicted Narnia with perpetual winter and turned her enemies into stone statues. Learning that Edmund has three human siblings, she quickly discerns that they have come to fulfill an ancient prophecy and usurp her rule over Narnia. So in a deceitfully cunning move she promises Edmund more of a certain candy he craves if only he will bring his brother and sisters to her, while privately intent on killing them and retaining her total control of Narnia.

Though innocently unaware of the White Witch’s plan to destroy both him and his siblings, Edmund is nonetheless motivated by a mixture of self-centeredness and wounded pride to carry out a heinous act of betrayal. Like the biblical Esau who foolishly sells his birthright for a bowl of soup to satisfy a momentary hunger, Edmund hands over what isn’t even his to offer, his very family members, in order to get a few more bites of Turkish delight.

Through various twists and turns in the plot, the White Witch is only able to retain her hold on Edmund, whom she eventually decides to kill even without his siblings. But at this point, Aslan, the great Lion who is the historic and rightful ruler over Narnia, arrives on the scene and acts to rescue Edmund from her clutches. Secretly arranging an exchange with the Witch, Aslan offers his own life to save Edmund’s. The Witch accepts, and during a gruesome nighttime festival of evil creatures, she plunges a dagger into Aslan, ending his life while preserving Edmund’s.

This whole thread within the narrative is a masterful analogy of what happens to each of us because of the death of Jesus in our place. The shape of Edmund’s story, I would guess, is what most of us have in mind when we refer to “the gospel” or the “the gospel message.” A popular shorthand form is to say that Jesus died for our sins so that we could go to heaven when we die.

Yet I want to ask what may seem an unnecessary follow up question: Is that *all* there is to the gospel? Is that *truly* an adequate summary of what the Bible means when it speaks of the gospel?

In fact, Jesus himself is one of the earliest figures in the pages of the New Testament to mention the word gospel, or good news. So let's look at his first mention of this term as it appears in what is arguably the earliest narrative about Jesus' ministry. Mark the evangelist begins his story of Jesus this way:

**The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.**

**As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" 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."**

**And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.**

**Now after John was arrested, 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." (Mark 1:1-15)**

Good news, which is just another way to translate the word often translated as gospel, is the overall theme of this opening scene. But what is its content? What did Jesus, and what did Mark later writing about Jesus, mean when they speak of the gospel, or the good news?

Two aspects of this opening section of Mark give us plenty of clues to go by. Working backwards in the narrative, but forwards in history, let's start with what Jesus himself says: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Now already two things are quite clear about what Jesus has in mind. First, he is speaking of a message, or news, that is *good*. And second, he is speaking of *God's kingdom* as the content of that message.

Note even with just this much to go on that the focus is on *God*. Specifically, Jesus' message is *good news about the arrival of God as king*.

David McCullough begins his celebrated book *1776* with the arrival of King George III of England at the Palace of Westminster to address parliament about the war in America. "An estimated 60,000

people had turned out,” he writes. “They lined the whole route through St. James’s Park. At Westminster people were packed solid, many having stood since morning, hoping for a glimpse of the King... So great was the crush that latecomers had difficulty seeing much of anything.”

The arrival of kings and famous people has often been like that. Think, for example, of the crowds that gathered in downtown Indianapolis to welcome the Colts home after their Superbowl victory, or the crowds that fill concert venues to await the appearance of a popular rock group.

Jesus brought news of such an appearance, but *of God* as king. So when we think of the gospel, that’s what ought to be uppermost in our minds.

But Mark also tells us something that can add to our whole sense of what is going on in God’s arrival as king. He says this is what the prophet Isaiah long ago was getting ready for when he said, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

Isaiah was speaking to Israel in exile in Babylon, hundreds of miles across the desert from their homeland. And he was telling them that, though they felt that Yahweh, their God, no longer cared about them, or even that he could no longer really do anything to help them, in fact God was just on the verge of returning as king to set wrongs to right and bring them back home (see **Isaiah 40:27-31**).

In words just following the ones Mark quotes, Isaiah says, “**Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.**” (**Isaiah 40:5**) The picture is of Israel returning from exile with Yahweh leading them as king (see **Isaiah 44:6**), restoring his dominion over them and over all the so-called gods of the peoples and indeed over all the nations of the earth. Just a few chapters later in Isaiah, we hear that this return is in fact called ‘gospel’, or ‘good news’. “How beautiful upon the mountains,” Isaiah says, “**are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’**” (**Isaiah 52:7**)

So what happens in fulfillment of this cry, this call to prepare for Yahweh’s return as king? Astonishingly, Mark shows us, *Jesus* appears, announcing the gospel of God and calling Israel to change because God’s reign as king is at hand. The clear implication is that preparing for *Yahweh* to return as king over Israel and the nations is somehow equivalent to preparing for the ministry and message of *Jesus*. Jesus, as has been said, is at once both the messenger and the message. He announces the coming of God as king and at the same time he actualizes and embodies the coming of God as king.

The gospel, then, according to Jesus, as well as Mark, is *the good news of God’s arriving kingship*. Long before, the psalmist could say, “**Make a joyful noise before the King, Yahweh... let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of Yahweh, for he is coming to judge the earth.**” (**Psalm 98:6, 8-9**) Jesus tells the crowds that’s happening with his arrival.

Now in the ancient world, when a king arrived on the scene to establish his reign, it signaled much more than merely his own power to rule. It was supposed to mean well being for the people and the land over which he ruled. In fact, kingship was often coupled with creation, so that to rule as king was to create a space in which both human and nonhuman flourishing could occur. We can see this even in the biblical creation story in Genesis, where God as king brings about an ordered

environment where all could interrelate harmoniously—plant, animal, and human life. And just as kings typically set up statues or images of themselves within the territory they ruled, so Genesis depicts God setting human beings as his image upon the earth, to symbolize and actualize his rule, his dominion, over the earth, and, importantly as we shall see, to subdue the earth as ultimately under God's authority.

With that in mind, let's return for a moment to the story of Edmund in Lewis's Narnia Chronicles. We noted that the story of Edmund's rescue through Aslan's sacrificial death is an analogy to what we often call the gospel, which is that Jesus died to save us from our sins so that we would have eternal life.

Now I suggested that the story of Edmund, important as it is within Lewis's work, is really only a subplot within a much larger story. The bigger picture Lewis was painting has to do with Aslan's return to Narnia as its rightful king and his restoration of Narnia to a condition of life and flourishing. Aslan is, as it were, the creator-king who defeats the White Witch, thus undoing the perpetual winter and stone statuary she had wrongfully brought about so that life and warmth could again flourish in place of death and deep freeze. Aslan redeems Narnia from evil and death, and one critically important aspect of this restoration is the forgiveness of sins through the redemption story involving Edmund, who of course represents all of us.

What Lewis does in his stories of Narnia, is, I want to suggest, very much like what the Bible does in its large scale story of God and his creation. In both, the aspect of salvation known as the forgiveness of sins is crucially important, very much at the heart of what Aslan in Narnia and Jesus in the Bible bring about. Yet that story of forgiveness, though we may often forget this, is framed by and only makes sense within the even larger story of creation's king arriving on the scene to set wrongs to right throughout the whole of creation.

While the forgiveness of our sins and our personal eternal well being is one *result* of the gospel of God's arrival as king, it is not what our Lord in the first instance calls the gospel.

So what happens when we make Edmund's story simply "the gospel" without remainder, without the larger context of God's coming kingship? In our environment of western individualism and consumerism particularly, some initially very subtle, but ultimately very crippling distortions set in. I'll mention just three:

- *When we make the gospel primarily about our salvation rather than primarily about the reign of God, we make the gospel primarily about us rather than centrally about God.* The gospel becomes about what people can decide for or against rather than about who God is and what God is doing. This often yields evangelistic methods that try to get people to make a decision for Jesus, instead of proclamation about God's reign in and through Jesus that largely leaves the question of response up to God and his Spirit's work in the hearts and minds of those who hear it. Peter's very first evangelistic sermon in **Acts 2:14-36** is a model of the latter.
- *When we make the gospel primarily about our salvation rather than primarily about the reign of God, we often reduce the scope of the gospel to life after death rather than life now.* How we think and act often becomes functionally irrelevant or a poorly connected afterthought, leaving "real life" issues to be decided by the best that human reason has to offer instead of being shaped by God. Especially among Protestants, who resist talking about

what we do for fear of being called legalistic, this is an acute problem. As one person has noted, we have mistaken effort for earning. But our efforts in our real lives here and now are very clearly and fully addressed by the gospel of God's kingdom coming upon earth as it is in heaven.

- *And when we make the gospel primarily about our salvation rather than primarily about the reign of God, we typically reduce it to being only about individuals rather than also about God's entire creation.* This last tendency is the one most prevalent in American evangelicalism. And we end up cooperating with secularism in sidelining Christianity by limiting it to the realm of personal faith issues and making it functionally irrelevant to modern or postmodern life.

These three tendencies are not hard and fast either-or choices. The gospel always involves our salvation, but it's also much bigger than that. And when we limit the gospel just to "me and my salvation," we distort and reduce the biblical good news. And that creates confusion in the church and ultimately shortchanges the world.

In a recent book called *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: Immigration, Islam, and the West*, Christopher Caldwell offers a picture of the immigration of many Muslims to Europe over the past sixty years. In an appreciative review, Fouad Ajami of Johns Hopkins University notes a central aspect of Caldwell's portrait of immigration. The immigrants moved to Europe because of Europe's benefits to them and their families, but many did not adopt the convictions and values of their new location. Instead, he notes, they enjoy Europe's perks while giving their deep allegiance to a different culture and way of life.

Now this is not the time to evaluate the relative merits of Caldwell's book. But let me just point out a lesson we could learn for our faith. It is possible for people who accept Jesus as Savior to do so in order to benefit from the perk of eternal life, all the while giving our deepest allegiance not to the kingdom of God but to the values and core beliefs of our culture. We appreciate having our sins forgiven and receiving the assurance of eternal life, but parts of us remain loyal to the norms of our families and our cultures, even ones that conflict with the reign of God.

That happens for many American Christians around the consumerist beliefs and values that motivate us, and the views and habits of money, wealth, and success that go along with them. We perhaps most miss the voice of Jesus where money, wealth, success, and popularity are concerned. Our preoccupation with what other people think of us based on what we own and how we appear often shapes our thoughts and choices more than Jesus does.

It also happens in relation to our sense of unassailable personal freedom. As belated children of the Enlightenment, we have drunk deeply at the well of the concept of freedom as freedom *from authority*. This is of course hostile to the biblical understanding of freedom as freedom *from the wrong kinds of authority* through *submission to the right authority*, the authority of God.

One result of enlarging our understanding of the gospel is to realize its call to submit ourselves wholly to God's kingship, his authority, and not any other that conflicts with it. Writing to the church in Corinth, Paul identifies such submission to God as the very purpose of Jesus' ministry. **"For [Jesus] must reign," Paul says, "until he has put all his enemies under his feet... When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all."** (1 Corinthians 15:25-28) We can

hear an echo here of God at the beginning of creation putting the earth under his subjection through the mediating rule of the human beings he made in his image.

So it matters that we develop a more full-orbed, biblically robust definition of the gospel as *the good news about God coming as king to restore and rule his creation in and through Jesus*.

It's important to let that understanding shape our imagination so that we don't inadvertently aid the secularizing process that reduces the gospel to a small, out of the way, publicly irrelevant matter of personal beliefs. Rather, the gospel of God's kingdom is stout, all-encompassing, and so revolutionary that, according to Scripture, it's reason enough for the whole world to **“break forth into joyous song.” (Psalm 98:4)** Attention to the gospel as Jesus and his earliest followers taught it can generate an invigorating vision for the church and offer a vital and hopeful message that is deeply relevant to the world.

Long ago the apostle Paul spoke in the public square in Athens using language drawn from Israel's kingship psalms. He wasn't trying to threaten the Athenians when he said God had appointed a man through whom he will judge the world in righteousness. He was appealing to their deep longing for the world to be set to rights (see **Acts 17**). Luke even summarizes Paul's very public ministry and message as **“proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.” (Acts 28:31)**

Paul's point was that God will bring everything and everyone in creation under his wise and overarching rule. This of course rules out any meaningful division between sacred and secular, popular as that belief is in the western world. This is not to argue for a theocracy or support the notion of a “Christian America” as those are commonly understood, because the good news of God's arrival as king is defined instead by the ministry of Jesus. God's kingship is arriving in an unexpected way, largely still hidden or veiled, actively resisted and even rejected by large parts of humanity and always still resisted at certain points even in the lives of the people now becoming part of God's ambassadorial community.

Where we speak of evangelization, or sharing the gospel, therefore, we are to envision a form of communicating the good news of God's arrival as king and its implications for the whole public world. This means that we will not easily present a message reduced just to individual salvation.

The public nature of the gospel also means something about its messengers. The reign of God is arriving precisely in and through those who become its subjects, just as Isaiah announced that the return of God as king over creation would be seen only as the dispirited Israelite exiles stood up and started on the long trek back home. They were to embody the message, just as the church is meant to embody the message of Jesus. In an important sense, our life in the world is meant to be a demonstration of God's reign that captures the imagination and allegiance of all people.

So what is the gospel, the message Paul considered worth imprisonments and beatings, painful journeys, and confrontations with the authorities? What is the gospel, the message that the psalms and the prophets announced, that Mark the evangelist and the other New Testament authors wrote about, that above all Jesus proclaimed and bore in his own life? The gospel is *the good news about God coming as king to restore and rule his creation in and through his own beloved Son, Jesus Christ*. There's simply no other news that compares with it. So let's embrace, live by, and share that good news with every last ounce of energy God gives us.