

**Sermon** February 4, 2024

*Woe to Me If I Do Not Proclaim the Gospel*

[Isaiah 40:21-31; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39]

Pastor Dan Peterson

Grace to you, and peace, from God the Creator, and from Jesus, who is the Christ, Amen.

As I said, at the beginning of the service, today's message is titled "Woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel," which is a line from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians that was our second reading for today.

I don't know about you, but there is so much in our readings today that capture my attention. Notice for example, the poetry of Isaiah. Take a look if you will, at verses 22 to 23. In our first reading, there, Isaiah writes, "It is He who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers,; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain and spreads them like a tent to live in, who brings princes to naught and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

Now in the margin here, I wrote "Wow." Wow. Poetry, which appears throughout the Hebrew Bible, is often lost to us today. Instead, we use the Bible to proof-text to show other people how they are wrong. What we're missing in the process is the beauty of Scripture; and Isaiah captures that well here.

You might also consider the next verse, verse 24, where Isaiah says, "Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth." – So, he's talking about rulers of the world, – "when He blows upon them" – namely God – "and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble."

Wow. That is powerful, beautiful writing. Verse 24 here illustrates the disparity or contrast between God, the Eternal, and human beings, who "come up like a flower and wither," as Job 14 says, "whose lives flee like a shadow." – All of us, who do not last. One of the things that I find really problematic is when people reduce the Bible to a book of science. They miss the book of salvation, the book that contains poetry, and the message of grace.

You might also consider Mark 1, our Gospel reading for today. It, too, captured my attention, like last week. Here, Jesus is a wonder-worker who casts out demons. Verses 32 to 34. reveal that "That evening," Mark writes, "at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him."

There is so much happening here. On the one hand, these aren't simply magic tricks on the part of Jesus. They are signs of God's impending salvation. They are symbols of the emerging kingdom of God that Jesus brings and announces.

There's also something interesting here in the last verse that I read, about how "the demons were not permitted to speak." This is part of what's called the Messianic secret. It's there in Mark and we have it also in Matthew. Why does Jesus constantly heal people, only to tell them not to say who he is, or to tell them to keep the story

quiet? While there are a couple of answers to this, one is quite practical, and that is, perhaps Jesus was employing a strategy, right? After all, he already had the whole town gathered at the door; the less people know about him, the more he is able to proceed with his ministry.

But I think there's something else going on here. I think from a literary perspective, the so-called "Messianic secret," the secret that Jesus implies whenever he tells people to be quiet about a miracle, is evident in the overarching narrative of Mark, such that you begin with mystery; by chapter eight, Jesus heals a blind man who at first can only see stick figures, and then after a second attempt can see visibly and clearly – that, too, is a symbolic reference to the growing clarity of revelation that is occurring in this text.

When you get to the crucifixion and resurrection, you have a *decisive* revelation of who God is in Christ and what God is doing; how God is suffering with humanity; how God is making accessible the path to God. And then in the resurrection, you have this great moment, where the women who are at the empty tomb are told to "go back to Galilee to find Jesus." Well, where is Galilee? Sixteen chapters earlier! Go back to chapter one, and immerse yourself once more in the mystery! So, this language of Messianic secret may very well be a literary device the author of Mark is using to gradually make people aware of who Jesus was.

Yet there's something more that captured my attention in today's readings, something beyond poetry and possession. And that something is one that all our readings share in common. We hear it explicitly in Paul, and by implication in Isaiah and the Gospel. And that is this: the good news. They all contain the gospel.

Now, often you hear me talk about "the gospel," and there are a couple of reasons for that. Number one, the Lutheran tradition, following Martin Luther, emphasizes it. Martin Luther said, in fact, that the message of "justification by grace," that is the message of acceptance, the message of reconciliation between God and world in Jesus Christ, is the chief article, or chief belief, by which the church stands or falls. So, this tradition from the beginning has emphasized that good news. In fact, Luther equates "the gospel" with "the Word of God." In 1521, he writes in his famous essay, "The Freedom of a Christian:"

"You may ask: What then is the Word of God, and how shall it be used, since there are so many words of God?"

"I answer: The Apostle explains this in Romans 1. The word of God is the gospel of God concerning" – drumroll please – "His Son, who was made flesh, suffered, rose from the dead, and was glorified through the Spirit that sanctifies" (or makes holy). To preach Christ means to feed the soul," (and by soul here, I'm not talking about some ghostly substance that exists within you. I'm talking about your innermost being, that speaks to your heart) "makes it righteous, sets you free, and saves you, provided you trust the teaching."

So you can see here how for Luther, the gospel as the Word of God is *different* than about, I don't know, 80 million Christians in this country, who instead of seeing the

Word of God as the gospel proclamation *rooted* in Scripture, simply say that Scripture itself is the infallible word of God. This tradition, from the beginning, teaches something differently.

The gospel, you might say, is “God’s Word within the words” – that message, that living proclamation, that grasps us, and transforms us, that preaches our acceptance by God; that sets us free.

So, that’s the first reason I talk a lot about the gospel. As Pat Keefer, one of Cantor Kyle’s seminary professors put it, Lutherans “have a nose for the gospel” and there’s a good reason; we’ve been practicing it for 500 years.

The second reason I often talk about gospel, which, as I mentioned earlier, I see in all three of our readings today, is that it’s fundamental to my call. In a document called “On the use of the means of grace” by the ELCA, we read

“The preaching of the God of the crucified and risen Christ is rooted in the readings of the Scriptures and the assemblies for worship. Called and ordained ministers bear responsibility for the preached word – which is the gospel – in the Church gathered for public worship... In fidelity to the readings appointed for the day, the preacher proclaims our need of God’s grace, and freely offers that grace, equipping the community for Mission and Service in daily life.”

That’s a long way of saying that my call to you as a congregation is to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments. That’s what a friend of mine calls “paying the rent” from a Lutheran perspective, the idea being that it is fundamental to my call.

It might be helpful accordingly if we reflect on the meaning of the gospel, given its importance in the Lutheran tradition, as well as given its basis as my call to Queen Anne Lutheran Church. What is the gospel? How do we define it? And how might we apply the gospel to our daily lives, some 2000 years after the New Testament was written?

Now in sermons past, I’ve defined the gospel broadly as “the good news.” Or as Luther puts it, “the glad tidings, the message of God’s mercy and grace, that one should shout from the rooftops.” This is the message that set Luther free. It’s the message that potentially can set *any* of us free from the gnawing expectations of culture, or from the Law, as it appears in the Old and New Testaments – both of which show us our lack, our inadequacy, our need for grace; they reveal to us our brokenness our turned-inwardness, our disposition to live only for ourselves.

The gospel reverses all of that and says, “God has cleaned you. God has set you free. Now do these things, not because you’re required to do them, but out of gratitude for what God has already, in Christ, done for you.”

Turns out, however, that things are a little more complicated. Indeed, according to Mark Allen Powell of the Harper Collins Bible Dictionary, the word “gospel” came to have at least four connotations in the New Testament and the early church. Now over

the next two and a half hours, I'm going to describe in detail each of those four meanings of the gospel – not to worry, let's try maybe 10 more minutes!

What's fascinating, as I said a few moments ago, is that our readings for today not only contain the gospel, but they contain *all four meanings* of the gospel. So, let's briefly have a look.

The first way of understanding the gospel is to define it as “the content of Jesus' preaching.” The content of Jesus' preaching. Mark 1:14 captures this perfectly. “Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the good news of God.” Here, we're talking, as I said, about the message of Jesus, which we find referred to in verses 38 to 39 of our Gospel reading for today, let's take a look:

“Jesus answered, ‘Let us go on to the neighboring towns so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came out to do.’ And he went throughout Galilee proclaiming the message in their synagogues, and casting out their demons.”

So his purpose, his call, his vocation, was to proclaim the good news, not only in word but in deed. The healing stories of the New Testament are symbols of God's impending salvation; are symbols of God's emerging kingdom, which is defined by wholeness, restoration, and reintegration.

Mark Allen Powell links it to our first reading as well. He writes, “Here the use of “gospel” is similar to the one in Isaiah: Jesus is announcing what God is about to do, and the message of impending salvation is called “gospel” or “good news.”

Check out for a moment Isaiah 40: 27 to 29, our first reading. There the author writes,

<sup>27</sup>Why do you say, O Jacob,  
and speak, O Israel,  
"My way is hidden from the LORD,  
and my right is disregarded by my God"?  
<sup>28</sup>Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
The LORD is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.  
He does not faint or grow weary;  
his understanding is unsearchable.

Now listen to this. Here's the gospel:

*He gives power to the faint.* “He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.” Power to the faint, strengthens the powerless. That is the promise, the message, that Jesus preached as well, that God's kingdom will not only provide healing and restoration, but also strength and empowerment.

This text incidentally, was written just before the Jews were about to be freed by the Babylonians. The author of Isaiah talks repeatedly about what God is about to do, given the fact that their freedom is soon to become a reality.

The second meaning of the gospel is not the message **of** Jesus. It's the message **about** Jesus, one where the messenger became the message itself. And we see evidence for this in the writings of Paul. Here, preaching the gospel focuses on the death and resurrection of Christ, and on the benefits faith in Christ has for believers. So note that: The good news here is not about the *impending* kingdom of God, the preaching of Jesus. It's about Jesus *himself* insofar as he overcame sin and death through the crucifixion and resurrection. Take a look at your second reading now. First Corinthians 9: 22B - 23.

"I have become all things to all people," Paul writes, "that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the Gospel, so that I may share in its blessings."

The gospel. Again, the message, for Paul, *about* Jesus, how Jesus conquered sin and death through his own death and resurrection. This is the cornerstone of Paul's preaching. How Jesus makes life in the world to come a possibility for human beings. We read it in Romans 8:38 -39, which says that nothing, not even death, can separate the love of God in Christ Jesus.

For those of us who are bereaved, for those of us who mourn, that is the message to which we cling, that love is ultimately stronger than death.

Now, the first meaning of the message of the gospel is that it's the message *of* Jesus. The second meaning, which I just described, is the message *about* Jesus, specifically focusing on his death and resurrection.

You can probably guess the third. Here, the gospel is a *combination* of the two, the message of Jesus as well as the message about Jesus: it refers to preaching that includes what Jesus had said was the good news about God, *and* what Christians had said was the good news about Jesus. So, it's both a message and man.

We have evidence for this in the book of Acts:10, which was written in the latter part of the first century. So you can see a development here: the preaching of Jesus, the preaching about Jesus, the preaching of and about Jesus in the emerging late first Century church. Listen closely:

"Then Peter began to speak to them. 'You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ.'"

So there's the message *of* Jesus.

<sup>37</sup>That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: <sup>38</sup>how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power;

So there we have a message *about* Jesus. You can see then how the two are combined: how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. <sup>39</sup>We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; <sup>40</sup>but God raised him on the third day.

So notice the crux of the gospel here, the death and resurrection of Christ.

<sup>42</sup>He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. <sup>43</sup>All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

So, in order to make sense of who Jesus was, first century Christians looked back to the Hebrew Bible and saw how it conformed with their experience of God in Christ. That's the basis for talk like what we just heard.

So there you have it... "gospel": the message *of* Jesus, message *about* Jesus and then the message *of and about*, in a single passage.

And the last meaning of the gospel is more straightforward than the previous three. Here the Gospel simply refers to "the books that offer in written form what had been previously proclaimed orally" and this, I say, has been the source of confusion for undergraduates in religious studies and theology for centuries. And that is they have trouble distinguishing between "the Gospels" capital-G, from the gospel, which I just defined. But this is the last meaning.

So, we have the preaching of Jesus, preaching about Jesus, the preaching of and about Jesus, and finally, the books that contain this preaching, as evident in our Gospel reading for today.

It's pretty interesting. But how does it apply to our lives now? How does the preaching of Jesus speak to us? How does his message based upon the book of Isaiah according to Luke 4:18, reach our ears?

Listen closely:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," Jesus says, as the opening words of His ministry in the Gospel of Luke, quoting the book of Isaiah, "because He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. (message of Jesus; message of Isaiah.) He has sent me to proclaim the release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind; to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Now most scholars now believe that Jesus' public ministry occurred in a Jubilee Year, which in Jewish tradition is where the debts of those who owe are forgiven. So Jesus is talking about not only the good news spiritually, but the good news materially.

Here's my question to each of you who among us today needs to hear this promise. Who among us feel that we are captive? Whether it's to our digital devices, whether it's to drugs or alcohol, whether it's to obsession...how do we experience captivity? And how does this message that Jesus came to free us, that Jesus came to liberate us, speak to you today?

Who, more broadly, needs to hear this good news when it comes to the material promises of Christ? Who are the captives in our world? I think, for example, of hostages still being held in Palestine. I think of people across the terrain of Central and South America, who are held captive by gangs and drug lords. These are the people who need to hear the political implications of the gospel, as Martin Luther King once

put it, that the gospel is not only meant to address our spiritual captivity, but also quite literally to address the material captivity of the poor, of the enslaved, and of the oppressed.

You can probably imagine many other examples. My point is this. In both cases, the preaching of Jesus has relevance. It speaks to our present situation. In my own experience, I've noticed over the last couple of years that my attention span is starting to diminish, and I am absolutely positive it is because I am almost addicted to my cell phone. I think about how often I check it each day. And then I think back to life before 2015 when I didn't have a smartphone, where I was freer, whereas now I'm more bound.

This is what I love about the Christian faith. It gives me a vantage point from which to say "That is not what God wants for our lives." We are called to freedom, as Paul says in Galatians 5, not to be captive to our devices, not to be captive to our other addictions, but to be set free to be liberated by a loving and gracious God.

What about the message concerning Jesus Himself, a message about Jesus, how he suffered death, but then overcame it in the resurrection? Well, I think here of Romans 8:38-39, (which I believe was Jimmy Porter's confirmation verse). This is where, as I mentioned earlier, the Apostle Paul says that "nothing, not even death, can separate us" from what I would call the invincible love of God in Christ Jesus – and I saw it for myself. I saw, in the last encounter I had with my mother, where for a moment, she opened her eyes, recognize me, and smiled, and a tear came down at the same time. That's love *and* death. Love is as strong as death.

The writer of the Song of Songs says in the life of the world to come, however, love is stronger than death. Love promises reunion, love promises that the separation we experience as bereaved will be overcome. Love promises that this is not the end, that there is more in store for us in the beyond.

Here, Cantor Kyle has proved himself to be a pretty darn good Lutheran theologian as well. If you take a look at what he wrote about the music for today, in the back of your bulletin, you'll hear a concise, perfectly stated consolidation of the gospel. Listen closely. (Why do I keep saying that? How about just "Listen:")

We may never understand why we must endure physical or emotional suffering – And it's true. Even as a pastor and a theologian, I constantly find myself asking "Why?" in those contexts. So: "We may never understand why we must endure physical or emotional suffering, but then notice the parenthetical.

"(apart from understanding that we live in a fallen world in need of redemption)," So when my mother died, or when I attend to those who have experienced similar loss, my message is this. This is not what God wants for us. This is the result of a fallen world. This isn't part of some mysterious plan regarding had to draw one of our loved ones back to God as I have heard to my personal discussed many times in funeral homilies and eulogies.

“but in Christ we know...

—and this is incidentally why Paul calls death the enemy of God. It’s expressive of our fallen condition.

“but in Christ we know that God is with us because the incarnate second Person of the Trinity has truly experienced human pain firsthand.”

So here the good news first is that God identifies with our suffering. God accompanies us as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. God is with us. Nothing can separate us from God in this regard. God identifies with the human condition, even to the point and through the point of death. This incidentally, runs against about 1500 years of classical Christian theology, which insisted that God cannot suffer because suffering it said was an imperfection not at all. Here we have gone as the fellow sufferer or who understands more than that we hold fast to the promise.

Kyle continues that “More than that, we hold fast to the promise that Christ Jesus overcame suffering—and even death itself—for us through his resurrection.”

So, this is called *Christus victor*, or “Christ, the victorious champion.” Lutherans are not bound to the older Anselmian view that says “Jesus died on the cross to pay for our sins.” Instead, as expressed especially in our humanity, we see the death and resurrection as “God in Christ identifying and then overcoming our condition of our mortality and sin.” Indeed, the Lutheran tradition teaches that in Christ there is a “happy exchange,” such that through His death and resurrection, we receive what belongs to God, through Christ. And God, in turn receives what belongs to us. So there’s an exchange in mortality, for mortality, new life for the end of life, holiness in place of sin. God takes all of those things into Godself, and gives to us what belongs to God. That, to me, is perhaps the best expression of the gospel: reference to Christ Jesus, who not only identifies with us and pain, suffering and death, but also overcomes it as the first fruits of God’s resurrection or new creation in the resurrection itself.

So. It’s helpful, I think, to know the different meanings of the gospel. We heard them today. The preaching *of* Jesus, preaching *about* Jesus, the preaching *of and about* Jesus, and then the book that *contains* the preaching of and about Jesus. I think it’s helpful because it’s not only clarifying; and I think it’s helpful not only because it assists us to see and find and recover the gospel in the Old Testament as well as the New; but I also think that it’s important so we can see better how in various ways, the good news of God and Christ *applies to us*.

One of my mentors used to say the gospel is good news for people in bad situations, for people who feel captive, or for people who directly experience captivity.

May God’s word, that is the message of hope and liberation, grace, peace and reconciliation, speak to each of us this morning and inspire us, and may it give us peace.

Amen.