

SUNDAY
DECEMBER 10
9 AM | 11 AM

Smooth AND Straight



Sunday, December 10, 2023
“Smooth and Straight”
Charlie Berthoud | Mark 1:1-8

In our Bible, we have four different accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, the four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. I’m grateful for those four accounts, with their varied perspectives, especially in this season of Advent, as we move toward Christmas.

Each of the four gospels emphasizes something different about the birth of Jesus and the beginning of his ministry:

- Matthew has Joseph and Mary and an angel, and then the magi, the wise ones
- Luke has the song of Mary, the shepherds, the song of the angels about peace
- John has the poetic imagery about light shining in the darkness and the word becoming flesh to dwell among us full of grace and truth

And then there’s Mark.... No shepherds, no Mary or Joseph, no angels.

Mark is the shortest of the four gospels and it seems like Mark was kind of a “let’s get to the point” kind of person. So, in rather undramatic fashion, Mark begins with an opening statement about good news, some prophetic scripture, and the words of John the Baptist.

Matthew	Joseph & Mary, angel, magi
Mark	Good news
Luke	Magnificat, shepherds & angels
John	Light shines, word becomes flesh



This is our assigned lectionary reading for today—the first eight verses of Mark.

Listen for God's word:

¹⁻³ The good news of Jesus Christ—the Message!—begins here, following to the letter the scroll of the prophet Isaiah.

Watch closely: I'm sending my preacher ahead of you;
He'll make the road smooth for you.
Thunder in the desert!
Prepare for God's arrival!
Make the road smooth and straight!

⁴⁻⁶ John the Baptizer appeared in the wild, preaching a baptism of life-change that leads to forgiveness of sins. People thronged to him from Judea and Jerusalem and, as they confessed their sins, were baptized by him in the Jordan River into a changed life. John wore a camel-hair habit, tied at the waist with a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild field honey.

⁷⁻⁸ As he preached he said, "The real action comes next: The star in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will change your life. I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. His baptism—a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit—will change you from the inside out."

Thanks be to God for the words of Scripture.

Above all else, the story of Jesus is a story of good news. So while we could criticize Mark for a lack of dramatic flair—couldn't you at least write about some angels or

shepherds?—Mark gets it right by acknowledging the **good news** in the first sentence of the gospel.

We read *The Message* today

The good news of Jesus Christ—the Message!—begins here.

In the New Revised Standard Version, which follows the Greek more literally, the first sentence is not even a sentence, more of a statement, maybe a headline:

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

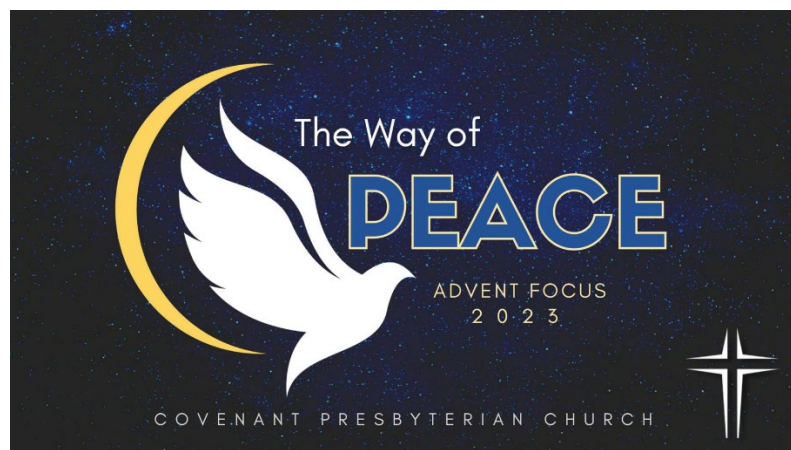
Yes, the other gospels may have more drama or poetic language, but Mark is clear that the arrival of Jesus is good news.

As we read the gospel, as we gather in church, as we seek to live our lives as Christians, we need to remember that fundamentally we are people of Good News.

It began 2000 years ago and continues today.

This good news is that God has come into the world in the person of Jesus to lead us in a new direction, a new way, a new journey, a new way—toward the Kingdom of God.

And a big part of that new direction, this new way, this new kingdom is **peace**.



During this Advent season our focus is peace, and our inspiration comes from Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. Zechariah's words are in Luke:

Because of the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,

to guide our feet into the way of peace.

So, with that theme, over these four Sundays of Advent our focus is on peace

- Peace on earth
- Peace in our country and in our community
- Peace with our family and friends
- Peace in ourselves

The Bible tells us about peace repeatedly:

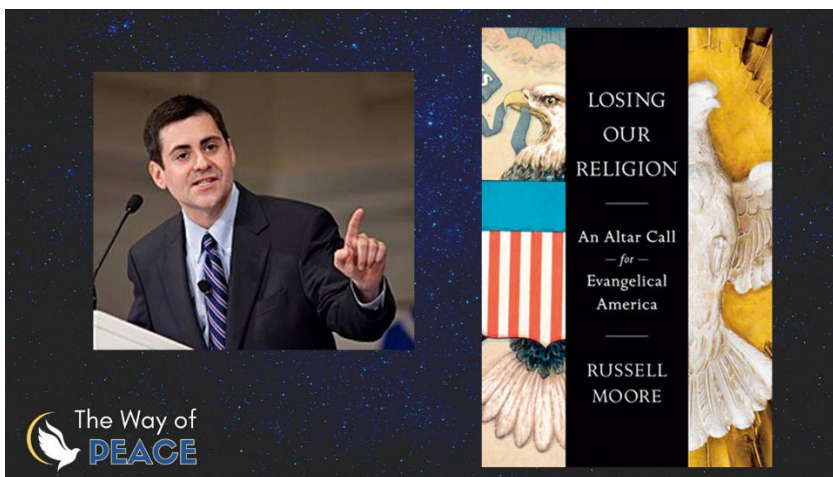
- When Jesus was born, the angels sang a song of peace
- Jesus said, “peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you.”
- Jesus commended the peacemakers, calling them children of God
- Paul calls God’s people to live at peace and be ministers of reconciliation

Last week we focused on peace on earth, thinking about Israel and Guatemala. This week, we think about our country and our community.

Sadly, here in the USA, we are not at peace. We are a people divided and those divisions are tearing at the fabric of our country and threatening our democracy. In the past week many analysts share fears of dictatorship.

Sadly, much of the division is coming from people who claim to be Christians.

Russell Moore was a high-level leader in the Southern Baptist Convention for many years. The surge of ignorance and anger and hatred in recent years led him to step away from the SBC, but he remains a committed Christian.



He recently published a book called *Losing Our Religion: An Altar Call for Evangelical America*, which I have not read, but I've heard a lot about it. Moore notes in a recent interview that

"Multiple pastors tell me essentially the same story about quoting the Sermon on the Mount parenthetically in their preaching - turn the other cheek - to have someone come up after and to say, where did you get those liberal talking points?"

Moore continues:

"And what was alarming to me is that in most of these scenarios, when the pastor would say, 'I'm literally quoting Jesus Christ,' the response would not be, 'I apologize.' The response would be, 'Yes, but that doesn't work anymore. That's weak.'"

<https://www.npr.org/2023/08/25/1195910822/in-losing-our-religion-russell-moore-tackles-a-crisis-in-evangelical-christianity>

So, we have a sizeable part of the Christians in our country not willing to engage with teachings of Jesus. Instead of loving neighbors, their focus is racial and or national superiority. Too many have become white nationalists, blending a twisted theology with racism, wanting to demonize anyone not like them.

To me this is an invitation for the rest of us to do the hard work of peacemaking, of seeking that smooth and straight path toward God's love and justice and righteousness.

At a recent lunch meeting of local clergy, we got talking about the violence directed toward both Jews and Muslims in our community, in the wake of the new war in Israel.

After some discussion, we sent flowers and a note to a local Jewish congregation.

The rabbi responded with a note of gratitude, and he went on to say:

If I may suggest an addition to your message of support and love, I might also encourage your congregants to especially reach out to other marginalized communities in the area, as the Neo Nazis don't discriminate between Jew, LGBTQ individual, African American, Latinx, Sikh, or other minority group that joyfully makes up the quilt of American life. We each need to be there for one another, and the need will only increase with the blunt and obscene coarsening

of our society. The struggle to come will be fierce, and I appreciate your joining in.

We do have a wonderful quilt in our country, but the quilt is in danger of coming apart.

In the face of all these challenges in our country and our society, we could understandably point our fingers at “them”, at all “those people” who seem to be causing the problems.

But let’s look at John the Baptist.

While the gospels all have different angles on the birth of Jesus, they all have the presence of John the Baptist. In varying ways, we read about how he appears from the wilderness, calling the people to repent and prepare—to get ready for the journey on path of peace which his father Zechariah spoke about.

It’s vital to notice that John the Baptist doesn’t start by denouncing the Romans or other corrupt forces in the society. Instead, John starts with the people who are following him, the people who presumably have some sense of faith, some sense of right and wrong—probably the same sort of people who would show up at church on the second Sunday of Advent.

So rather than railing about the bad people “out there”, John tells these insiders, these faithful people to repent, to turn around, to change their minds, to find the path of the kingdom, the path of peace.

John baptized people into a changed life, starting them on a new journey. Jesus continued, calling people to turn around and find new purpose, new meaning and to follow him on the path toward the peaceful kingdom of God.

This makes me think of the wonderful song: Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.

We need peace in ourselves, so that we can be peacemakers in the world.

I’m grateful for the way our congregation is trying to find peace in ourselves, and stay on the path of peace, and to be people of good news.

I want to highlight three things that we’re doing, and that we need to keep doing as peacemakers.



CONNECT events. With recognition that people are weary and isolated and lonely, we've been organizing spiritual strolls, lunch meetings, board game gatherings and more. We need to spend time with each other and fun and in the course of that we to about different life experiences and perspectives. Bringing people together lays the foundation for journeying together.



Matthew 25 initiative

Building congregational vitality

Dismantling structural racism

Eradicating systemic poverty

Matthew 25. We are a Matthew 25 congregation. This is an initiative of the Presbyterian Church USA, with focus on

Enhancing congregational vitality
Dismantling structural racism
Eradicating systemic poverty



Passing the Peace. This is a vital part of every Sunday, when we remember the good news of God's love which comes to us as the peace of Jesus Christ. Then with handshakes, hugs, fist bumps, high fives, bows, and waves, we look each other in the eye and say the peace of Christ be with you.

For the last two Sundays, we have been holding up signs to share Christ's peace with our at home congregation. We hope this also helps us remember that the peace is meant to be shared beyond this building.

Friends the good news of the gospel is that God has come to be with us to give us peace and to show us the smooth and straight path to share this peace with the world, with our neighbors, with everyone. Amen.

Together, may we find the path of peace.