

In the Beginning
Mark 1:1-20

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Many years ago, before I became a pastor, there was a style of preaching called “Three Points and a Poem”. As you can guess, each sermon had three points and ended with a poem. They were clear, direct, easy to remember.

That style of preaching fell out of favor some years ago. But today, maybe because it’s the end of the year, I’m feeling old fashioned. This morning, I want to preach a three-points and a poem sermon.

My first point is we can trust Jesus. We can trust Jesus. Mark is very clear about this. Jesus is not some man of mystery who pops up out of nowhere and starts preaching. Mark gives us the background so we can trust Jesus.

Mark shows us Jesus was predicted in the Old Testament. The prophet Isaiah prophesied about one who would prepare the way for Jesus. A prophet from the wilderness urging the people to create a straight path into their hearts for Jesus to follow.

John the Baptist is the prophet Isaiah is talking about. His home is the wilderness. He wears camel hair instead of wool. His diet is a wilderness diet of locusts and wild honey, not the more usual diet of bread and vegetables.

John does what he’s supposed to do. He urges the people to turn from their crooked paths of sin and to make their lives a straight highway to God. He does this because someone is coming who is more powerful than he; someone who will transform our lives. John is pointing us to Jesus.

Finally, when the time is right, Jesus appears. He is baptized in water by John, but he also receives the Holy Spirit. The one who will baptize in Spirit is himself baptized with the Holy Spirit. And then God speaks, "With you I am well pleased."

God's voice is the seal of approval we've been waiting for. John's prophecy was important, but God's pronouncement is as high as you can get. God is pleased with Jesus, God's beloved Son. We can trust Jesus.

'But wait, there's more.' Jesus doesn't start preaching the instant he's baptized. First, he is tested. Jesus, are you sure this is for you? Is this what you really, really want to do? Mark doesn't give us any details, but he lets us know the testing was successful. Jesus is the real deal.

Jesus can be trusted. That's my first point. Jesus can be trusted. We can trust Jesus. He's not some stranger we know nothing about. He's been predicted by the prophets. He was foretold by John. Jesus was baptized in water and received the Holy Spirit. God was well pleased. And then, even though God had given God's approval, Jesus still submitted to a time of testing. And he passed. Friends, we can trust Jesus.

My second point is Jesus' message, which is simple but profound. In Jesus, the Kingdom of God has come near. In Jesus, the Kingdom of God is at hand. It's right here. Reach out and grab it and don't let go.

When we embrace Jesus, when we live his life of self-giving love, when we heal the sick and feed the hungry, when we protect the powerless and forgive our enemies, when we are generous beyond reason, we are living the Kingdom of God life. We are living in the Kingdom of God.

The good news of Jesus is we don't have to wait to live in the Kingdom of God. We don't have to pass a test to live in the Kingdom of God. We don't need to see a dove or hear a voice from heaven to live in the Kingdom of God. And we certainly don't need

to die to live in the Kingdom of God. We can do it now, right here, this minute. If we will repent and turn from our crooked ways. If we will embrace Jesus as our Lord and Savior. If we will live Jesus' life of self-giving love, we will be in the Kingdom of God.

Friends – we can trust Jesus. We can trust his message. And that's my second point, Jesus' message. In Jesus, the Kingdom of God has come near. All we need to do is live it. This is my second point. In Jesus, the Kingdom of God has come near. All we need to do is live it.

My third point is Jesus is inviting us to do just that. He is calling us be his disciples, to be students of Kingdom living, and we need to respond.

Let's stop a moment and look at these first disciples. We know they were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee, a large, inland lake in the northern part of the country. These were professional fishermen. It wasn't their hobby. It was their living.

Archeologists have uncovered a boat from the Sea of Galilee that dates to about the time of Jesus. It's almost 30ft long and about 8ft wide, big enough to hold about 15 people. Or, big enough to hold a lot of fish.

The fish were taxed. The local rulers had tax stations dotted around the shores of the lake. You couldn't just go fishing, haul in your catch, and sell it. You had to go through the taxman before you could go to market.

These fishermen, then, were small-business owners. They had their own boats, their own crew, their own gear. They paid taxes and supported their families through their efforts. These were not guys who would get up and walk away from it all just because some itinerant teacher asked them to. Clearly, there was something about Jesus that got them up and going. They left their old lives behind and immediately followed Jesus. Notice that. No lollygagging around. Jesus calls, they get up and go.

Some of us have powerful conversion experiences. We meet Jesus in-person, face-to-face, and he changes us on the spot.

Others get to know Jesus over time. We grow up with Jesus the same way we grow up with our parents – when did you realize you love your parents? There probably wasn't a blinding moment of revelation but over time you slowly realized you love your parents, and Jesus.

Others meet Jesus as adults. We get to know him the way you might get to know a friend or a lover. At some point, we realize Jesus is the one for us and we take the plunge.

However, we come to know Jesus, at some point we have to make a decision. We are either with him or not. We are on his side or not. Once we get to know Jesus, we have to decide – are we a disciple or not? The realization may come in an instant, it may come slowly over many years. But at some point, we all have to decide – are we Jesus' followers or not? Are we disciples or not? Are we learning to live the Kingdom of God life, or not?

What are you, my friend? Are you Jesus' follower? Are you a disciple, a learner? Are you learning how to live in the Kingdom of God?

By your words and your actions, are you letting the world know we can trust Jesus? We can trust Jesus when he says the Kingdom of God is close at hand? As we boldly walk into this new year, are we boldly walking in the footsteps of Jesus, living the Kingdom of God life?

There you have it. Three points: we can trust Jesus; his message is sure. The Kingdom of God is at hand, close enough to reach out and touch. And Jesus is calling us to live it. Jesus is calling us to choose to be his disciples. Jesus is calling us to live in the Kingdom of God.

For my poem, I'd like to use a bit of Hebrew Poetry. I'm sure many of you know it. It's not meant to be realistic. No one takes it

literally. Rather, it's aspirational. It's poetic vision. It's a vision of the kind of life we're striving for. As disciples who trust Jesus and embrace his good news, this is the kind of world we are trying to shape.

Isaiah 11:6-9

*⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.*

*⁷The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.*

*⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.*

*⁹They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.*

May we set our face towards that wonderful land and walk there with Jesus. Amen.