

Sermon for Zion, January 14, 2018 – Rev. Douglas Rollwage

Hymns: 425 – We praise you; All In All; 496 – Thy Word; 499 – The old, old story

Scripture: Matthew 4:23-25; Mark 1:1; 1:16-18; Luke 1:1-4; John 21:24-25.

Sermon Title: Knowing Jesus Better – Reading the Gospels Together

(Matthew 4:23-25) Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.

(Mark 1:1; 1:16-18) The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God; As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” At once they left their nets and followed him.

(Luke 1:1-4) Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

(John 21:24-25) This is the disciple who testifies of these things, and wrote these things; and we know that his testimony is true. And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

I’m having trouble getting started on my New Year’s resolutions. Not in making them, but in carrying them out. I can’t say I’ve given up on them, because I haven’t actually begun them yet. For one thing, the Christmas treats have not yet run out. For another thing... Well, there seems always to be some reason or other for putting things off just another day... just another week...

So it takes more than a little gall for me to stand up here in front of you, and suggest another resolution you may want to add to your list. But since we’re already halfway through January, rather than a resolution, let’s call this a goal. And the goal is, that together, in 2018, we might get to know Jesus a little better. Maybe a lot better.

And the best way to do that, the best place to get first-hand knowledge about Jesus is in the Gospels, the four books known as Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. If you want to come to know Jesus, and what he said and did, and why that should matter to you, there is no better place to go. Their purpose is to tell you just what it was Jesus did, said, and promised, so that you can come to know him too.

So as I challenged the congregation in Mermaid this summer, and as I challenge you today, together, over the next few months, let's read the Gospels. Because if you are not reading the Gospels, over and over again, you are cheating yourself of the greatest opportunity that life has to offer: the chance to meet Jesus, to come to know Jesus, to come to believe Jesus, *and in the act of believing, have real and eternal life in the way he personally revealed it...*

To give you a taste of just what's there, let's take a quick look this morning at these four small but world-changing books, whose very name, Gospel, means "Good News."

One of the first and often most surprising things about the four Gospels is how very different they are, how the Good News can be told in so many ways, by such different people. The little stories are told differently. Some, like the Feeding of the Five Thousand, are in all four. Some are left out of one or two, like the stories surrounding Jesus' birth. Some are only in the three "synoptic," or "see things the same way" Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, like the calming of the storm. Others, like the "water into wine" story, or the "You must be born again" conversation with Nicodemus, are found only in the Gospel of John. Some seem to quote the Old Testament at length, while others ignore it altogether. Sometimes Jesus seems long-winded, other times brusque and dismissive. The pictures which the Gospels paint of Jesus, different though they are, help give us a multi-perspective view of the one who changed all history. What is certain of all four Gospels is that they are all, above everything else, Good News.

For Matthew, the main thing he wanted to say was that although Jesus was born in the sticks under mysterious circumstances and never had two cents to rub together and was ignored by just about everybody who mattered and was strung up in the end between two crooks, he was the same Messiah, the same Christ, the same Anointed of the Lord, the Descendant of King David, that for centuries Israel had been waiting for with tears in its eyes. Everything Matthew wrote was aimed at convincing people that this was so and to accept it was to find eternal life.

Jesus was the Messiah, Matthew said, and he was also a second Moses, giving his Sermon on the Mount just as Moses had brought the tablets down Mount Sinai, but taking

the fierce old stone and making pure gold of it. *“You have heard that it was said ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’ but I say to you, do not resist one who is evil. You have heard that it was said, ‘you shall love your neighbours and hate your enemies,’ but I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”* As Matthew saw it, Jesus came not to drown the old law out, as his opponents supposed, but to make it sing new, like an angel. To make it better than new. To make it Good News.

In the Gospel of Mark the Good News is written down by a man in a hurry, out of breath, with no time to lose because the people he was writing it for didn't have much time on their hands either. Mark was Peter's personal secretary, and Peter had relocated to Rome to share the Gospel in the very center of the Empire's power. The authorities were out for Christian blood, and the Christians were on the run. At any moment of day or night a knock might come on the door, and from there to getting thrown to the lions – or, in Peter's case, crucified - took no time at all. So Mark is in a hurry, and leaves a lot out, and it's amazing how much. There's no family tree for Jesus as there is in Matthew or Luke. There's nothing about how he was born, no angel explaining it ahead of time, no wise men, no Herod, no star. There's nothing about his childhood. There's precious little about his run-ins with the Pharisees, which Matthew enjoys so much, no Sermon on the Mount, only four parables. His teaching in general is brushed passed hurriedly; except for one long speech, just a word here, a word there.

Instead, “Immediately” is one of Mark's favourite words, and he uses it far more than the others even begin to. “Immediately he called them,” “Immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue.” Immediately the girl got up and walked, the father cried, the cock crowed. As the great Christian writer Frederick Buechner observed, “Jesus himself races by, scattering miracles like rice at a wedding.” Mark is alive with miracles, especially healing ones, and Jesus rushes from one to another. Like Peter, Jesus had no time to lose either. If you have a short attention span, Mark is the Gospel for you.

But even in the midst of his great haste, Mark stops and looks at Jesus and sees him with Peter's eyes; sees him better than any of the others do. When Jesus naps in a boat, it's in the stern he does it, with a pillow under his head. The others don't say that. But Peter remembers it. And the grass was green when Jesus fed the five thousand on hardly enough to feed five, not dry grass, crackling and brown. Jesus got up “a great while before day” to go and pray by himself, not at nine, not after a hot breakfast, and he was sitting “opposite the treasury” when he saw the old lady drop her two cents in the collection box. Only Peter remembers how the desperate father said, “I believe, please help my unbelief,” and how Jesus found it belief enough to heal his sick boy by. Mark wrote that down, as Peter told the story to him, tears in his old fisherman's eyes.

The other thing about Peter? Like me, he was always hungry, always complaining about food. If you run into a verse which says, “It was so crowded, there was no place to eat,” or, “There were so many people coming and going, there was no chance to eat,” or, “Jesus taught and healed until well past the time to eat,” you’re hearing Peter’s voice in the Gospel of Mark; Peter, the Apostle with one foot walking on water, the other firmly in his mouth, and a stomach worried about the next meal. You can say they make no difference, such details as these the others skip, or you can say they make all the difference. The difference, perhaps, between any old news, and Good News.

For Luke the Good News is good not just for the cream, but for the curdled, for everybody. Smelling of cheap gin, the prodigal son comes home bleary-eyed and dead-broke, but his father is so glad to see him anyway that he almost dies for joy. Jesus tells Simon the blue-blooded Pharisee that the prostitute’s sins are forgiven her because she knows she needs forgiveness, and doesn’t spend her time thinking of how much better she is than other folks are. The thief Jesus talked to on the cross may have been a purse-snatcher and B&E man from way back but when he asked Jesus to remember him when he made it to where he was going, Jesus told him they’d be together in Paradise that very day.

Different as they all are in some ways, it’s not hard to see that these stories in Luke all make the same general point, that everybody’s welcome in the Kingdom of God, that Jesus had such a soft spot in his heart for the folks other people considered the scum of the earth – prostitutes, tax collectors, beggars, lepers, Samaritans, Romans - that you would have almost thought Jesus considered them the salt of the earth. Which is Good News for us all.

Good News which, in the Gospel of John, takes 21 chapters. Epic poems, healings, miracles, proclamations, tragedies, triumphs. Surely, when we read this Gospel, it seems as though we hear the whole story of Jesus, that we walk through the whole history of grace. Yet John ends his book by reminding us that we haven’t heard it all, that there are many other things which Jesus did. In fact, the writer of the fourth gospel imagines that if every one of these things were to be written, the world could not contain all the books.

And he says this because he had in mind more than just a clinical recording of historical fact, more than just dictionary entries about events in the life of Christ. For as this careful collection of stories and themes demonstrates, the emphasis is more on how Christ affects other people, than about Christ himself. John, the youngest of the Apostles and the one who was to live the longest, wrote his Gospel to fill in the blanks, to add in what the others had left out.

To do so, John writes of reactions. His favourite way of doing this was through the way people spoke with Jesus. They would ask him a question. Jesus would answer. His answer would provoke a dumb response. Then Jesus would explain himself at length. Which is precisely how I think an interview between Jesus and me would go: Question, answer, dumb response, patient explanation. Like Nicodemus: “How do I get to heaven, Jesus?” Good question. The answer: “You must be born again.” Now the dumb response: “You mean, climb back up into my mother?” And then Jesus’ patient explanation, containing the words familiar to all (John 3:16): “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Wonderful stuff, and all based upon reactions, no matter how wonderful, no matter how dumb.

Or the reaction of the steward at the wedding feast, amazed that the best wine was saved to the last; or of the woman at the well who is told all she ever did; or of the man paralysed for 38 years, suddenly healed; or of Lazarus staggering out of the tomb into the light of the morning sun; or of the Pharisees who know such things just don’t happen in this day and age. The list goes on, and what John may mean when he is speaking of the countless books it would take to tell the stories is, “what are the stories of all the people Jesus touched, of all who felt the power and the love of the one sent from heaven?”

Some of the stories might be shorter than others. Some might say, like the man healed of a blindness that had darkened his life since birth, “all I know is, once I was blind, and now I see.” Others, like Thomas, confronted with the living Christ, could perhaps only stammer, “My Lord, and my God.” Others, like John, like Paul, could write eloquent letters testifying to the love of Christ moving throughout his people, others like Luke could tell of the birth of this most special infant and, out of his dying and his resurrection, the birth of his church, of which we are all an important part. And, some of the stories might be the stories of some who are here today. One of the stories, about how God has brought meaning to a life, might be yours.

All four Gospels get their power, their purpose, their life, from the presence of Jesus within them. In the same way, for us right here, right now, it is the presence of Jesus among us that gives us our power, our purpose, our life. It is the love of God in Christ that enables us to love, completely and unselfishly. It is the Spirit of God within us that helps us to rise above ourselves and accomplish things, however large or however small, of lasting value. It is the faith we have in Christ that enables us to face all of life, the ups and downs of life, even the end of life, with courage, hope, and determination. If we are without purpose, it is the call of God that can give us reason to carry on with direction and towards fulfilment. Even if we are faced with tragedy, even if we are crushed by grief, it

is the resurrection of Jesus that assures us we shall be together again, and enables us to live in joy. Just like for the men and women whose stories we find in the Gospels, men and women who encountered Jesus. Men and women like you and me.

I suspect that for us, as for the people of the Gospels, if we were to take out all the bits of our lives where God was there for us, with us, working through us, working through others on our behalf, whether we realised it or not; well, I suspect that without those bits, our lives might not mean too much, to ourselves or to others, at all.

I suspect, too, that if God is not playing too big a part in our own lives, it's because we haven't provided God with much opportunity, and that we are missing out on a great deal. I suspect that if we were to open the door a bit wider, if we were to open our hearts and our minds to what God could really do in us and through us, if we give God a chance, a good chance; well, I suspect the sky wouldn't even be the limit. No, the sky wouldn't even be the limit. Just take a look at what Matthew, Mark, Luke or John had to say, and find out for yourself.

Take a look at what Jesus has done. Take a look at what God has done for others through him. Read through a Gospel or two, or three, or four, and find out more. If you start this afternoon with just a chapter a day – that's my challenge to you today, to daily read a chapter of a Gospel (and a Gospel chapter is generally a page or less – five minutes) you'll be through Matthew, Mark and Luke, and well into John by Easter. And you will know Jesus – his words, his actions, his voice – like never before.

Incidentally, if you start with Matthew chapter 1, you'll wonder why you bothered. Matthew starts with a long, boring list of names. Or does he? Here's a clue: look for the women's names. As you'll hear in an upcoming sermon, they're the least boring women you're ever likely to meet. Anyway, by the end of the chapter, you'll be right there with Joseph, worrying about what to do with a pregnant fiancé, and he knows he's not the dad.

Journey with me. Read the Gospels, a chapter a day. Meet Jesus all over again. Think about how that might make a difference in your life. Give it a chance. For if you don't, I'm afraid you are cheating yourself of the greatest opportunity that life has to offer, the chance to meet Jesus, to come to know Jesus, to come to believe Jesus, *and in the act of believing, have real and eternal life in the way he personally revealed it...*

It is satisfaction guaranteed, or your life cheerfully refunded. This is Good News!
Amen.