



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

January 7, 2018

"A Divine Disruption" - Hope Restored Sermon Series

The Rev. Steve Peich

Today we begin a new sermon series entitled, "Hope Restored." We will be talking about this theme as we journey through the Gospel of Mark.

Some may see hope as something sweet, sentimental, or perhaps a little religious, but it is an extremely powerful force and we have known the powerful force of hope for millennia.

There is a Greek myth that I'm sure all of you have heard of: Pandora's Box. To those not actually familiar to the story line, it kind of goes like this. There was a time when there were only men in the world. They had not yet known lust and sorrow. One of these men, Prometheus, went against the wishes of the great god, Zeus. As a result Zeus got the other lesser gods and goddesses to create a woman. Her name was Pandora.

Pandora was given a special box, which she was directed by Zeus to never open. Well, she was sent to earth where she met and married a mortal man.

As time went on she became curious about the box and finally opened it. And suddenly out poured sickness and suffering, hatred, jealousy and greed, and all the other cruel things that hardened the heart and brought on old age.

But here is what you may not know about the story. Only one thing stayed in that box that never came out—and that was hope. It did not come out because hope would make humans powerful again, so powerful it could even threaten the power of the gods.

That's how powerful hope is portrayed even in non-Christian literature. And when you think about it, this is *why* and this is *what* broke into the world with the coming of Jesus Christ; the hope to change *everything*. And that is the thing about hope. What has to come with it is the idea of change. If you want to live in hope in your life, then you need to be open to change.

Now here is a trigger warning as we begin our study of Mark. Sometimes the change that God brings to individuals, churches, and societies feels very disruptive. In fact, the very opening lines are as disruptive as they are reassuring. Let us now dive deep into a "Divine Disruption."

Verse 1, at first blush, seems to be this innocuous start to a nice little story: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." It sounds a little like "Once upon a time..."

But the meaning is anything but innocuous and this is anything

but a nice little story. To understand the great significance of this opening line we need to interpret what we read here in its historical and cultural context.

First of all, you may be surprised to hear that the word Gospel, which is also translated as Good News, at the time of Mark's writing, was not a *religious* word. And I can't stress enough the importance of that fact.

To the Romans, by the time Mark wrote his book, Gospel represented "good news" in the sense of announcing some significant event, which made a change in world history. For example, it was used in reference to the ascension of a Caesar to the throne. That was called "good news." Or when a great battle was won, this was considered "good news."

In fact, if we use Caesar Augustus as an example, the man who was Caesar at the time of Christ's birth, you may see what I mean and appreciate the stunning beginning of Mark's Gospel.

Augustus was an adopted son of Julius Caesar. His original name was Octavian, later changed to Augustus, meaning "Revered One." He was seen as the one who possessed divine characteristics.

**H**e reasserted his father Julius Caesar to be a god, thus making Augustus a son of a god. And he was praised for having inaugurated a worldwide peace. (aka Pax Romana).

His birthday was called the beginning of Good News, or Gospel, for the world. It was particularly in celebration of his birthday the emperor was hailed “Savior” and “Lord.”

Putting all this together we have an Augustus who is considered divine, the Lord, Son of a god, and Savior of the world. He is the focus of Good News and the bringer of world peace. In light of the holiday we just had (Christmas), does this ring a bell?

Now when Mark writes declaring another gospel (around the early 60’s AD) Augustus’ great grandson Nero was emperor. And Nero also claimed to be divine. In fact, since the time of Augustus emperor worship became more and more a test of loyalty to the regime.

So it is up against, and in direct contrast to, *that kind of gospel, that kind of King and that kind of Divine Sonship* in the Roman narrative that Mark writes what he did in the way he did it. You see, Mark is claiming Jesus, the crucified Jewish Messiah, is the True Son of God and King of the world—and Caesar is *not*.

My point is, contextually speaking, Mark’s words in verse 1 are not the language of religion, but the language of revolution, of sedition. It’s an effort to tell *another* story of the contemporary world. What Mark and other Gospel writers are *not* saying is, “Jesus came to give us a new religious experience that you may want to try on.”

Now for the Jewish people Gospel was also about something far bigger than just religious language and religious experiences. In Isaiah we see it connected to all kinds of issues and it is connected to the Christ and His mission. In Isaiah you see the gospel declaration is about God reigning and bringing peace to the world (cf. Isaiah 52:7)

For the Jews, the Christ or Messiah, was to be their great and mighty King who would set the world to rights—not just give them a better religion to follow, but to set the world to rights. And in these verses you see why they thought that.

In Isaiah 61, a section of scripture that Jesus used to describe His mission, it speaks of the Anointed One who was to bring Good News to the world. Listen to what that Gospel was all about. I should mention it was given to the Jews when they were in a hopeless period in their history, that is, captivity in Babylon.

It says in Isaiah 61:1-3: *The spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me; to bring good news to the oppressed,* (by the way, please do not read this as, “He has anointed me to proclaim a religious message to oppressed people.” But rather read it as, “I have come to proclaim a message that will *eradicate* oppression.” That’s the intent here.)

Let’s read on: *(He has anointed Me) to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; <sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, (this is a time socially and economically [not just “spiritually”] where debts are forgiven and slaves would be*

*freed) and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; <sup>3</sup> to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of His glory.’*

So we see that in the Jewish vein, the Gospel was about the radical in-breaking of God into the human condition in order to change it in *its entirety*. To change the person, the community, the society, to change all of it! Not just to change church. Or as theologian N.T. Wright puts it, “to put the world to rights.” Again, change and hope go hand in hand.

That’s what I think, at least in part, what the Gospel and what Jesus has *always* been about: the new and glorious recreation of life through Christ. The recreation of human worth and human flourishing. The recreation of human relationship and justice and spirituality. The recreation of a new world.

And this mission of recreation was a direct challenge to *all* of Roman and Jewish (and American) claims to social, spiritual, and political order, power, and peace. It was a challenge to the status quo of the way we do things and it needed to change.

And this is where John the Baptist comes in. Notice in the passages we read before (verses 4,6), John is preparing the way for the Lord.

He is calling for repentance, in other words, change—because we can’t have hope without change. And he does this in the wilderness.

It also remarks (verse 6) that he was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

What do you picture when you picture John the Baptist? I usually picture a guy with a permanently bad hair day. He sounds like he can look pretty wild.

But let me ask a question: What's the significance of all this? Why does Mark write all that? Is it just meaningless, curious, and incidental information for the reader? Or is something being communicated by all this?

Look, if you were going to start a renewal movement to bring people to God, why not do it in Jerusalem and at the Temple? Or at a Synagogue? His father was a country priest (which meant John was of the priestly line), so why didn't he follow in his steps and influence people as a priest?

Why prophecy, preach, and try to bring change from an obscure place like the far off desert of Palestine instead of from the places of influence, prestige, and socially acceptable places of power? Don't we tend to think that these are exactly the places to influence society?

What's being stated here by wilderness motif? The way I see it is John is calling us to come away from the status quo, away from the center, away from the dominant versions of reality and culture and live life with God from another place; to live from another perspective, from another value system and outlook on life than those who are running the status quo in Israel.

John is preaching in a time in Israel where God was now "controlled" by the religious,

political, and social elite—people who were corrupt as the day is long. The Lord, the God of the Universe, became a domesticated god—a god who expressed *their* value system, *their* faith, *their* rules, and *their* politics.

This is the temptation of every society, including our own. That is, the temptation to shape God according to our own cultural values, and rules, and politics. I'm reminded of Voltaire when he said, "In the beginning God created man in His own image. Ever since then man has decided to return the favor."

But it was an important thing to upset the status quo because in the center of the status quo, in the dominant narrative of that culture: Lepers were never to be touched, tax collectors were to be shunned, sinners were to be hated, prostitutes were to be shamed, and enemies were to be killed.

And John (and Jesus) were out there on the margins turning the dominant version of reality on its head, and it is deeply disruptive to the status quo.

You see, this is the problem of the Gospel for some folks. It never promises without threatening something. It never begins without ending something. It never builds up something without dismantling something else.

Again, hope cannot be restored unless the journey towards it includes the critique and dismantling of those things that make life hopeless. They knew that and that's what they sought to do out there on the margins.

Let's now peek into Luke 3 to see some of what John was actually preaching. Notice the

critique he gave to make life more hopeful.

**Luke 3. 7-14** - <sup>7</sup> John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"

<sup>8</sup> Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.

<sup>9</sup> The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

<sup>10</sup> "What should we do then?" the crowd asked.

<sup>11</sup> John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same."

<sup>12</sup> Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?"

<sup>13</sup> "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them.

<sup>14</sup> Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay." ...

<sup>18</sup> And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.

Notice how Luke labels John's preaching as Good News, as Gospel. Notice also where the meaning of the Gospel, the meaning of God's reign, is to show up.

It is to show up in the way we deal with our clothes, our food, our pay, our community, etc. This is very earthy, not so typically religious type stuff. Notice that John doesn't say, "Hey you sinners go pray more go to more synagogue services." They were already praying, or going to the Temple or the Synagogue and it wasn't doing anything. Instead, he says to repent and change the way you treat your neighbor.

I think he is pointing out the way of God, the Gospel, is to penetrate and pervade the very earthy and ordinary issues of our lives because when the gospel penetrates and pervades those things it will affect human flourishing.

Think about Isaiah 61 again. That section we read is so much about human flourishing. Remember what Jesus said in John 10:10 when He spoke about why He came. He said, "I came that you may have life and have it to the full." The Messiah is deeply committed that.

This is why repentance is so central to John and Jesus' message. In a nutshell, repentance is to rethink, realign, and rebuild *everything* on the basis of Jesus. It is to rethink, realign, and rebuild your making and spending of your money on the basis of Jesus; to rethink, realign, and rebuild your clothes closet on the basis of Jesus. To rethink, realign, and rebuild the purpose of your food pantry on the basis of Jesus, etc. You get the idea.

What may be going on in *your* life that you need to rethink, realign, and rebuild on the basis of Jesus?

One of the things that struck me this week as I meditated on John's message, is that what he

teaches here is so darn obvious! Think about it. John's words were not so ground breaking or foreign that people could not possibly understand them. You would think that with all the rules and rituals and teachings of the Priests and the Scribes and the Pharisees they would have gotten these basic things down already. This is obvious.

So why were these people not about such things already? Why weren't they already sharing their food or clothes with those who had none? Why weren't they already caring about the poor like they were connected to them? Why weren't they already not abusing their authority or ripping people off?

My point is, somewhere in their lives despite knowing the scriptures of God, despite knowing the promises of God, and going to the Temple and to the synagogue, etc., they somehow drifted from the heart, purposes, and will of God. And they drifted to a point where simply taking care of the poor and not abusing people or taking bribes is the now the radical stuff of prophetic preaching! Think how far you have to travel away from God's heart for such basic things to become the radical message of prophets.

I think this is one of the reasons why prophets and repentance are always necessary—because we (even we Christians) can slowly and imperceptibly drift from God's heart, purposes, and will. And this is no small thing because when we drift people are inevitably ignored. And when they are ignored it is an easy next step to demean and denigrate and marginalize people.

Often culture and its goals and values slowly pervade our

hearts and minds. We begin almost unconsciously to create a different faith. This combination and infusion of faith and cultural values can adversely affect even with the most committed of Christians.

While I lived in Thailand I went to lunch with a wealthy Christian friend of mine. Now if you have never been there, unlike American waiters who seat you, give you your menus and walk away so you have a few minutes to look things over, the waiters in many restaurants in Thailand seat you and then just stand there with pen and pad in hand waiting for you to order. And they will stand there a long time if necessary.

So while our waiter was standing there I started to feel a little anxious for the guy because the poor guy is waiting and waiting as we are chatting away catching up with each other. I mentioned to my wealthy Thai friend, "We'd better order because the young man is waiting." She laughed slightly in response. I said, "What's funny?"

She said, "I laugh because you worry about him. I don't even notice him."

You may be curious as to why that happens. Well, the Thai society is very hierarchical. In that society there are those you see and those you *don't need* to see. That's simply the way of the cultural status quo.

Now before you feel upset with my friend, let me assure you this woman worshipped God with all her heart and even endured a lot opposition being the first Christian in her family. However, her faith was infused at least a little bit with Thai society values.

**A**nd that slight infusion of Thai society with her faith created a certain level of “ungodly blindness” to the very people God wants us to pay attention to.

Now let’s contrast that with something that happened a couple of months ago. The Marriage Course leadership team and I met for dinner at a nearby restaurant. We had recently heard Chris Pan talk about praying for those who wait on us at restaurants, so we gave it a shot.

The waitress served our food and then we asked her what her name was and if there was anything we can pray for her as we give thanks for our meal. She seemed delightfully surprised and was happy to tell us her name and what she needed prayer for. It changed the whole dynamic of our interaction with her for the rest of the night.

No longer was she just our nameless server, located somewhere low on some kind of American social ladder, but she became our concern, our friend for a couple of hours, someone to respect and value and dignify with the love of Jesus. And its in little efforts like that we change how the world sees and values people, even waitresses.

This is why when you folks do Laundry Love, or go to minster to people in retirement communities, or help kids in Kalihi, or minister to the marginal in Africa or Cambodia and other places. It prophetically shouts to the people and to the surrounding society: “*These people matter!*” It shouts, “We Christians refuse to be numb, or cynical, or resigned, or hopeless about their lives.”

This is what I think needs to be a part of the purpose of today’s

church. That is, in part, telling *another story* of what is right, good, and true. Another story of human value and human flourishing. Another story about what really creates peace and wholeness in our world. Another story about economics, injustice, and power. Another story about God. Another story over against the dominant version, the world’s version, the American version of these very issues.

Some of you may sit and think that’s too big a goal for little ol’ me. I’m just a shy and quiet guy from Kaneohe. Well, then let me suggest you be a shy and quiet prophet.

Let me give you an example of a Christian who gently, but boldly, even disruptively, lived out a prophetic life and brought change to our culture. His name is John Woolman. Woolman was a New Jersey Quaker who lived in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He was a great forerunner in the movement to abolish slavery. From the time he was in his young 20’s he took, as people say, “quiet stands” against slavery.

In 1758 for example, a hundred years before the Civil War, he preached a sermon against slavery in a rural community near Philadelphia. He was then taken to the home of Thomas Woodward for dinner. When Woolman realized that the so-called “servants” at Thomas’ home were actually slaves, Woolman quietly slipped out of the house without saying a word.

But here’s the thing, the owner’s conscience was so troubled the next morning he vowed to liberate his slaves. That was *100 years before* the Emancipation Proclamation, because a man took a quiet stand

that God was very concerned about.

Woolman’s actions were disruptive, discomforting, and prophetic—and they were right on!

Now I must be honest when you speak against “Caesar’s version” of reality, don’t expect a parade.

When I used to go around speaking in government meetings on the issue human trafficking and critiquing the government’s poor job of doing much about it, I assure you I was not always well liked. I had city prosecutors yelling at me; FBI agents trying to undermine and interrupt me when I was saying at meetings. It was not always a picnic.

Sometimes presenting God’s version of humanity, presenting God’s Gospel, is very disruptive to people in power—and power will push back.

A couple of years ago the Catholic Church declared this man, Oscar Romero, a martyr of the Church. In the 1970’s Bishop Romero was a gentle and easy going guy who for a while, wined and dined with all the important people of El Salvador, e.g. generals, politicians, wealthy class, etc.

While he did all that, he effected very little change in a very oppressed society.

But through the persecution and death of one of his priest friends he was awakened to a new reality. He finally saw how the ways of the dominant political culture were really antagonistic to the ways of God’s kingdom, even though the people of that status quo went to church.

**B**ut the common people began to hear Bishop Romero's messages on the radio. In so doing they started finding strength and encouragement to stand up for what was godly and just. And the people of the status quo hated him for it. They tried to curb his preaching, but they could not silence him with truth because the truth was on his side out there on the margins.

Eventually one day while serving communion in his church, he was killed by gunfire by a government death squad.

But before he died he wrote these inspiring words: "A church that doesn't provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of God that doesn't get under anyone's skin, a word of God that doesn't touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed, what Gospel is that? Very nice, pious considerations that don't bother anyone, that's the way many would like preaching to be. Those preachers who avoid every thorny matter so as not to be harassed, so as not to have conflicts and difficulties, do not light up the world they live in."

And my friends know this today, you and I are called by God Himself to "Light up the world we live in" for the sake of The Gospel and for Jesus Christ the Son of God. What is God calling you to light up for *His* sake in 2018?

+ + + + + + + + +

*Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at [fpchawaii.org](http://fpchawaii.org) The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: [fpchkoolau@gmail.com](mailto:fpchkoolau@gmail.com)*