

New Resolve

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Mark 1:1-13

Sermons Series:
In Christ Together
for the World

“The object of a new year is not that we should have a new year. It is that we should have a new soul.”

Nearly half of us at this time of year make New Year’s resolutions. Four out of every five people who make such resolutions will eventually break them. One-third won’t even make it to the end of January. Most resolutions fail because our goals for the New Year are unspecific or unrealistic.

I’ve provided on the screen a list of last year’s top ten New Year’s resolutions. Losing weight always seems to be a perennial favorite, followed by getting a better job, quitting smoking, spending more time with loved ones, giving back to others and becoming fit. I know this last one to be true because every year at precisely this time a horde of new people show up at my fitness center.

I’d like to reflect on the seventh resolution on the list, that of working on spirituality and faith. What new resolve can we bring to following Christ this year? I’m reminded of something G. K. Chesterton said: “The object of a new year is not that we should have a new year. It is that we should have a new soul.”

I invite you to join us on a journey these next four months.

To take this journey, you’ll need to make worship a high priority and utilize the study guide that accompanies this series. Consider joining a small group or becoming part of a men’s group studying Mark’s gospel. This journey has the potential to change your life. If this sounds like an outrageous claim, Scripture attests time and again that God changes people who become fully followers of Jesus.

When Mark wrote his gospel, he introduced a whole new genre of literature to people. Mark’s eyewitness account is not written in precise chronological order nor can it be properly called a biography. There’s nothing about Jesus’ appearance and next to nothing about the first 30 years of his life. The word gospel originates from the old English word “godspel,” meaning glad tidings or good story. The gospel is a really good story about Jesus.

The gospels have been called “passion narratives with extended introductions” (Martin Köhler). Mark’s gospel is a tersely written, fast-paced narrative for the first eight chapters. Our Scripture lesson is written this way. Mark compresses the story of John

Who is Jesus?

the Baptist, Jesus' baptism and temptation in the wilderness into 15 verses. Yet, when it comes to Jesus' passion or suffering which results in his death, everything slows to a crawl. It's as if the story is being told in slow motion so we can contemplate the magnitude of these momentous events.

Mark is the earliest of the four gospels, written sometime between 60-70 AD. Mark is never identified by name in his gospel. Since Mark is the first gospel written, maybe everybody already knows he wrote it, so there's no need to reveal his identity. Or perhaps Mark doesn't reveal his identity because he doesn't believe it to be appropriate to his writing task. After all, it's not Mark's gospel he is reporting, it's the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Mark's full name is John Mark. He isn't one of the original 12 disciples. We're told in Acts the early followers of Jesus meet in his mother's home (Acts 12:12), so presumably Mark becomes a Christ-follower there. Papias, an early church father, writes in AD 130 that Mark serves as "Peter's interpreter." This would explain why much of Mark's gospel is told through Peter's eyes. Mark's gospel is in actuality Peter's gospel.

We will concern ourselves with three essential elements of Jesus' life over the next four months: that of Jesus' identity, mission and call. Let me frame it using three questions: Who is

Jesus? Why did he come? What is our response? Who is Jesus addresses Jesus' identity. Why did Jesus come references his mission. What is our response brings it down to the level of Jesus' call to take up our cross and follow him.

Who is Jesus? Mark wastes no time in answering this question. He opens his gospel with the words, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). Jesus is a common first-century name. Its equivalent in Hebrew is Yeshua or, alternatively, Joshua, meaning "God saves."

The designation "Christ" is not a reference to Jesus' last name. Christos is a title meaning Messiah or anointed one. Jesus is the Christ or Messiah, God's anointed one.

Son of God is a phrase utilized at several strategic points in Mark's gospel. It's not intended to convey that Jesus is God's biological son. Rather, Jesus stands in unique relationship to God. He exists in the closest possible relationship to God, like that of a father-son relationship. When Jesus is baptized, he hears a voice from heaven: "You are my beloved son; in you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11).

Let me add a parenthetical note to parents and family members. Memorize these words and pronounce them over your children: "You are my beloved son (or daughter); in you I am well pleased."

Why did Jesus come?

What would it be like for children to hear such unconditional words of love and acceptance?

Who is Jesus? He is the Christ, the Messiah, God's anointed one. He is the Son of God.

Why did Jesus come? Mark recounts the story of "John the baptizer who appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4).

Sin is a central human problem. While we often associate this word with specific misbehaviors, actually it refers to something far more basic and foundational. Sin originates in the heart as an attitude or disposition.

We've been telling God's Big Story in this church. We've utilized three words to tell this story: creation, fall and redemption. Creation—we've been created to live in right relationship with God and each other. Fall—we fall out of relationship with God and each other through something called sin. Sin is any thought, word or deed that results in separation from God and each other. Redemption—we have been redeemed or reconciled back into relationship with God and each other through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Archbishop of Paris told a story in a sermon about three young men who were seeking a good time in Paris. After a night of partying, they

were sitting on the steps of the Cathedral of Notre Dame, recounting the previous night's exploits when a strange idea hit them. They dared each other to enter the cathedral and make up a confession to the priest. One young man accepted the dare and entered the confessional. He confessed his sins to the priest in long, lurid detail, loud enough so his friends outside could hear him.

When the priest figured out what was happening, he interrupted, "Young man, I've heard enough. You needn't confess any longer. If you want to be forgiven, you need only to do one thing. Go stand before the crucifix, look into the face of Christ and say, "All this you did for me and I don't give a damn."

The young man left the confessional, bragging that he had successfully completed the dare. His friends insisted the dare wasn't complete until he did what the priest requested. So the young man went to the chapel and looked into the face of Christ. "All this you did for me and I...I...I don't...I don't give a..." At that point in the story, the archbishop leaned over the pulpit and said, "I know this story to be true, because 30 years ago I was that young man."

Why did Jesus come? He came to remedy our separation from God caused by sin. He came to reconcile us back to God.

What is our response?

What is our response? This is really the so what question in this sermon. So what difference does Jesus make in my life? What is your response to this good story? The story is written in such a way that invites our response. This is not only a story long ago and far away. It's a story intended to elicit a response. It begs the question, so what am I going to do about it.

Jesus speaks for the first time in Mark's gospel in verse 15: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15).

There are two words for time used in the Bible. One word, *chronos*, is where we derive our word chronological. *Chronos* is linear, clock time. The other word for time, *kairos*, is a decisive moment in time. *Kairos* is the word Jesus employs in this instance. Jesus' coming is a *kairos* moment. Repent and believe the good story.

Repent in the Greek is *metanoia*, where the word metamorphosis originates. Repent literally means to turn around. Unfortunately, repentance leaves a bad taste in many people's mouths. It conjures up fire and brimstone preachers and images of self-flagellation. Let's recapture its original meaning. Jesus says the kingdom of God has come near, but we can't see it if we're looking in the wrong direction. We need to turn around.

In the first century, people didn't use maps or street signs to get around. It's easy to get lost walking through the desert. Repentance is recognizing that I'm going the wrong way. I need to turn around and go in a new direction.

What is our response? Repent and believe. If you can't find God, maybe you're headed in the wrong direction. Turn around. Make an about-face, a 180 degree change of course. Don't keep barreling down the highway if you're going the wrong way. Hang a U-ey!

Let me return to this matter of making New Year's resolutions. We won't be successful if we make change a matter of the will. Repentance does for the soul what tilling the land does for growing crops. Before farmers sow seed, they prepare the soil. They eliminate rocks and pull the stumps. Repentance is the act of inviting God to walk the acreage of our hearts. There is this rock of greed I can't budge. There is the mountain of guilt I can't move. Things grow better if the soil of the heart is cleared so the seed can fall in and take root.

***If you can't find God,
maybe you're headed in
the wrong direction.***

