

8-18-24

411

Mark 1: 1 -28

Well, as most of you know, I've just returned from a two - week trip in northern Thailand. Sydney and I had a chance to visit a missionary couple who have been serving there for nearly three decades. Jullie and Lily are still with them and will be coming home this week.

I met the Foerstes when I was studying at seminary in the mid-nineties – they weren't even a couple yet. Later I was Dave's best man at their wedding in 2005, and I've followed their careers ever since, but this was the first time I was able to join them in the mission field. They visited our church a few years ago and shared their ministry with us then.

Anyway, it was a real treat to see them in their element, seeing their home, their church, the city where they work, and the projects they've been involved in and invested in over many years.

We especially appreciated seeing the university where Liz teaches, a high school Dave designed – he is an architect who studied at U of M – and the overall culture of Thailand at least in the northern part of the country.

We visited an umbrella factory,

a silk factory where the silkworms were busy munching on mulberry leaves and weaving cocoons.

A wood carving factory where the workers and artists were carving extremely intricate designs on furniture and wall hangings.

We visited an elementary school where teachers were using curriculum that Liz developed to help the students learn to write their language, a language that has been spoken for centuries, but only recently developed its own alphabet.

We even had the chance to ride an elephant which made me feel sorry for the elephant since my attempt at getting on the gentle giant was neither athletic nor graceful, but quite comical to say the least – I hope the elephant's ears will be okay!

But putting all the touristy stuff aside for a moment, I came to experience once more what it is like to be on the outside looking in, or more accurately, being on the outside hearing, but not understanding the conversations that were all around me.

In short, I was in a culture where I couldn't speak the language. I was completely reliant on Liz or Dave to communicate and translate for me.

And this made me think about how grateful I am for the effort and pain God went through to get his message through to me and you – to speak my language and to get my attention and to make sure I understood what He is offering me through his Son.

In other words, God communicated with me the 411 concerning the salvation of my soul. And for this, I'm eternally thankful.

For those who are not up on this contemporary phrase, the 411, it simply means, "the relevant information, the truth." And I can't think of anything more important than the truth these days about any topic one is trying to understand, but especially when the topic is the salvation of our souls.

Because I think we can all agree that we are living in some pretty extraordinary times when we are constantly bombarded with messages – messages that, to be perfectly honest, do more harm to us than good a lot of the time.

They are on the TV, billboards, radio, and of course all our electronic devices, and for the most part they're there to get something out of us, typically our money, but other things too, like our allegiance or our loyalty.

They are there to frankly handicap us and ultimately destroy us. To prevent us and keep us from our true life in Christ and to make us serve false gods which in most cases ends up being our feeble selves.

These false messengers and messages want to sway our opinion, make us feel dissatisfied about our life, and create a feeling of inadequacy within us so that we'll believe that our plight cannot be remedied until we purchase whatever it is they're selling.

In some strange way, I almost wish I couldn't understand the English language, my native tongue. Then perhaps, I would be better able to ignore all the lies I'm fed daily.

So, I'm very grateful for the Bible, because it gives us a straightforward pitch about reality and what we must do in order to stay in reality especially when so many messages today want us to escape reality and find this better place they promise, which according to many these days is the virtual world, the fantasy world – not the world God intended us to live in. The Bible, God's Word gives us the 411 on the truth we need.

And I know this world in which we live can be a tough place to live, and when we've been traumatized by certain things, whether it's betrayal, tragedy, rejection, catastrophe, heartache, our temptation is to escape to the so-called greener pastures.

But God gives to us an alternative route. A way that is true and real and leads to peace and contentment and joy – not just temporary fulfillment of our fleshly desires.

But this alternative route is not the easy way, because it feels like it when we take it, we go against the natural order of things.

Let's face it, we all desire safety and comfort and purpose and meaning and significance and love and health – and all these things that seem to make life tolerable. But the problem is that the world tells us to take one path to achieve these goals and God says there's another way.

But it's difficult to take God's way because we have to use faith and trust Him, believing that not only does he have the power to deliver on his promises, but also that He wants to do this and will do this for us – in his time, not necessarily ours.

And if we don't believe him, if we don't have that faith, then we, by default, will opt for the world's way of achieving these desires. And we will get them, at least on a temporary basis, but in doing so, we're going to have to sacrifice that which cannot afford to sacrifice, meaning our very souls.

Is this worth it?

To sacrifice that which is eternal for some worldly temporary, fleeting gain?

I know all of you will say absolutely not, and yet I also know that when we leave here this morning, the siren song of this world will be stronger than ever, tugging on our hearts, tempting us to follow it, rather than God.

What piece of advice can I give you this morning that will help you take the right fork in the road?

What can I say that will make you choose God instead of the false gods that are there ready to steal your joy and purpose and life?

The answer: nothing.

I've got nothing to say except to say ... listen to God and His Son Jesus because He speaks our language and if we listen and trust in Him, He will lead you and me to his green pastures and his calm waters.

You see, God has been speaking our language from the very beginning, reaching out to us ever since mankind was created. He did this because He created us and in doing so, made us in his own image.

It says this way back in Genesis 1, and the One who has made us obviously knows how to communicate with us. He knows our heart and our mind and soul, because he designed us and loves us.

One of things about the Foerster's ministry is that they've spent the last thirty years trying to help a certain village people get God's word into their unique language that is different than all other languages.

And I've often wondered why.

In other words, why not just share the Gospel in another language that is close to their language so that they can hear and respond to the Gospel and be saved.

Why not, for the sake of time, take a few shortcuts so that these people can get saved?

Why go to all the trouble to get the Bible into their unique language?

Why not just teach them their national government language and let them read the Bible in that language?

This is a good question, and I'm still unsure of the answer, but it has something to do with God speaking to their heart.

When that small group of villagers finally hear and read and write God's word in their own specific language, then they will know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God truly loves them. The message of God's love will shine on and in their hearts and then they will truly be saved.

Could it happen through another language? Perhaps. Perhaps not.

Perhaps it's too great of a risk. I think this is why the Foerstes have devoted the greater part of their lives to serving in this way. They are convinced that God speaks His message of love to that particular people group.

When I think about this truth in this in these terms, I'm deeply thankful for their extreme efforts. God has used them mightily in Thailand, but they'll never make the front page of any newspaper – not even a Christian one, but they're okay with this because they're seeking God's glory, not men's praise.

And this leads me to the Mark 1 text for this morning. The prophet Isaiah, John the Baptist, and Jesus himself give us the 411 concerning Christ's mission to earth.

They communicate in a fashion that speaks straight to our hearts. They speak about things like how long God has been speaking to us, about the signs we can look for to recognize his arrival, and the power in which he comes.

All this in just the first half of Mark chapter 1!

First Isaiah. God, through Isaiah prophesies that a messenger will be sent ahead of the Messiah to tell the people to get ready for his arrival. Today, we all know this person as John the Baptist.

But Isaiah's prophecy was probably delivered 700 years before Jesus ever arrived, and though he didn't know John by name, Isaiah not only describes him as *"a voice of one calling in the desert,* but also describes in detail the message he would deliver: *"Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him."*

So, as I stated earlier, God has gone through great pains to get the message to us. He gave advance warning concerning his arrival, and as we all know, used the gifts and abilities of many men and women to prophecy and record his promised arrival.

So, Mark chapter 1 is exhibit A of what Hebrews 1 declares: *"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways."*

And God did all this for us because He created us and loves us and wants us to be with Him forever. So, He speaks our language to help us understand what it means to be saved.

Then there is John the Baptist. God through Isaiah told us he was coming, and when God says something going to happen, it does! And so, after a very long wait, John shows up, preaching and baptizing in the desert region.

He preaches about repentance and baptism and the forgiveness of sins and how they all point and are connected to Jesus' arrival and ministry: *"I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

What does the baptizing of the Holy Spirit by God mean in our lives?

Well, simply put, it means everything to us!

It means new life!

God's Holy Spirit in our lives means God's spirit connects with our souls, and indwells our lives, and we are never alone!

It means we cross over from spiritual death to life!

It means that God's cleans our souls and forgives us our sins and gives the hope of salvation and eternal life!

It means we have the greatest friend and counselor that we could ever have! Remember the words of Jesus in John 16? *"But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the counselor will not come to you. But when he, the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making known to you."*

And the supreme truth that the Holy Spirit imparts to us is that Jesus Christ, the Creator of the Universe, has come to earth in human

flesh to be the perfect sacrifice so that our sins can be forgiven, and our lives can be with God forever! He has come to be our Savior!

This is God's message to us through the prophets, through his word and through the Holy Spirit, and it's the message we're called to take to the world: John 15: 26 – 27: *"When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of Truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me. And you also must testify."*

Isaiah gives us the 411 on our salvation. Go to Isaiah 53 to get an even more detailed and comprehensive picture.

John the Baptist gives us the 411 concerning Jesus: "After me will come one more powerful than I whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

And now Jesus himself speaks: *"The kingdom of God is near; repent and believe the Good News!"*

I've heard that the word repent isn't used much in Pastor's messages these days which is so sad when you think about it since repentance is central to Christ's message of salvation.

Repentance essentially means to turn away from a life of sin that leads to death and turn toward Christ with faith believing that He is who he says he is ... Our Creator, Our life, Our Savior, our Master and Friend for all eternity for those who believe.

This is why He is so eager to invite us to follow Him: *"Come follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."*

God uses our language to speak to our hearts.

I hope we'll all listen.

I conclude with these words from Hebrews chapters 3 and 4. Did you know that in these two chapters a single phrase is repeated three times? This typically means that the author has something exceptionally important he wants us to hear:

The phrase is ... *“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”*

I think the meaning is obvious: We either humble ourselves and take in God’s message by faith and in doing so claim Christ to be our Savior, partaking in eternal life.

To harden our hearts is just the opposite: to stand opposed to God’s message of salvation and thereby forfeit and reject the invitation of eternal life.

You decide.