

Graffiti



The words that define our faith have the potential to embody the beauty and mystery of our faith. But all too often, they instead become boundary markers, marking who is welcome and who is not. In this series, we seek to recover the beauty of these words, and through them, the beauty and power of the faith into which God has invited us.

Gospel as Propaganda

Interact with texts

Of all the words in this series, none has strayed as far from its original meaning as 'Gospel'. Today it's a word that belongs almost exclusively to the Church. Whether it's Gospel music, Gospel preaching or even the Gospels in the Bible - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the word has strong religious connotations. Many of us have heard 'the Gospel' is a message: that we're all a bunch of sinners and Jesus saved us.

So would it surprise you to learn that the word 'gospel' originally had nothing to do with God or the Church? Gospel is translated from the Greek word *euangelion*. A gospel, a *euangelion* was a political word, a technical term used by the Roman Empire. *Euangelion* literally means 'good message', which was translated into Latin as *evangelion* and into Old English as "God-spell", and was finally modernized as 'gospel'. A Gospel is a 'good message' or 'good news'. So how did Rome use the 'good message' or 'Gospel' as propaganda? Here's how it worked:

Rome had a particular way of seeing the world. Rome believed that ROME defined reality - that the way Rome saw the world, understood reality to work, was the most real, the most right, the most true. Rome believed that their government was the best government, their culture the best culture, their armies the most powerful armies, their gods the truest gods. And if you were a part of the Empire (whether you liked it or not), you were expected to live in support of Rome's dominion. You pay taxes to support the Roman Emperor and the Roman legions, you worshiped the Roman gods and obeyed Roman law. Or else.

And as you can imagine, the territories Rome conquered weren't always as wild about Roman rule as Rome was. So Rome developed a propaganda system to convince people that Rome's rule really was better than whatever culture or beliefs they'd held to before. Rome's propaganda was crafted to convince Roman subjects that they were better off under Roman rule, that they would be foolish to resist or revolt. Rome promised peace and prosperity to all those who remained good, loyal subjects of the Empire.

The gospel, or *euangelion*, was an important piece of propaganda. Anytime something happened in the Empire that reinforced Rome's claims to dominance, a Gospel was sent out. A Gospel is a message that validates the Empire's claim to define reality.

So if the Roman legions won a military victory, *evangelists* were sent out with a gospel, an *euangelion*, saying 'Good news! Rome won!' The underlying message was See? It's exactly as we told you - the Roman army really IS the mightiest in the world. You would be a fool (probably a dead fool) to challenge Roman rule!

If a new Caesar was crowned or an heir to the throne born, a Gospel was sent out, saying 'Good News! There's a new Caesar!' The underlying message was, See? Rome is reliable. Rome will always be here, ruling over you.

The Emperor ruling when Jesus was born was Caesar Augustus. Augustus called himself the son of the gods - he even set up temples for loyal subjects to worship him as the embodiment of all that Rome was. Just a few years before Jesus was born (9 BC), Caesar Augustus declared that his birthday was "the beginning of his *euangelion*."

The not-so-subtle message he sent in as that the day Augustus was born was the dawn of a new era in human history, that his entry into the world was good news for the world because he would bring peace and prosperity to everyone by bringing Rome's way of life to the whole world. (Pretty audacious claims).

A Gospel is a message that validates the Empire's claim to define reality. If that's what Gospel means, then I want you to hear how shocking this early Christian writer was: he begins his story of Jesus with this statement:

The beginning of the GOSPEL of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. -- Mark 1:1

Mark was not being subtle here. His message was very clear: Rome thinks that they define reality. Rome thinks that their word is the last word. Rome has a message they call good news. But it's *not* actually good news. Their caesars aren't actually God's sons. Their reality isn't actually the most real. Mark says, I'm going to tell you about Jesus, the true Son of God. And *Jesus'* message is *actually* good news. Jesus' reality is actually the real reality. Rome's gospel is false. Jesus' gospel is true.

(I'm sure you can imagine how Rome would respond to this sort of message. It's easy to see why Jesus was crucified by Rome, isn't it?)

Which Gospel is Really Good News?

So the word Gospel is a word the Church stole from the Empire. Because those first followers of Jesus believed that Rome's reality wasn't the most real. They believed that God was doing something new in Jesus, that what they saw around them wasn't the end of the story (this is what we talked about last week - they chose to live by FAITH).

So when they began telling people about who Jesus was, what he did, the new life that God offers, they called it a Gospel. It made a lot of sense to the people of the Roman Empire who heard it because they were used to hearing all about the Gospel of Rome. Now they were hearing about the Gospel of Jesus.

And to people who'd been beaten down and crushed by Rome, Jesus' gospel sounded like very good news.

But today, the Church has far outlasted Rome. We've seen Empires come and go, and each of them has had their own gospel, their own claim of Good News. Today we are inundated by gospels, by various groups that try to tell us they know the true path to happiness, that they can describe a fully human life. We are caught in a web of competing truth claims, with each ideology, religion, political party, producer or pundit claiming that *their* way is best, that their particular path to fulfillment is true.

We in the Church believe that all these other Gospels are just as false as Rome's was. That the various ways our culture defines reality *still* aren't the truest picture of what's real. We still believe that no matter what culture is telling us they have found the true path to happiness and fulfillment, whatever culture tells us they've discovered the truth, it's never the most true. It's never the most real.

And that's the problem with false gospels - eventually they all turn out to be bad news. I wonder how many of us have come in here today a little nervous because we've been exposed to a lie masquerading as the Good News, something that's left us with wounds or scars, something that's hurt us. That hasn't actually been very good news.

In our quest for the true Gospel, the actually-good Good News, it won't do us any good to retread those painful gospels. There're so many false gospels we could spend weeks together dissecting the various gospels that vie for our allegiance. We could talk about the American Gospel or the Gospel of Capitalism. We could talk about other religions and the gospels they proclaim or explore various political ideologies. But we'd never get to the end of it. There'd always be another nuance we could tease out or another path we could explore. Every dysfunction is dysfunctional in its own unique way.

The True Gospel

What's more profitable is to spend our energies pursuing the Gospel of Jesus. We can focus our energies in on learning and living out the one true Gospel and let all our dysfunctions be healed in Jesus. So what is God's Gospel? What is the actual good news? How does Jesus describe reality?

As you can imagine, that's a huge question. There are literally thousands of books all trying to answer it. As a church staff, over the last several months, we've been wrestling with that question. Because there's a sense in which Jesus' gospel is too big for any one explanation. We have four separate accounts of Jesus' life and teachings in our Scriptures, plus even more letters, sermons and visions.

But we wanted to craft a statement that we could hold on to, something we could use as a guide. We took the whole witness of the Scriptures, along with conversation we had with authors we love and respect, friends and more, and we put together this statement:

Through Jesus' incarnation, death and resurrection, God invites us to join in the restoration of all things.

We recognize that this statement is huge - each word is loaded with meaning. In fact, this statement is what gave birth to this whole Graffiti series. We realized that these words are so important that we wanted to take lots of time with them, to recover them and restore their meaning.

We believe that God is fundamentally a relational being. A being who is three persons but also one person. Who exists independently of us, who does not need us but who creates out of the joy of giving, the freedom that comes only with love.

We believe that God created everything including us, and that it was all originally good. Perfect. The way God intended it to be.

We believe that the world is not this way anymore, that we as a race have chosen and continue to chose to live life on our own terms rather than on God's. We build Empires and declare ourselves kings and queens rather than living as God's faithful subjects.

We believe that because of that choice, we introduced death and destruction into God's good world. That death and destruction, which we call sin, separates us from God and enslaves us.

That's the bad news.

But here's your good news. Here's the Gospel:

Through Jesus' incarnation, death and resurrection, God invites us to join in the restoration of all things.

Jesus became one of us in the Incarnation. That was God's affirmation that this world is good, that (as Sheila reminded us) this world, our bodies, the physical realm matters to God.

Jesus died in our place, as our Passover Lamb, to rescue us from the death we introduced into the world. He made it possible for us to reconnect with God.

And Jesus rose from the dead as a down-payment, an assurance that God is going to make good on his promise to save us.

Through his work in Jesus, God invites us out of Death into Life. Out of slavery to sin into freedom in Jesus.

And that life is a life of restoring, of reclaiming the broken creation. Of restoring what we've broken. We become God's co-workers, following his directions and living as he lives.

That's good news!

The Gospel is our North Star

And why is it so important that we have a clear picture of the Gospel? Why is it so important that we not quit, not give up chasing after the Gospel?

Precisely because there are so many false gospels still at work in our world. Because it's so easy to get distracted, to lose sight of our goal, to think that something else is actually truth, the path to fulfillment.

The Gospel is our North Star, our guide, the truth by which we orient our lives.

<lights drop, stars come up on screens>

The North Star is called the North Star because it appears in the... Northern... sky and because of its position doesn't move in the sky as the Earth rotates. Every other star moves through the sky at night (just like the Sun does during the day), and may not even appear depending on the time of year. So you can't really use them to navigate - they're shifting and unreliable (or maybe it's better to say they're reliably useless). But the North Star is constant. It doesn't change. It's always in the same place, always due North.

This means that if you can find the North Star, you can always figure out where you are. You can always figure out how to get to where you're going.

I would suggest to you that the same is true of the Gospel. In a world of reliable uncertainty, a world filled with false gospels that tell us they know truly how to make us happy or rich or pretty or whatever, the Gospel of Jesus is a fixed, unchanging point, a guide calling us back to who we were created to be.

The funny thing about the North Star is that it's not the brightest star in the sky. It's not actually all that easy to find. What makes it the North Star is not that it's the flashiest star or the easiest star to find. It's not even the fact that once you find it you're out of the woods, so to speak. What makes it the North Star is that it's constant, unchanging and reliable.

The same with Jesus' Gospel. His good news isn't the flashiest show in town. Other gospels promise an easier road or riches or popularity far beyond what Jesus offers. Jesus' gospel isn't especially easy to learn - it's radically counter-cultural. It challenges us. It's not easy. And Jesus' gospel isn't a magic fix. You can't take this Gospel home with you and fix all your problems.

But Jesus' gospel is our true, unchanging North Star. Our guide when we feel lost. Our promise of better roads ahead.

Through Jesus' incarnation, death and resurrection, God invites us to join in the restoration of all things.

You want to know how all this comes together? All these false gospels our empire feeds us have created a disconnected, selfish and despairing culture. We give more and more of ourselves to things that matter less and less. And the people who deserve the very best from us don't get it, because we have nothing left to give. We're taught to take and take and take, to worry only about ourselves and our own. That we can't afford to be generous. And we're taught to be afraid. Afraid of the left or the right. Afraid of the enemy (whomever the Empire decides it is right now). We're taught to live, to spend, to vote, to raise our families, all under a cloak of fear of the future, of what the world is becoming.

That's the world the Empire's false gospels would leave us disconnected, selfish and despairing. But Jesus' gospel says no to these things. Because God is fundamentally relational, we too are fundamentally, essentially relational. Jesus teaches us that a life that does not value relationships with others above all else is not full.

Because God became human in the Incarnation, we know that a fully human life values connectedness, embodied relationships. We appreciate the connections technology helps us make, but we do not allow our virtual lives and relationships to supplant our physical reality. Jesus teaches us that a life that is physically disconnected is not full.

Because Jesus died in our place, we know that a fully human life is characterized by giving, not taking. We learn the art of self-sacrifice, we learn to say no to self-gratification. We learn to place others' needs above our own. Jesus teaches us that a life that's not given away is not full.

Because Jesus rose from the dead, we know that a fully human life is characterized always by hope. We know that no matter how bad things get, no matter how dark the night seems or how deep the valley of the Shadow of Death, that dawn is coming. That God will raise us up. We know that fear can never have the final word because the same God that raised Jesus from the dead is working now in our circumstances. Jesus teaches us that a life that does not always look towards the best is not full.

This Gospel is our guide through life, our plumb-line against which we measure ourselves. This Gospel is the story into which we enter and which we make our own. If we hear Jesus' good news, then we know that even now God is at work around us, restoring our world, healing brokenness and disconnectedness. And the best news is that we are invited into God's rescue movement. In imitation of Jesus, we can become embodied, sacrificial and hopeful people who are at work *with* God to heal our world.

Jesus' Gospel, his good news, is so much more than just a sermon or a song or a Bible study. Jesus' Gospel is for the whole world, for every aspect of our lives. Jesus' gospel completely and wholly transforms us.

<Princess Day Interview>

Communion

This table represents God's invitation to you. To join in Jesus' Gospel. To be a person who is embodied, sacrificial and hopeful. To do what you can where you are to bring about restoration and healing.

Jesus died for us so that we could join in his life, the only life that is truly life. When you come to the table today, come remembering Jesus' Incarnation, Death and Resurrection. And remember that through Jesus, God is inviting you to join him in restoring all things.

Prayer of Consecration