

Well, we made it to week six of our Lenten journey through the Bible – to the Gospels. Here you may feel you are in more familiar territory. Which you probably are. But since, as I said a couple weeks ago, the Gospels are the foundation – the heart and soul of our Christian faith, I think they bear some closer examination. So let's get started.

The Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, were written sometime between 60 – 90AD, with Mark's Gospel being written first, Luke and Matthew's were next, and John's was written last. Now the Gospels were written after most of the Epistles, which may seem backward. Shouldn't the Gospels have been written first? But remember, the disciples were still alive then, going around sharing their stories and accounts of their time with Jesus. But as they begin to be persecuted and martyred – remember James was killed by Herod in the year 44AD – people of “The Way” realized they'd better get something down on papyrus – 1st century paper. Luke even begins his Gospel by saying, “Many people have set out to write accounts about these events and they used the eyewitness reports from the disciples.” So you can see, from early on, various people had begun to write about Jesus. But over time, these four Gospels came to be regarded as the authentic and authoritative word. And whereas the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, the New Testament was written in Greek. And you might be wondering, if Rome ruled the world, why were the Gospels written in Greek and not Latin? Well at that time, the primary language of the Eastern Mediterranean countries, where the disciples came from, was Greek.

Now what's interesting, if you look closely, is that Matthew, Mark and Luke are very similar in the way they present Jesus – telling about his life, his teachings, his parables, his miracles. John, however is very different – he is much more theological in his approach. Matthew, Mark and Luke are what we call the “Synoptic gospels,” from the Greek meaning “see with.” They “see with” one another, and share many of the same stories, and in some verses, they agree with each other word for word.

So let's begin with the Gospel of Matthew. Early tradition says it was written by Jesus' disciple Matthew, the tax collector, also called Levi. Now, if you're watching the series, “The Chosen,” you can see why tax collectors were despised. They were Jews who worked for the Roman government, and were known to practice extortion against other Jews. But Jesus doesn't care what kind of crowd he

hangs out with – he is an equal opportunity rabbi. So in Matthew’s Gospel we hear, “As Jesus went on, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. ‘Follow me,’ he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.” And the first thing Matthew does – is throw a party. The Bible says there were "many tax collectors and sinners." You could imagine the crowd – eating, drinking, cursing. And there's Jesus – the guest of honor. And the religious authorities are indignant seeing a rabbi hanging out with this kind of crowd. And granted, Matthew may not have been the ideal Jewish citizen, and his crowd may not be the most genteel – but consider this – he wanted his friends to meet Jesus, and he invited them to come and see. When was the last time any of us invited our friends who don't know Jesus, to come and meet him?

Now Matthew is writing primarily to a Jewish audience, wanting to persuade them that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah. We see this in his first sentence, “This is a record of the ancestors of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” He right away establishes the necessary bloodline of the Messiah, through King David and Abraham. Then, in the twenty-eight chapters of his Gospel, he references the Old Testament an estimated one hundred thirty times, all to prove that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises and expectations of Hebrew scripture. And here’s a unique thing about Matthew. The other Gospel writers talk about the “Kingdom of God.” However Jews at that time were exceedingly careful about using the name of God, because it could easily be considered blasphemous. So Matthew, writing specifically to Jews, chooses the safe route and refers to the “Kingdom of Heaven.”

Matthew and Luke are the only Gospels to tell of Jesus’ birth. And they tell it differently. Matthew tells the story of the angel just visiting Joseph, and then the story of the wise men bringing gifts, and the story of Herod ordering the killing of all male children two years old and under, and how an angel tells Joseph to take Mary and Jesus and flee to Egypt. Which means that, at about two years old, Jesus and his family are refugees, seeking asylum from a harsh dictator in a foreigner country. That certainly resonates today.

Now although Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience, he is in no way claiming that Jesus came just for the Jews. On the contrary, Matthew proves once again that Jesus is Lord of all. He tells an interesting story of a Gentile woman that came to Jesus asking him to heal her daughter. And, in what appears to be a rather un-Jesus-like moment, Jesus says he came only for the people of Israel, and he didn’t want to throw food, meaning his words and teachings, to the dogs or non-Jews. But the Gentile woman squares off with Jesus and says “yes, but even dogs get to eat crumbs from the table.” Jesus then praises the

woman and heals her daughter. Now perhaps it was a test of faith for the woman, or maybe Matthew, in writing, just wanted to send a strong message to the Jews - that Jesus came for the Gentiles too. And, Jesus comes for children. When his disciples try to stop people from bringing their children him, Matthew tells us Jesus rebukes the disciples, "Let the children come to me. Don't stop them! For the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these." And that's a message for us – He's telling us we must have the hearts and blamelessness of children. And finally, Matthew is the one who reports Jesus giving us what is known as the Great Commission. "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And the disciples did go to all nations. We heard last week that Peter went to Rome, where he was crucified upside down, because he said he wasn't worthy to die in the same way as Jesus. Thomas went to India, Andrew to Greece and likely the Ukraine. Others went to Syria, North Africa, Ethiopia, Armenia, Lebanon and more. Now other than Judas, who hung himself after betraying Jesus, and John who was exiled to the Island of Patmos, all the disciples died a martyr's death. Now, just as an aside, here's a little Bible trivia for you. Jesus had twelve disciples. I just mentioned some of them, but can you name all of them? Well, there's Matthew, Peter, Thomas and Andrew, Judas, John and his brother James, Philip, Bartholomew, James – son of Alphaeus, also known as James the Lessor, because he's hardly mentioned, Thaddaeus, and Simon the zealot. Then, we learned in Acts, Matthias became a new disciple to replace Judas.

Here's another thing, you've heard me use the terms apostle and disciple. There is a difference. A disciple is a "learner," a "follower," someone who wants to be like the teacher, the master. Jesus had twelve disciples, but other Rabbis had disciples as well. Even John the Baptist. We read in Luke, "After Jesus finished praying, one of his disciples came to Jesus and said, 'Teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples.'" That's why you and I are called disciples – we seek to follow and be like the Master, Jesus. The term Apostle means "one who is sent," or messenger. Jesus commanded the twelve disciples to go out and make more disciples – thus they were sent – they became Apostles. St. Paul was sent by Jesus, thus, he too, was an Apostle.

Next, to the Gospel of Mark. Remember his was probably the first one written and it is where we hear the word "Gospel" used for the first time. It comes from the Greek *euangelion*, (u in geel lee on) meaning "good news." Mark's very first sentence reads, "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God." His full name is John Mark, and we heard about him in Acts. An angel had helped Peter escape from jail, and Peter went to the home of John Mark's mother. Peter was Mark's

mentor, and they went together to Rome, where tradition has it that after Peter died, the church in Rome asked Mark to put into writing the accounts and teachings of Jesus' life. The style of his writing indicates that his audience is Romans Gentiles – he sometimes explains Jewish customs, and, while the letter is written in Greek, he will slip in a Latin word once in a while. Rome was the bustling center of power at the time, so they had a “get right down to business” sort of attitude. And so, when it came to a religious leader like Jesus, Rev. Kalas says, “Quite simply, the Romans would ask, “Can Jesus bring it off? Tell me quickly, and stick to the facts.” And that’s the way Mark writes. There is no birth narrative – it’s straight to Jesus’ baptism. And in the first forty-five verses, Mark reports on Jesus’ baptism, his temptations in the wilderness, enlisting his first disciples, healing a man with an unclean spirit, healing a number of persons at Peter’s house, embarking on a preaching mission throughout Galilee, and cleansing a leper. In his Gospel, we see the word, “immediately” thirty-nine times. It’s like he can’t wait to tell the story of Jesus.

One of the unique things about Mark is its ending. There are three of them. Let me explain. The last chapter of Mark, Chapter 16 in your Bible ends at verse twenty. But you will notice after verse eight, there is notation as to a “shorter ending,” that adds to verse eight, and a “longer” ending that goes from verse nine to verse twenty. And both these endings differ in style from the rest of the Gospel. So what’s going on? Well, from verse 1 – 8, Mark writes that, on what we now call Easter morning, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome brought spices to anoint Jesus’ body for proper burial. But an angel tells them Jesus has been raised and is on his way to Galilee. Mark then says the woman ran away afraid. And that ends verse eight. Now the problem is, for an author whose whole goal has been to tell the good news of Jesus the Messiah, it seems very unlikely that Mark would end with no appearance of Jesus, no words from this Messiah – just some frightened women running away. And so the abrupt ending at verse eight, leads most scholars to believe that either Mark died before he could finish the good news - remember he was in Rome when Peter was crucified, or his manuscript – papyrus, remember, not exactly a digitized pdf file, was lost or even destroyed. Therefore, others finished it for him.

There’s also a wonderful story I love that lends such genuineness to Mark’s telling of the good news. On the night before his crucifixion, Jesus is with his disciples, when suddenly Judas and the religious leaders and temple guards burst on the scene. As you know, Judas kisses Jesus to betray him and the soldiers come after Jesus. Peter then pulls out a sword and cuts off an ear of one of them. Interestingly, when the

disciple John tells this story, he specifically names Peter. But Mark, being Peter's protégé only says, "One of the men with Jesus pulled out a sword." He apparently didn't want his teacher to look bad. Well after that altercation, all the disciples become frightened and run away. Then, in in the next two verses, we learn, "One young man following behind was clothed only in a long linen shirt. When the mob tried to grab him, he slipped out of his shirt and ran away naked." Now if all the disciples had run away – how could they have known about this young man – unless that young man, was Mark himself.

Our third Gospel writer is Luke. You remember him from Acts and his travels with Paul. He was a physician, and the only writer in the New Testament who was not Jewish. He was also a poet and a painter, and since the fourteenth century, he has been the patron saint of painters. He is writing to Theophilus, who, you remember from Acts, is either a wealthy benefactor, or a general term for anyone who loves God. And he writes that his purpose is to "set out an orderly account" of what happened with Jesus. Now he begins his Gospel, not with the birth of Jesus, but with the birth of John the Baptist and his parents, the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, who were both past the child bearing age. Then he tells of the angel going, not to Joseph, as Matthew describes, but first to Mary. I can imagine that, as a physician, he would have been intrigued by a woman who was too old to give birth, and a young girl, a virgin who was to give birth. Now although Luke is a Gentile, he wants to establish Jesus' Jewish roots – he tells of Jesus being named and circumcised, the trip to the Temple for the Jewish purification rites, and then the only story we have of Jesus as a young boy. It's when Jesus was twelve; his family came to Jerusalem for Passover, and on the trip home, Mary and Joseph realized Jesus wasn't with them. Now you may wonder how his parents don't know Jesus was missing. Well, in those days, family and friends traveled together in large caravans to go to Jerusalem for the key Jewish festivals. And just think – pre-COVID, I'm sure you could imagine a large gathering with people milling all about, different groups doing different things, kids running here and there. And Luke says that Jesus' parents assumed he was with the others, perhaps relatives or the family of a friend – until evening came and he was nowhere to be found. So the very first Amber Alert goes out and they finally find Jesus – where? In the Temple, among the religious leaders, where, Luke writes, "all who heard him were amazed at his wisdom and his answers."

Now Luke's Gospel could be considered the "social justice" Gospel. He shows Jesus as one who has a heart for the poor, the marginalized, the lowly, the lost, the hated, the unaccepted. It is in Luke we find the story of Jesus inviting himself to dinner at the home of Zacchaeus – a chief tax collector. We find the

parable of the Good Samaritan – the only true neighbor to a wounded Jew. We read about Jesus commending an immoral woman for anointing his feet because she was forgiven and she showed him extravagant love. We find the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, the prodigal son, who is welcomed home. We find women have a place with Jesus – Mary and Martha, and the women who travelled with him, like Mary Magdalene, Joanna, the wife of Herod’s business manager and Susanna, plus other women who supported Jesus with their money. He had to eat too, you know. And it is in Luke we find Jesus promising the dying thief on the cross, “I assure you – today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Now to the fourth and final Gospel – the Gospel of John. As I said, John’s Gospel is different. He has his own story to tell and his own dramatic way of doing it. He was Jesus’ disciple, and twice in his Gospel, he identifies himself as an “eyewitness, one who testifies to these events.” John was a fisherman with his brother James, and these two, along with Peter were known as Jesus’ “inner circle.” There were times when Jesus took only his inner circle, Peter, James and John with him – like to the mountaintop where he was transfigured, when he healed the daughter of a synagogue leader, when he was in the Garden of Gethsemane and he took them aside. So obviously John had a very close relationship with Jesus. In fact, six times in this Gospel he refers to himself as “the disciple Jesus loved.” It was John that Jesus asked to care for his mother, Mary after his death. And, interestingly, remember, John was the only disciple not martyred. Now unlike the other gospels that tell us right up front why they wrote – Matthew to establish the lineage of Jesus, Mark to tell the Good News, and Luke to write an orderly account, John waits till the end. It’s as if he is building up the storyline, chapter after chapter, until he finally delivers the punch line almost at the end: “These things are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

So John starts his Gospel, not with a human interest birth story, but with the astounding proclamation, “In the beginning was the Word.” Remember in Genesis, God spoke the word and all was created. John says, “and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” And everything after that speaks to Jesus’ divinity and his mission – to bring light and life to all. Now whereas the other Gospels follow the journey of Jesus’ ministry – what Jesus says and does, John is much more interested in telling about who Jesus is and what his life means. And he wants to establish up front that Jesus is the Son of God. In his first chapter, we find John the Baptist, three of Jesus’ disciples, and even Jesus himself, declaring Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah, the Son of Man. The first half of John’s Gospel, chapters, 1 – 12, has

been called “The Book of Signs,” because they contain stories which John says are “signs” pointing to who Jesus is and what his life means. It is only in John’s Gospel that we find Jesus “I am” statements – “I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the Good Shepherd.” These are all statements which point to Jesus being the great “I AM” the name God used for himself when talking to Moses. In John’s Gospel, Jesus turns the tables in the Temple at the beginning of his ministry, while in the Synoptics he turns them at the end of his ministry – the last week of his life. Why? Again, John’s point is not to give a chronological account of Jesus’ life – it’s to point to him as the One who can “Destroy this temple, and in three days, I will raise it up.” Only in John’s Gospel does he raise Lazarus from the dead – as a sign that he is the “resurrection and the life.” Now the second half of John’s Gospel, chapters 13-21, has been called “The Book of Glory,” where John lets us, the reader, into the “inner circle” so to speak. Here he records Jesus private words to his disciples on the night before his death. John alone tells of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet, of Jesus’ promise to send the Holy Spirit, of Jesus’ personal prayers to his Father, and Jesus’ prayers for them. John then tells of Jesus’ death and resurrection, where even Jesus’ dead body gives life – for when the soldier pierces Jesus side, blood and water flow out. Consider – Communion and baptism – the blood and water have never stopped flowing, they continually give life to those who believe in Jesus. John relates that after his resurrection, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, he appears to his disciples and gives them his peace, he tells Thomas the importance of having faith, “Blessed are those who believe without seeing.” And he counteracts Peter’s denials when Peter affirms his love for Jesus three times. Yes, John sets out to convince us that “God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him will not perish, but will have everlasting life.” And he ends his Gospel with this beautiful statement: “Jesus also did many other things. If they were all written down, I suppose the whole world could not contain the books that would be written.”

What an ending!

Now before I get to the ending of my sermon, I want to mention two things that I think are important for our understanding of the Gospels. First we hear often about the Sadducees and Pharisees, and how they were in conflict with Jesus. So who exactly are they and what was the difference between them? Well the Sadducees were the priests who had power and authority over the Temple – Temple worship, Temple administration, Temple guards. In fact, after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70AD, we hear no more about the Sadducees. Now because of their affluence and position, they dealt with the Roman authorities, and were often more politically minded than spiritually minded. Thus, they didn’t have much favor with the common people. They believed only in the written law, and rejected any oral

tradition. They did not believe in angels, in a final judgment or in a resurrection. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were not priests, they were just learned religious leaders whose power and authority was in the local synagogues, and they had the general respect of the masses. They differed with the Sadducees in that they believed in both the written and oral laws that were handed down, and they did believe in angels, a final judgment and resurrection. Their primary focus was on the law – adhering to every letter of the law – and there were a lot of them – 613 in fact. Now you also hear of the Sanhedrin, and that was the Jewish court system, composed of primarily Sadducees, but some Pharisees. Both the Pharisees and Sadducees were united against Jesus – the Pharisees because he disregarded many of their traditions and laws, and the Sadducees because he was becoming more than a nuisance, and they feared he would bring unwanted Roman attention and upset the status quo. Remember, in Palestine 2,000 years ago, Jews were under Roman occupation. Rome ruled most of the known world at that time. And they were harsh. They tolerated the Jews and the Jewish religious authorities, but there was no doubt as to who was in charge. That’s why the Jewish religious leaders would often try to appease the Roman officials because they didn’t want to risk an uprising thus potentially losing their position.

Which brings me to the final point I was to make today. Because it’s what Holy Week is all about. The Jews were anticipating a Messiah who was going to deliver them from Roman occupation, from their enemies, and usher in a new era of peace and prosperity for God’s chosen. Messiah means “Anointed One,” which came from the practice the Israelites had of anointing kings with holy oil at their coronation. So the Jews were expecting someone from the line of David who would be like David – a military leader who, as the prophet Isaiah predicted would, “release the captives.” That’s why on what we call Palm Sunday when Jesus comes riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, the Jews lined the streets waving palm branches – because the prophet Zechariah had foretold, “Look, your king is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet he is humble, riding on a donkey.” And he goes on to predict “the Lord will go out to fight against the nations, and the Lord will be king over all the earth.” And so the people were convinced that Jesus was this Messiah. So they came to celebrate and lift him up. But by the end of the week, this Messiah, appears to have been defeated. Arrested, beaten, humiliated and crucified. Was he defeated? We will get to that next week! Amen.