

The Beginning of the Gospel

Mark 1:1-8

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Well, we've made another trip around the sun. We've turned the page of the calendar from 2020 to 2021. Probably nothing significant has really changed, but we still like to think of the start of a new year as a new beginning. In our minds, it's a chance to start fresh, to put some old things behind us and venture into new things.

The Bible is full of beginnings and new beginnings. Mark opens his Gospel with the phrase, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God." There's an echo here of the first verse in the Bible: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). It might recall all the times God started new with his people, from the call of Abraham to the Exodus to King David to the return from exile. In fact, the Exodus is pretty clearly in the background of this opening section of Mark.

But the greatest new beginning was what God did in Jesus. Mark wants to tell that story. And he tells it in a way that speaks to people going through hard times.

Here's some quick background. The Mark that tradition says wrote this Gospel is John Mark. We meet him in the book of Acts. It looks like his mother's house in Jerusalem was a meeting place for the early church—and may have been the site of the upper room where Jesus had the last supper with his disciples. Mark was a cousin of Barnabas and traveled with Paul and Barnabas for part of their first missionary journey. He left them and returned home part way through the trip. Later, when Barnabas and Paul were planning another mission, Barnabas wanted to take Mark along, but Paul refused. So those two partners in mission went their separate ways. Some years later, Paul mentions Mark in a couple of his letters, says he is helpful, and wants him to come see him in prison.

Mark is also associated with the apostle Peter. And early church tradition tells us that Mark's Gospel is based on Peter's memories and preaching. So with Mark we're getting some of Peter's firsthand accounts of Jesus.

Most scholars agree that Mark is the first Gospel that was written. Then Matthew and Luke used Mark as they wrote their Gospels. Mark most likely wrote sometime in the late 60s or early 70s A.D. This was soon after Rome burned and the emperor Nero put the blame for the fires on the Christians. Persecution of Christians became intense in Rome and various parts of the empire. Mark may have written in Rome for Roman Christians to encourage them that following Jesus is worth it. He shows Jesus suffering and teaching that following him means denying self and taking up the cross. Those Christians in Rome shouldn't be surprised that they face opposition and suffering for being Jesus followers. We shouldn't be surprised if we face opposition and struggle in our life of following Jesus. This is a Gospel to encourage following Jesus in difficult times.

Following Jesus is worth whatever it takes when we realize who Jesus is. Mark lets us know Jesus' identity right away. This is the beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. That first line is almost like the title or table of contents of the book. Messiah and Son of God are important titles of Jesus that will show up at high points in Mark's Gospel.

For the first eight chapters, people, including the disciples, are puzzled about who Jesus is. In chapter 8, Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they report various rumors that are going around. Then Jesus asks, "Who do you say I am?" Peter answers, "You are the Christ" (8:29). The word Christ is the Greek form of the Hebrew Messiah. They mean the same thing: the anointed one. That is, someone specially chosen, appointed, and empowered by God to lead God's people. Kings in Israel were anointed with oil to show they were set apart to lead. Christ is not Jesus' last name. It's his title. Instead of saying Jesus Christ, we could almost say King Jesus and that would communicate what the Bible means.

So at the mid-point of Mark's book, we see this confession by Peter that Jesus is Christ, Messiah, King. For most of the rest of Mark, Jesus teaches his disciples what kind of king he is and what it means to be his people.

The phrase Son of God shows up near the end of the story. As Jesus dies on the cross, the Roman centurion in charge of the crucifixion declares, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" (15:39). "Son of God" was sometimes

another title for a king of Israel. So it can just be another term for Messiah. But Mark seems to tell us that Jesus is Son of God in a unique way. He truly is God coming among us, becoming King, and acting to bring his kingdom. Often the way Mark describes Jesus and what he does is the way the Old Testament describes God and his actions.

It's interesting that the centurion is the only human character in Mark who calls Jesus the Son of God. At Jesus' baptism, God the Father says to him, "You are my Son, whom I love" (1:11). And demons sometimes acknowledge Jesus as Son of God (3:11; 5:7). Jesus silences them. He doesn't need their testimony.

From the start, Mark wants us to know who Jesus is. He's Messiah, the Son of God. He's also the Lord. Mark quotes OT prophets telling about the messenger who would prepare the way for the Lord's coming to his people. He applies those to John the Baptist who prepares the way for Jesus. That identifies Jesus with the Lord God of Israel. He comes to us, he comes among us, he comes as one of us. He comes to establish and extend his kingdom, his rule, in the world. We don't just stroll into the presence of the great God. We don't just sit around when we know he's on his way. We need to be ready, to be prepared.

That's why we had the weeks of Advent leading up to Christmas. It slows us down and heightens our expectation. We realize how urgent it is that we be ready and we find great hope in our waiting and watching and preparing. We experience the Lord even in our waiting on the Lord.

John the Baptist's ministry was about getting people ready, calling them to prepare for what God was about to do. When John comes on the scene, prophecy is fulfilled. Even more, prophecy is *revived* with John. There hadn't been a prophet in Israel in 300 years before John came preaching in the wilderness. Now, God's messenger comes, preparing the way for the Lord. He's the voice calling out to all who will hear, "Prepare the way for the Lord."

These quotations from OT prophets show a connection between what God had done in the past and what God was doing in the present. John and Jesus didn't just appear out of the blue. They were part of the long line of God's people, God's actions, and God's word through history. John, and a

few others in the Gospels, are those who stand at the threshold between two ages. John is the last of the OT prophets and the one who sees and introduces Jesus, who is God's new beginning, who opens up the new era of God's kingdom.

John comes on the scene in the wilderness, not in the temple. He's about as far from the temple in Jerusalem as he can get. He doesn't dress or sound like the priests in Jerusalem. And there in the wilderness he calls people to prepare the way of the Lord, to return to the Lord.

The wilderness, the desert, is important in Israel's memory and history. John was a man of the wilderness. He performed his ministry in the wilderness. And he announced that one greater than himself would come after him.

John called the people to repent and to be baptized as a sign of repentance. In the OT, especially the prophets, repentance is related to the wilderness. The call to "turn" is a call to return to the beginning of God's history with his people, to return to the wilderness. Israel's time in the wilderness after they came out of Egypt and before they reached the Promised Land was the time the nation was seen as God's true child. And someday God would lead his people into that status again. Calling people to come out to the wilderness and to be baptized was a call to renew relationship with God, to be truly God's children. John's call was urgent because God was soon coming to act in a final and decisive way.

When John summoned people to be baptized in the Jordan River it meant that Israel must come once more to the wilderness. They were separated from Egypt through the Red Sea. Now they needed to be separated from sin and the rebellious world to prepare for a new covenant with God (William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark. New International Commentary on the New Testament*).

We're called to be separated from the "Egypt" of sin and death to come into a new relationship with God through Jesus.

John the Baptist is different. He's "out there." It's not easy to go hear him. You have to make an effort. You have to go out of your way to hear his message and be part of getting ready for God's new thing. And still people go to hear John and be baptized by him. It seems like everybody in

Jerusalem and the countryside of Judea went out to see and hear John the Baptizer.

Why did they go? They were hungry for God. Something must have been missing from the temple and its way of worship. The priests and traditions and rituals had lost meaning or they'd buried the meaning so deep that people couldn't find it. John seemed to have what people were looking for. He spoke as if he were reporting the very words of God. He didn't have all the details, "...but he knew that the old world was about to end and a new world was spinning toward him, carried in the arms of God's chosen one" (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Pulpit Resource*, 1999, 39-42).

John the Baptist called people to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. The people responded by confessing their sins and being baptized. John also introduced them to, or prepared them for, someone greater and more powerful than himself, someone who would baptize them with the Holy Spirit.

He's talking about Jesus. This is another element in who Jesus is. He's Messiah, Son of God, Lord, and the greater one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. In the story of the first Exodus, God delivered his people and then led them through the wilderness with a pillar of cloud and fire. The prophets promised that someday the Lord would make the Exodus story happen again and set his people free once and for all. God would come to live personally with his people. He would be their God and they would be his people. This time, instead of a pillar of cloud and fire, God's Spirit would live with people, in people. The Holy Spirit would be the air we breathe, the fire in our hearts. John says the promise is now coming true. Would they be ready for it? They weren't. And even John may not have been ready for what God actually did in Jesus (N. T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone*).

But there was the call to get ready. We still hear that call. How do we get ready for God's coming among us, into our lives, into our world? How do we get ready for all that God wants to do here? John the Baptist reminds us that there's nothing automatic about the Lord's coming. Human expectation, preparation, and repentance play a part. "The Lord may be perfectly able to come without those things, but the odds of our recognizing him go way down" (Taylor). We need to get ready.

Did you hear about the woman who had four husbands over the course of her life? A banker, an actor, a preacher, and an undertaker. It was one for the money, two for the show, three to get ready, and four to go.

John the Baptizer proclaims three things to get ready. Three things the people needed before the Messiah came (Lloyd John Ogilvie, *Life without Limits* 22-24). Three things we need to prepare our hearts, to get ourselves ready to recognize God's coming in Jesus, to experience his coming now in the Holy Spirit, to be ready when he comes again to fulfill all things.

The first is *confession of sin*. People from all over went out to John in the wilderness. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River (verse 5). We begin to get our hearts in tune with God, we get ready to receive God's coming to us and all he offers us, when we acknowledge our need for God. Later, Mark will emphasize that Jesus' ministry and message are for sinners only. The ones who need him and recognize their need for him are the ones who receive what he offers.

One reason Communion is so important is that it gives us the opportunity to search our hearts, to allow the Holy Spirit to search our hearts and expose our sins and needs. When we celebrate Communion, we usually pray a Prayer of Confession. Today, we're using the Covenant Prayer in place of that. But even that expresses our need for God and all that God wants to do in us. What do you need to confess to God? Confessing our sins silently or with another person opens us to grace and is a step in getting ready for Jesus.

Next is *repentance*. John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance is a radical return to God. The word we translate repentance means a change of mind, a change of direction, a change of affection. To repent is to turn from sin and turn to God. It's a willingness to leave sin behind. We're saying to God, "As far as I know my own heart, I'm willing for you to take this sin from me." God will do it and we'll experience God's new beginning.

Baptism is an important step in preparing for the Lord's coming. For John, baptism was a tangible sign of dedication, cleansing, and commitment. John offers to all who want to be awake and aware this ritual

bath that is the outward and visible sign of inward repentance and forgiveness. The promised transformation would be complete when the more powerful one came to baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Someone said that John could be called the *water* Baptist and Jesus can be called the *Spirit* Baptist or Baptizer (Joe Dongell, *The Gospel of Mark. Onebook/The Biblical Journey* DVD Week 1). John's baptism with water was symbolic, preparatory, temporary. Jesus' baptizing with the Holy Spirit is real, fulfilling, and lasting. We still baptize with water as a sign of God's grace and of our faith and repentance. We'll baptize anyone of any age. People who were baptized as infants, when they are able to decide for themselves, need to claim for themselves grace and faith and repentance. We all need to claim grace and faith and repentance regularly. As followers of Jesus, we live a baptismal life. We're always dying and rising to new life with Christ. That's the pattern of our life with Jesus. Our regular prayer can be something like, "I want to be as fully immersed in your Spirit as you can make me" (Dongell).

So, three things to get ready: Confessing our sin, our need, returning to the only one who can forgive us and meet those needs, and dedication to receive what God has to offer. Then we'll know Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, for real. We'll know him as the one who lived and died and rose again. The one who comes to us now in the Holy Spirit. The one who will return for us someday. Let's let that good news make a beginning, a new beginning, in us today.