

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 12/10/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Second Sunday of Advent

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, December 10th

Mark 1:1-8

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Blazing the trail

During the Second Sunday of Advent, the lectionary focus is on John the Baptist and the theme of preparation. This is an opportunity for personal examination and community discernment as we prepare to celebrate the first Advent and look forward with hope to the second Advent. As a result of the divisions and unrest at home and around the world, this year we may have more in common with John the Baptist's audience and the original audience of Mark's Gospel than we have had for many years. We long for God's reign and wait in the hopeful anticipation of the coming peace and justice of the Lord. Yet the Kingdom has already come, if not yet fully consummated, and we are the subjects of this King. We are called to prepare the world for Christ's second coming at the end of time. We are called to the places of wilderness, both physical and spiritual, to blaze the trail and remove obstacles.

Mark 1:1-8 Commentary

¹ *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

Due the lack of a primary verb, some consider the opening verse of Mark's Gospel to be a title. Whether a title or not, this is a lot packed into this sentence. "Beginning" (*archē*) is defined as an event that is the start of something. In Acts 1:22, Luke considers the starting point of the Good News as John's Baptism. Similar is found in Matthew 11:12, Luke 16:16, and John 1:6. The title would thus apply only to the opening. If the title applies to the whole Gospel, then this would be a parallel to the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, in which Genesis begins "*en archē*" (*in the beginning...*). If this is the case, Mark's entire Gospel must be considered as God revealing a new beginning for humankind. It would also recognize how Mark's account is only the beginning of the story – a story which is still currently unfolding.

"Gospel" (*euangelion*) can also be rendered as "good news", "good message", and "glad tidings." The Old English root is *godspel* (*god – good, spel – story, message*). To us, the word "Gospel" is entirely Christian and evokes some precise theological meaning. This is also the case for the derived words *evangelism* and *evangelize*. However, to the Jews in Mark's original audience, they would immediately connect *euangelion* with the "good news" in Isaiah 40:9 - the long-awaited coming of God's reign.

To the Romans in Mark's original audience, *euangelion* is found in several imperial inscriptions. One honors the birth of Caesar Augustus (B.C. 27 –A.D. 14) as the birthday of the god which marks beginning of the good tidings for the world. The Romans would have connected "good news" with the arrival of a king, a supreme divine ruler

who would bring peace and salvation. Coins minted under Tiberius Caesar (A.D. 14- 37) identified Tiberius as “son of the divine Augustus” and “high priest of the god Peace.”

Jews and Gentiles alike would have connected the “good news” in Mark’s opening verse to how God’s King was ushering in a reign of peace and salvation. His name was Jesus (*Yeshua* – Hebrew for *the salvation of Yahweh*). Jesus was the Christ, the Anointed One (Hebrew *Messiah*, Greek *Christos*), who was not just the son of an emperor but the Son of God.

² As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, ³ the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

The prophecies of Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 now follow. Both prophecies refer to John the Baptist and not Jesus. Isaiah is named since he was the most prominent. Here Mark is identifying John the Baptist as the predicted one who prepares the way of the Lord. No great king shows up unannounced. There is always a herald. “*Make his paths straight*” is rooted in preparation. Modern English equivalents are “pave the way” or “blaze the trail.” The perfect tense of “it is written” denotes past action completed in the past with continuing results.

⁴ John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

John did not baptize in the name of the Trinity (Paul re-baptizes John’s disciples in Acts 19:5.). Baptism was not initiated by John. Baptism was used as a step in the conversion process of a Gentile to become a Jewish proselyte. Here John is asking Jews to submit to a process only Gentiles are supposed to need. John thus indicates being a Jew in an ethnic sense alone was not sufficient. John called his followers to repentance (*metanoia* – an intentional change of heart and purpose) where a changed life was the proof of a changed heart. John’s ministry must have generated much excitement. The imperfect tense of the verb indicates people went out and kept going out to him.

⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

John is a prophet of the type found in the Old Testament, the first since Malachi some 450 years earlier, bringing the Word of the Lord. Yet John also brought a sense of urgency and imminence to his messianic preaching. God’s coming Kingdom was about to dawn. John’s appearance and location evokes Elijah. Indeed, Malachi 4:5 prophesies how God will send Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes and thus the response of the people to the sudden appearance of John is not surprising.

John was tasked with preparing the way for the Lord. John understood how his ministry was relatively unimportant compared to the one who would come after him. While we often view John the Baptist as a footnote to the birth of Christ, Jesus said of John the Baptist in Matthew 11:11a, “*Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.*” To Jesus, John the Baptist was more prominent than Moses. When John baptized with water, the coming one baptizes with the Holy Spirit. Only God can do that.

Reflection and Action

The Gospel of Mark begins somewhat abruptly. There are no angelic pronouncements of Christ’s birth. There is no genealogy or explanation of Christ’s place in creation. Mark is writing to a predominantly Gentile (perhaps Roman)

audience. Unlike Matthew, who writing to a Jewish audience begins his Gospel account with a genealogy and takes great pains to indicate throughout how Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies, Mark gets right to the point. He packs a lot into only eight verses which begin and end with references to the deity of Christ. Jesus the Christ is the coming divine King about to establish God's rule on earth. We must repent and believe in the Gospel (Mark 1:15).

In the timeline of salvation history, we live on the other side of the cross than John the Baptist. In our time, our job is to prepare for the Second Coming. Part of our responsibility is to look inward and self-examine. Where are the crooked paths in our lives that must be straighten out to prepare for Christ's coming? Another part of our responsibility is to discern as a church community how we can best go out into the many different kinds of wilderness that exist in our time and place – the spiritual wildernesses where people who have not heard or witnessed the Good News are still lost and wandering in emptiness; the places of isolation characterized by exclusion, despair, and dependency; the desolate places in our communities where poverty and injustice prevail; the time of devastation brought about by COVID-19.

The *euangelion* that Mark wrote about is to be lived out by Christ's Church in the world today through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. As Christ's disciples, we are called to be the trailblazers to Christ in the wildernesses that exist in our time and place until the second Advent when the Kingdom is fully consummated.



“Left Turn Ahead” A Blaze on the Pinhoti Trail, Alabama

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