

January 7, 2018

Year B – 1st Sunday in Epiphany

Genesis 1:1-5

Psalm 29

Acts 19:1-7

Mark 1:4-11



PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD

The gospel of Mark is said to be the oldest of the four gospels, as well as a source used by Matthew and Luke. Mark was the son of a woman named Mary, whose home in or near Jerusalem became a meeting place for the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:12).

Mark was known to all the apostles, including Paul (Acts 15:36-40, Philem 1:24), and probably obtained most of his material from Peter, who came to look upon Mark as his own son (1 Pet 5:13). Mark's narrative today presents a concise description of the ministry of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus.

Mark 1:1-11. *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ²As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,*

“Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way;

³the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight ...”

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

⁵And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; ¹¹and a voice came from heaven, “Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.”¹

• *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God* (v.1). Each of the four gospels begins, in its own way, by proclaiming the cosmic and eternal nature of Jesus Christ. Mark does this by identifying Jesus as the *Christ, the Son of God*. Jesus is a man, and also God come to us in human form: “*He who has seen me has seen the Father*” (John 14:9). Yet Jesus urged believers to pray, “*Our Father ...*,” and the NT repeatedly uses “*children of God*” to describe Christians. Compare John 1:12, John 11:49-52, Rom 9:6-8, and Phil 2:14-15. Christians become *children of God* by appropriating the life of Jesus, the *Son of God*.

• “*Behold, I send my messenger before thy face ...*” (v.2). Mark recalled Isaiah's prophecy (Isa 40:3). All four gospels speak of prophecy being fulfilled in Christ, including Jesus himself being the prophet spoken of by Moses in Deut 18:18. For example, read John 7:37-44, which begins with Jesus saying, “*If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink ...*” His words prompted some of the people to say, “*This is really the prophet*” (v.40). The rest of that passage consists of a debate among the Jews regarding the identity of Jesus. When someone asks, “*What do you believe about Jesus Christ?*” how do you reply?

All four gospels proclaim John the Baptist to be the prophesied *messenger* from God. Review

Matt 3:1-3 *In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea ...*

Luke 3:1-6, ... *the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness ...*

John 1:19-23. And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem ...

John the Baptist has a singular role in history. Nevertheless, much of the world today remains a spiritual wilderness, and John's is not the only voice crying in it. Your pastor's is another, and so is yours whenever you tell a hungry soul where to find the bread of life. John's message is still relevant, and urgent!

¹ Bible quotations are from the RSV.

• *John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness ...* (v.4). There are at least three other men named *John* in the NT. One was the son of Zebedee, brother of James, and author of the fourth gospel (Mark 1:19). Another was John Mark, the writer of this gospel (Acts 12:12, 25), and a third was the father of Peter (John 21:15).

One way to distinguish the Baptist from the rest is to remember John's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, and his remarkable birth, which we discussed during Advent. Recall highlights in Luke 1. Where was John, and what did he do when the Mother of Jesus went to visit his mother? What did his father say of him in Luke 1:76-79? And how did Jesus distinguish John among all the prophets in Matt 17:9-13?

• *And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem ...* (v.5). Baptism was not new, nor was repentance. The history of the Jews was full of times of repentance. But in this case *all the people* went out to be baptized by John. What caused this phenomenal response to the words of a hermit in the wilderness? There had to be a Spirit working among the people – a voice you could almost hear saying, “I am sending my Son among my people. If they can't manage to soften their hearts and prepare to receive him, I will do it for them.” Pray that God may send that same Spirit into the world today!

• *“After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit”* (v.7-8). This is Mark's concise summary of what John had to say about Jesus.

John's words were prophetic. Later, John knew his task was finished. He said, *“He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full. He must increase, but I must decrease”* (John 3:29-30). And just as John prophesied, Jesus had hardly begun his ministry when John was arrested and put in prison by Herod. Mark 1:14-15 says, *“Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.”* The time was indeed fulfilled – for John, for the Jews, for the world, for you, and for me.

While John was preaching and baptizing, he was recognized publicly as a prophet. In Mark 11:27-32, when the Pharisees were questioning the authority of Jesus, Jesus said to them, *“I will ask you a question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men? Answer me!”* And they argued with one another: *“If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But shall we say, ‘From men?’ -- They were afraid of the people, for all held that John was a real prophet. So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.”* It is clear from this that John was honored and revered by the people. Later, Jesus said, *“I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John; yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he”* (Luke 7:28).

John was great in the eyes of all who came to him repenting, but he didn't see himself that way. He saw himself as “not worthy to stoop down and untie the sandals” of Jesus – a task given to the lowest servant.

John contrasted his baptism with that of Jesus in v.8 when he said, *“He will baptize you,”* and yet John 4:1-3 claims that only the disciples of Jesus baptized. In other words, *“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit”* describes something Christ does in the hearts of those who receive him as their Lord and Savior.

• *He saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove* (v.10). Why would Jesus, who “knew no sin,” go to John to be baptized? Several reasons have been offered: (1) To authenticate his identity with mankind and emphasize our need for cleansing from sin; (2) to validate John's baptism; (3) to be himself authenticated by the Father as *“my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased”*; (4) to receive the Holy Spirit, who would empower him to leave his former life and begin his journey to the cross, where he would lay down his life to redeem our lost world from sin.

Jesus preached as John preached: *“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel”* (Mark 1:15). He taught his apostles to preach the same message (Mark 6:12).

To come back to God, you must *repent*. C. S. Lewis said repentance “is not something God demands of you before He will take you back and which He could let you off if He chose: it is simply a description of what going back to Him is like.”² There are no exceptions: *Repentance* is the only way to God.

2 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (II, 4), “The Perfect Penitent.”