

THE BEGINNING OF THE GOSPEL

Mark 1:1-20

A sermon by Peter Budd

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We're one week into a new year.

A time for new beginnings.

And at Emmanuel we're beginning a new series of sermons in Mark's gospel.

A gospel that begins with what it's beginning. (*Mark 1:1*)

"The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God,"

Wow. What a way to begin.

Right from the start it's clear that what is coming is gospel – good news.

Good news we want to know.

Good news we need to hear.

Good news about Jesus.

And who is this Jesus?

It's Jesus Christ – the Messiah – the Anointed One.

Anointed, like a king, or a priest.

Expected, foretold.

But even more than that.

It's Jesus, the Son of God.

Having a special relationship to God.

Indeed, when we link this to other passages in the New Testament, we understand he has the very nature of God.

God in human form.

Wow, what a lot is packed into those opening words.

And that's how Mark's gospel continues.

It moves rapidly, capturing events in a few well-chosen words.

Showing who Jesus is, as it takes us through what Jesus did.

The other synoptic gospels, Matthew and Luke, have most of what Mark says, and more.

But Mark gives us a concise and accessible account.

John's gospel is thoughtful and reflective, providing theological context.

But Mark is fast-paced, full of action.

Matthew and Luke tell about the human background of Jesus.

His genealogy. (*Matthew 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-37*)

His birth and childhood. (*Matthew 1:18-2:23; Luke 2*)

John speaks of the divinity of Jesus.

The Word who was with God and who was God.

Through whom all things were made.

Without whom nothing was made that has been made. (*John 1:1-3*)

The Word who became flesh and made his dwelling among us. (*John 1:14*)

Mark simply places Jesus within God's unfolding plan for humanity.

Preceded by a messenger, as predicted long before by Old Testament prophets. (*Mark 1:2,3*)

Mark combines a quotation from Malachi 3 verse 1

“I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way”
with a quotation from Isaiah 40 verse 3

“A voice of one calling in the desert,

‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”

We can imagine a cry to clear the mess out of the way,

and build a grand road for the arrival of the master, the Lord.

Not a physical road, but a figurative road,

preparing hearts to receive the king.

A messenger to prepare the way.

“And so”, says Mark, “John came...” (*Mark 1:4*)

We’re not told about John’s birth or background.

We have to turn to Luke’s gospel for that.

What’s important for Mark is what John did and what John said.

“John came”, says Mark

“baptising in the desert region

and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

It was to the desert – the wilderness – he came.

Not to a great centre of population.

People had to seek him out, in the barren lands near the Jordan River.

Seek him out, so they could be baptized.

And people came. (*Mark 1:5*)

“The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him.

Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the Jordan River.”

Baptism – a ceremonial immersion in water – indicating purification or consecration,
was something done when Gentiles wished to become Jews.

But here it is Jews confessing they are far from God,

recognizing that if the Christ – the Messiah – is on the way,

they need to repent – to change the direction of their lives –

and to seek forgiveness of their sins.

For those who came to seek John out, he was quite a sight. (*Mark 1:6*)

With clothing made of camel’s hair,

with a leather belt round his waist.

Just as the prophet Elijah is described in 2 Kings 1:8.

Reminding them of a past prophet who called Israel to repentance.

Reminding them of Malachi’s prophecy, Malachi 4:5

“See, I will send you the prophet Elijah

before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes.”

John was quite a character.

Living off locusts and wild honey.

But John’s message was focused on the one who would come after him. (*Mark 1:7,8*)

“After me will come one more powerful than I,

the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.

I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.”

John’s baptism with water was an external demonstration of repentance,

but the one after him would truly cleanse from sin,

immersing people in God's Holy Spirit,
changing them from the inside.

John's message was focused on the one who would come after him.

And Jesus came. (*Mark 1:9*)

Came from Nazareth in Galilee.

And Jesus was baptised by John in the Jordan.

Mark doesn't have any discussion about whether Jesus needed to be baptised.

We have to turn to Matthew's gospel for that. (*Matthew 3:14,15*)

Mark simply states that Jesus was baptised,

and focuses on what happened after. (*Mark 1:10*)

"As Jesus was coming up out of the water,

he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove."

Heaven being torn open.

Suddenly, dramatically, the sky seemingly ripped apart.

Reminiscent, perhaps, of Isaiah's plea in Isaiah 64:1

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains would tremble before you"

Except that this isn't accompanied by earthquake and terror.

Rather, by the gentle image of the Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove.

The Spirit descending.

The Spirit of God, in some way visibly present.

Descending on Jesus.

Confirming his mission.

Descending like a dove.

Recalling, perhaps, the language of Genesis 1:2, where in the beginning

"the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters."

And then there was a voice. (*Mark 1:11*)

"A voice came from heaven"

The Bible doesn't record many occasions when God speaks audibly from heaven.

But he does here, saying

"You are my Son, whom I love;
with you I am well pleased."

God the Father publicly declaring his love for, and his pleasure in, the Son.

Trinity isn't a Biblical word,

but in this episode, we have all three persons of the Trinity in action.

God the Son is baptized.

God the Holy Spirit descends like a dove.

God the Father speaks from heaven.

Jesus and his mission were affirmed.

But before he could continue with his public ministry,

he must spend time away from people, in the wilderness. (*Mark 1:12,13a*)

"At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert,

and he was in the desert for forty days, being tempted by Satan."

Mark doesn't say how Satan tempted Jesus or how Jesus responded.

We have to turn to Matthew's or Luke's gospels for that.

(Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13)

Mark simply states that Jesus was tempted,

showing that he is fully able to identify with us, and us with him.

As it's put in Hebrews 2:18

"Because he himself suffered when he was tempted,
he is able to help those who are being tempted."

And in Hebrews 4:15

"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses,
but we have one who has been tempted in every way,
just as we are – yet was without sin."

The temptation of Jesus demonstrates his humanity.

And encourages us to turn to Jesus for help when we feel tempted.

Mark then adds something unique, something the other gospels don't mention,
about that time Jesus spent in the wild and craggy Judean desert.

"He was with the wild animals" *(Mark 1:13)*

He was with the wild animals.

That might be taken just to indicate that God was protecting Jesus,

like Daniel in the lion's den,

but I think it shows something more.

It suggests Jesus was at peace with the wild animals.

There's a hint here of creation restored.

A hint of Paradise.

A glimpse of the bigger picture of what Jesus came to do.

Reconciliation.

Making peace.

As is expressed in Colossians chapter 1, verses 19 and 20

"For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,
and through him to reconcile to himself all things,
whether things on earth or things in heaven,
by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross."

In the wilderness we see both Jesus in his humanity and Jesus in his divinity.

He was with the wild animals and, Mark says,

"angels attended him." *(Mark 1:13)*

From Matthew's gospel, we understand that this was after Satan – the devil –
left from tempting Jesus. *(Matthew 4:11)*

Angels – heavenly beings – God's messengers

attended him, served him, ministered to his needs, took care of him,

Mark then skips to after John was put in prison, when

"Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God." *(Mark 1:14)*

They'd been waiting, waiting, waiting for God to act to save his people.

"The time has come", Jesus said. *(Mark 1:15)*

They'd been waiting, waiting, waiting for God's kingdom – God's rule – to be manifested.

"The kingdom of God is near", Jesus said.

The kingdom of God may be nothing like they'd imagined.

They may have thought it was something just for the Jews,
not something for all nations.
They might have expected Roman rule to be quickly overthrown,
not a sacrificial death at their hands.
But God was doing something bigger, grander, than anything they could imagine.
Good news for all people.
Good news for us today.

And the right response to that?
“Repent and believe the good news!”, Jesus said.
Repent – turn around – change the direction of your life.
And believe the good news.
Have faith, trust in what God does through Jesus.
Repentance coupled with faith.

Mark then jumps from the message that Jesus proclaimed
to introduce four key characters who would be instrumental
in spreading that message.
Two pairs of brothers, fishermen from Galilee.

First, there was Simon, who became known as Peter, and his brother Andrew.
“‘Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will make you fishers of men.’
At once they left their nets and followed him.” (*Mark 1:16-18*)
Then there was James son of Zebedee and his brother John.
“Without delay he called them,
and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men
and followed him.” (*Mark 1:19,20*)

Jesus called and they followed.
They can’t have had much concept of what following Jesus would actually involve.
At that stage, they didn’t understand who Jesus really was or what he came to do.
But they recognized, here was someone worth following.
Even though it meant leaving behind everything that was familiar.
Venturing into the unknown.
Jesus called and they followed.

What about us?
Are we eager for something different?
Are we ready to respond, whatever God asks of us?
Are we ready to follow wherever Jesus leads, in 2023 and beyond?
Even if it means abandoning things we cherish.
Even if it means new ways of thinking and new ways of doing things.
Are we ready to follow wherever Jesus leads, in 2023 and beyond?

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