

PREPARE THE WAY

Mark 1:1-8

P.C. Edwards

Introduction

If there is one thing that gives me chills every time it's the opening of *The Lion King*. Out of darkness we hear this beautiful voice singing unknown words as we watch the darkness overtaken by the light of the rising sun. We're meant to sense that with this new day is a new work beginning; indeed a new life is entering the world. But with this birth is also the acknowledgment of the reality of death, that we all live our lives through various ups and downs, and eventually our lives end to give way for new life to come.

As I read the opening of Mark's Gospel I can't help but hear Lebo M's voice breaking through the silence. A new thing is happening; a new beginning. And yet, at the same time, this is the beginning of something promised of old. You see, the beginning of the Gospel doesn't begin with the birth of Jesus but dates back to the prophets of old who foretold of it to come. New Creation will bring to end, therefore, the work of the Old Testament prophets. John the Baptist will decrease, will fade away into the night, in order for the Son to rise and usher in a new dawn.

Thus, as we enter into the second week of Advent this morning, we do so in a similar spirit, experiencing tastes of the new creation, of the new beginning, that has already begun. But it can be said we also continue to wait in the darkness, for dawn to fully come. We still groan with the creation awaiting the full children of God to be revealed. We still wait for the end so that a new beginning may follow. And so, it's in this light that we hear John the Baptist's words preparing the way for the first coming of Jesus Christ and we consider the way being prepared now for His second coming. We consider how **King Jesus has inaugurated a new work of God in creation, with which we join in through faith and repentance.**

1. We await the completion of new creation

v. 1-3

As already mentioned Mark begins with a title, essentially, of what is to follow, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God,” (Mark 1:1). We’ve already hinted at the new work Mark has in mind, but His use of “gospel,” “Jesus Christ,” and “Son of God” are noteworthy as well. You see, the term “gospel” was not a novel term to Mark or his audience. Instead, it was a deeply political term. The word, *εὐαγγέλιον, euangelion – Gospel*; was used in Roman calendars to call Caesar a god. It was a statement of victory and sovereignty. And so, when Mark uses these same terms he’s making a political statement. Caesar is not god; Caesar is not victorious; Caesar is not sovereign; only Jesus is. The true King is coming.

But at the same time Mark is quick to show the ancient nature of this new work. The Hebrew equivalent, *בשׂרָ, basar : εὐαγγέλιον, euangelion – Gospel* is used seventy-seven times in the Old Testament to denote good news, particularly of God’s return to Zion, ending Israel’s exile, and rooting out evil from the world. Moreover, the fact that Mark uses the Hebrew title of Messiah, or Christ in Greek, is a clear indication that though Jesus comes to do a new work in creation now, that this is connected to Israel’s past, and indeed to the past of the entire world. This is further enhanced by Mark’s quotation of Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 in verses 2 and 3. The point for Mark is that Jesus is beginning of new creation.

But that word, beginning, also implies one other thing: an end. You see, as we sit here some two-thousand years later we understand that though Christ has come and has won the victory, the world still suffers the lingering pain of sin. As Paul writes in Romans 8, “For the creation was subjected to futility—not willingly, but because of him who subjected it—in the hope that the creation itself will also be set free from the bondage to decay into the glorious freedom of God’s children. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together with

labor pains until now,” (Romans 8:20-22). We still deal with physical illness, with natural disasters, with hatred and envy. This year we’ve experienced a pandemic and global reaction like none of us has ever known. We continue to be divided politically, socially, economically. The concept of compassion and charity toward one another has nearly completely disappeared. The world is still longing and yearning for the fullness of the Kingdom to come.

But it is near! As we saw last week in Mark 13, we are to be alert and ready, for it could come at any time. Thus, John comes preaching. He’s the new Elijah, as his dress and diet distinguish him as such, (2 Kings 1:8), and he calls the people of Judea to get ready to enter the Kingdom. Just as thousands of years before the Israelites had crossed through the Jordan River into the promised land, now they were going through the river again, this time through a baptism of confession and repentance. John’s ministry, thus, is one of getting the people ready, for Jesus is coming. Get ready for the true and better conquest, the conquest of sin, death, and evil.

The problem, we see in Mark 1, is that the people aren’t ready. That in part is what Mark hints at when he places John as “in the wilderness”. You see, “Wilderness” plays a prominent theme throughout the Scriptures. Adam and Eve are sent out into the wild from Eden after their sin. Abraham is called out of the wilderness to come to the land God would show him. Jacob lives in exile for decades after his deception of his father and brother. Israel is brought out into the wilderness from Egypt in order to make them ready to enter God’s promised land; they are then left there for forty years for their idolatry. Later in history, Jerusalem is destroyed and Israel is taken into exile because of their sin. Jesus would go out into the wilderness to be tempted, to show that He was the true and better Adam, the true and better Israel. Even in the book of Revelation, the church is described as fleeing to the wilderness awaiting Christ’s return.

And so, that John the Baptist is preaching in the wilderness is statement of where Israel is spiritually. You see, while Israel had literally been restored to the land centuries before, Mark hints here that their true exile had not ended, just as saw every week in the Book of the Twelve. Yes, God had restored them in the land, but spiritually they were still broken, they were still slaves. Peter Leithart writes, “They are still in exile not because they are under the dominion of Rome but because they are under a much worse oppression,” (Peter Leithart).¹ Israel, and the whole world with it, are under the dominion of sin. This is the true exile from which they awaited a Messiah to rescue them.

As we just said, God had done great things in their past. He had brought them out of Egypt, brought them into the Promised Land. He had brought them out of Babylon, out of exile. Only 150 years prior to this, He had brought them out from the oppression of the Greeks. God had delivered them time and time again from their enemies, and yet in their hearts they still weren’t seeking Him. They may have had the appearance of religion, but not genuine repentance and faith of the heart.² And in many ways, I think, the same characterization could be offered of today.

You remember from last week, Jesus said that no one knows the time of his return, that a lost and dying world will be completely unprepared. In Matthew 24 Jesus describes the times as like that of the flood in Genesis 5-9, in that at the moment He returns people will be eating and drinking and carrying on with life as if everything was normal. They will be caught totally unprepared, not even looking for the return of the once and future King, which is how our world

¹ Peter Leithart, *The Gospel of Matthew through New Eyes, Volume 1: Jesus as Israel* (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2017), 81.

² Leithart writes, “John’s placement in the wilderness, his baptism in the Jordan, his diet and clothing, indicate that Israel will pass through a radical renewal before they can be brought out of the exile they are currently in. They have to be wrenched from the land, dwell in the wilderness all over again, and return to the land. Israel has become Egypt, and for Israel to become new, she must go through a massive exodus, which is what John is enacting,” (Leithart, *Jesus as Israel*, 83).

sits today. We continue to watch more and more open attacks on the Christian faith and on those who follow Jesus. We continue to watch the religion of secularism grow throughout the Western world. In majority world countries false religions continue to spread and the persecution of the church is rampant in many parts of the globe. And yes, while the Gospel continues to spread and the lost are found, the vast majority of the human population isn't seeking Jesus' return. Moreover, as the Gospel expands into new territories and new hearts, apostasy in "reached" nations and regions, like the U.S. and western Europe grows. In other words, we see places, like our own country, where people are seemingly leaving the faith. More than that, we've seen this past year just how much Christian nationalism, or civil religion, parades around as biblical Christianity, scores and scores of people across the U.S. who have traded loyalty to Christ and the Kingdom of God with loyalty to politicians and political figures. The world still largely lives in its spiritual blindness under the dominion of sin and death. Thus, the voice still cries out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight!"

2. We ready ourselves through faith and repentance v. 4-8

So, how do we make ourselves ready? How are all who hear this preaching to respond? John says it's with genuine faith and repentance. Mark describes John's baptism as one of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. In other words, John called upon the people, and specifically the Pharisees, the religious leaders and teachers of the day, to recognize their spiritual exile and to humble themselves through confession. Tom Wright describes the Pharisees like this, "Their pride itself was getting in the way of God's homecoming, and their arrogance toward other Israelites, let alone toward the rest of the world, was quite out of keeping with the humility needed before the coming king," (N. T. Wright).³

³ N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone: Chapters 1-15* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 18.

Now, what was the source of the 1st century Jews' pride? Well the rest of Mark's gospel, and the other gospel accounts, indicates that their pride seemed to stem from their ethnicity. Because of their ethnic status as descendants of Abraham the Jews of John's day assumed that they were entitled and guaranteed to all of the promises God had made to Abraham. Because they bore the outward sign of circumcision they were convinced they were beneficiaries of the covenant that circumcision signified. There was no need for any sort of lifestyle change or personal faith. They had checked the box and proven themselves by their traditions and rituals. This is precisely what we found throughout the Book of the Twelve, a misunderstanding of their identity that was shaped by heritage rather than faith.

Once again, here we see another parallel between the days of John the Baptist and our own. What I mean is that just as much as the religious class of Jesus' day trusted in their traditions or their background, and dare I say their skin color, so, too, many today assume they are "good with God" because, perhaps, they attend church every so often, or have been baptized, or grew up in church. The list of things we count on for our security with God goes on and on.

And the terrifying part of this is that most people don't even realize this about themselves. I mean, clearly, many of Jesus' day didn't recognize it about themselves; they really seemed to believe they were just fine! And I really think most in our community don't realize this about themselves either. They'll say, 'What do you mean; I liked the church's page on Facebook, or 'I have this sticker on my car.' We find the bare minimum that we can do to make ourselves feel safe and that's it.

Again, however, as we saw in the Twelve, as we see throughout the Scriptures, it's not those who share in the ethnicity of Abraham or the outward expressions of Abraham who are children of God, but rather those who share the faith of Abraham. As Paul writes to the Romans,

“This is why the promise is by faith, so that it may be according to grace, to guarantee it to all the descendants--not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of Abraham's faith. He is the father of us all,” (Romans 4:16).

Abraham heard the promises of God and he believed they were true. And not just mentally, but he had a belief that led to action. He put his hopes in what God said and then he pursued that with his life. Circumcision doesn't make you a child of God; baptism doesn't make you a child of God; 'going to church' doesn't make you a child of God. Faith in the promise of God is what makes you His child. As Paul tells the Galatians, “You know, then, that those who have faith, these are Abraham's sons. Now the Scripture saw in advance that God would justify the Gentiles by faith and proclaimed the gospel ahead of time to Abraham, saying, ‘All the nations will be blessed through you’. Consequently those who have faith are blessed with Abraham, who had faith,” (Galatians 3:7-9). Thus, John warns, you must genuinely place your faith in Christ, in such a way that you genuinely repent from your pride and rebellion. As Stanley Hauerwas argues, “[The call is] for Israel to again live as God's people, a holiness embodied in the law, requiring Israel to live by grace, making possible justice restored,” (Stanley Hauerwas).⁴

Now note, though, it's not that our repentance issues in the Kingdom or triggers in. Rather, it is the opposite. Because the Kingdom comes, that enables our repentance. John says, “One who is more powerful than I am is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit,” (Mark 1:7-8). There's a regenerating work that Christ does within the person to bring about genuine faith and repentance. Because of sin we are not our true selves as designed by

⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, BTCB (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 45.

God; we are alienated in our essence from the very purpose of our beings. We must be made new and conformed to the likeness of Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit through our faith.⁵

Conclusion

And so, this morning, we see two specific ways that Mark 1 calls us to respond in this Advent season. First, you must believe, repent, and be baptized. Just as John called those in his day, the calling remains the same that we must turn from our sin, renouncing our dependence upon ourselves, our family heritage, our personal righteousness, and our worldly accomplishments. Repentance doesn't only mean turning, though, from something, it entails also turning *to* something. We turn to Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only way we may be saved and made new in God's Kingdom.

Jesus Christ came once and He will come again to save you from your sin. As we trust in Him, we are resting in *His* righteousness, that when the Father looks at us He sees the glorious holiness and justice of His beloved Son. In Jesus alone we are adopted by the Father, made His sons and daughters, and declared citizens of His Kingdom that has no end. And as John shows us this morning, such a work produces faith in our life.

In other words, how do we know if we've been saved? How do we know if we've really trusted in Jesus? By whether or not we bear the fruit of faith in Him. As we've talked about these past two weeks, Advent is a season of self-examination, penitence, and faith. Examine yourself, therefore. In your heart have you placed all your hopes and all your confidence in Jesus alone? Is this made manifest in your life? Are the actions and conduct of your everyday life consistent

⁵ It is in Jesus alone that we are baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire meaning, as Cyril of Alexandria wrote, with, "the life-giving energy of the Spirit," (Cyril of Alexandria, *Fragment 27 in Matthew 1-13*, ACCS [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001], 47).

with your professed faith? I'm not saying you're perfect or you never sin, but does your life more resemble Christ and Him crucified or that of the world?

We spoke at the beginning of the necessity of the old passing away in order for the new to come. Think right now, what are some characteristics that we true of your old life before Christ? Maybe you came to faith young and don't have much concrete memory of the old life. Still, what are traits of estrangement from God you could list? But what also are characteristics of the new life. As Christ has come to set the world to rights, to overturn the political and social institutions of this present world, to overcome the powers and principalities of sin and evil, to conquer death itself, what kind of world and citizenry does King Jesus produce. And once you have that picture in your mind of the old and now of the new, now look at your life. Just as we watch the sun rise in the morning and overtake the darkness, can you honestly say of your old life that the sun is rising and that day after day the light continues to overtake the darkness and usher in new life?

That newness of life, it's what baptism represents. You see, while church traditions vary as to the mode and meaning, the Bible is unequivocally clear that baptism is by immersion in water for the person who has already professed faith in Christ. Baptism does not save you, as the Catholic Church and Christian Church believe. Baptism doesn't set the newborn baby on the right path as Anglicans, Lutherans, and others believe. Baptism is an outward show of an inward reality. It's an act of obedience to Jesus. It's an act of assurance and blessing. It's an illustration that the old is now dead and we are now living in the newness of the life King Jesus has accomplished for us.

And it is a public declaration. That's why we don't do private baptisms or why we don't just do it on someone's private property or just with a few other people. We do it together,

publicly, as a church because that's the model we see in Scripture and the mode that most closely aligns with the meaning of baptism as defined in the Scriptures.

This is how we must all first respond to Mark 1, this morning, to make sure we've each believed, repented, and been baptized. But then the second overall application we can take is from John's example, that is that we must now proclaim the gospel. You see, John's purpose in human history was to prepare the way for the first coming of Christ. Our purpose, the purpose of the church, is to prepare the way for the second coming. We declare to a lost and dying world that Jesus has indeed already come and is coming again. He is the once and future King. And there is either salvation or wrath coming with Him. I know many of us are hesitant and uncomfortable with sharing this simple truth because we don't want to offend or cause issues, but the fact is that, "The ax is already at the root of the trees," (Matthew 3:10a).

We watched this emphasis weekly throughout the Book of the Twelve. The Day of the Lord will be a day of both judgment *and* restoration; which one depends on your response to Jesus Christ. And so, let us not forget what kind of truth this is. It is a gospel, meaning its news, which is good, and, thus, is to be told! The early church took the message of Jesus and proclaimed it to the evil rulers of their day. While Rome espoused a false gospel of Caesar, the church proclaimed the true Gospel of Jesus as Lord and Savior. Likewise, the church today must take the message of Jesus and proclaim it against all the false gospels of our day. The false gospel of civil religion, 'God and Country', the false gospel of health and wealth; the false gospel of secularism and consumerism; the false gospel of political liberation and revolution. We have a true gospel that needs to be heard by all.

Our gospel also must be spoken not just against the ungodly or amoral institutions of our days but also to individuals who live in estrangement from their Creator. The individuals who

live next door to us, who work beside us, who stand ‘six-feet-apart’ from us at the grocery store. The individuals who live in different parts of town from us, who look different or speak differently than us. The individuals who live in other parts of the world, in Haiti, Guatemala, Serbia, Albania. We must carry the gospel next door and to the ends of the earth, heralding the good news that restoration has come!

We must personally make ourselves ready for the coming King and we must call all others around us to do the same. As we lit the Faith Candle this morning, as you gaze at its flame, is your faith in Jesus Christ and are you pointing others to the same?