

Mark 1:1-15 (NIV)

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, ²as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way” —
³“a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’ ”

⁴And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

⁷And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

⁹At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

¹⁰Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

¹²At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, ¹³and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

¹⁴After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.

¹⁵“The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Tweet it. Facebook it. E-mail. Text it.

It is time to proclaim the coming of the Lord. It is always time.

When the Pope is tweeting you know it is time to get on board. I’m still not sure how much you can accomplish in 140 characters, but I suppose that when it comes to the Good News there is no need to go on and on. Jesus’ first words in the gospel of Mark are these:

The time has come, the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!

86 characters . . . eminently tweetable.

Or this brief message from a voice in heaven when Jesus is baptized by John:

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

56 characters . . . tweet-worthy even for a slow typist.

Perhaps Jesus would have taken to Twitter with no hesitation. In fact, I’d bet on it, for Jesus had a singular focus on announcing that the kingdom of God was arriving in and through himself. Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, LinkedIn . . . he’d have used every means possible to get the word out, to connect people to himself and to one another

Certainly, the Gospel of Mark is brief and to the point. The first of the gospels to be written (mid-60’s AD), it is also the shortest. There are only 661 verses in the NIV translation of the gospel, compared to more than 31,000 for the whole of the Bible. 661 tweets for Mark. They begin simply enough:

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God . . .

70 characters. . . . In this writing, as with all writing, beginnings matter. They set the stage for what is to come. We have four Gospels that have been sacred Scripture from the earliest decades of Christianity. Each of the four paints for us a different portrait of Jesus. And all four Gospels begin differently. Two tell the story of Jesus' birth. Two introduce Jesus as he begins his public ministry. As Morna Hooker puts it, each beginning is the key that opens the Gospel to us.¹

A dramatic key

Imagine, if you can, that you've never heard of Jesus. A friend invites you over for a small dinner party to hear an amazing story. You arrive in the evening, a little tired and hungry. But, as everyone takes a seat, someone rises and begins reading a dramatic story.

This is a bit how it was in the first century. Mark's Gospel, his story of Jesus, was not read, it was heard, usually among small groups of Christians gathered in homes for worship. We aren't very practiced at listening to someone read to us. I doubt that most of us have the attention span even for a writing as brief as Mark's Gospel. But we do attend the theater, where we might enjoy a play that lasts even two or three hours.

Mark's Gospel has to function a bit like a play when it is heard. The listener has no paragraphs or chapter headings. The listener can't go back and reread a passage to clarify something. Thus, knowing that his Gospel would be heard, not read, Mark helps the listener along, helping us to see what is coming. Hooker points out that the first thirteen verses of Mark do just that. They are a prologue, preparing us for the dramatic events we will soon hear about in Mark's story.

“The time has come, and the kingdom of God has come near;
repent and believe in the good news.”

Here you have it. If you are looking for a one-sentence description of Jesus' ministry, this is it. These are the first words Jesus speaks in Mark's gospel. So let's take a closer look at them.

The time is fulfilled For centuries, the Jews had labored under foreign rule that was often brutal. They waited with great hope and anticipation for the day when God would again rule, when God's kingdom would come, when all the world would see that YHWH is God. Jesus' announces that their waiting is over – the time has come!

The kingdom of God has come near Jesus announces that, yes!, God's rule is about to burst upon them; the story is coming to a climax. God will again be king. There will be no room for Caesar or any other pretenders to lordship. There will be only one Lord (and it will turn out to be Jesus!).

Repent Jesus is not inviting his fellow Jews to join some sort of social club. Rather, he invites them to recognize and to regret that they have been wrong-headed in their approach to being God's people. Jesus invites them to abandon their own agendas and follow his. This is not about simply being sorry for what they did; Jesus calls them to turn 180° and take a new path.

Believe in the good news The word “believe” can throw us off here; it makes it all seem too intellectual. Instead, Jesus speaks here of trust, of embracing Jesus and his proclamation with our whole being. The good news is that Jesus is Lord, not anyone or anything else. Our loyalty and devotion must lie with Jesus.

Preparing the way

Mark, the storyteller, is the first to prepare us for what lies ahead. He gives away the ending at the beginning. We are about to hear the Good News of Jesus the Messiah (“Christ” is simply the Greek word for “Messiah”). Most of the characters in Mark's

¹ *Beginnings: Keys that Open the Gospels*, by Morna D. Hooker of Cambridge University. Dr. Hooker helps us to see how each Gospel prologue offers us guidance on how the rest of the book should be read.

drama won't understand that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, but we are told right up front. To make sure we "get it," Mark then quotes Isaiah's promise of one who would "prepare the way of the Lord."

With the words of Isaiah ringing in our ears, we then meet John the baptizer, who is living in the wilderness on locusts and honey, dressed in animal skin. He is proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and is actually performing some sort of ceremonial washing or plunging in the Jordan River.

This all seems pretty strange to us, but it would not have been strange to Jews of Jesus' day, for Jesus was born into a world of turmoil and trouble. The Jews still believed that they were God's chosen people, though they had labored under the ungodly oppression of foreign rulers and assorted pretenders for centuries. The Jews anxiously looked forward to the day when God's promises to them would be kept and a messenger (see the quotes from Isaiah in today's scripture) would come to announce the long-awaited arrival of God's kingdom. Thus, when people heard of John out there in the Jordan wilderness plunging people into the river and announcing the forgiveness of their sins, many flocked to him. Could this be, they asked? Might John be Elijah? Might he even be the Messiah himself? Has our story finally come to its climax?

Baptism

We think of *baptism* as only a church word. But in Jesus' day, the Greek word *baptizo* meant simply to "plunge" or "dip" or "splash" or even "drown."

Though there was some precedents for ceremonial washing in Judaism, the only people who got a full immersion were non-Jews converting to Judaism.

Thus, when John told people that they needed to come and be washed in the Jordan for repentance of their sins, it was probably offensive to many Jews. After all, sins were to be forgiven at the Temple, but here was John, plunging people into a river for the forgiveness of sins.

More than 1200 years before John, Joshua had led the Israelites across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land. Ever since, the Jordan River had been a symbol of salvation and hope. In baptizing people in the Jordan River, John was symbolically reenacting the crossing of the river. People came to be washed in the river, to give up their old ways, to be cleansed of their past, to be part of the renewed people of the covenant. Yet . . . John pointed the people to the one "more powerful than I who is coming after me" (v.7) who would baptize, not with water, but with the Holy Spirit (v. 8). In Jesus, entering God's renewed people will be a crossing over from an old life to a new life.

The crowds don't know that it is Jesus to whom John points, but we, the listeners do, thanks to Mark's beginning. Though no one other than Jesus sees the Holy Spirit descending upon him, we see it. Only we and Jesus hear God's call to his beloved Son.

Are we prepared for the truth?

It is striking to me that Mark's prologue prepares us for Jesus' public ministry but not for his crucifixion. Mark tells us right up front that Jesus is the God's Messiah and Son. Thus, we aren't surprised when Jesus performs miracles or restores life or casts out demons. But nothing here prepares us for Jesus' humiliating and lonely death. It is as if Jesus' entire 2½ year journey begins and ends in the wilderness. It is God's Spirit who drives Jesus into the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry (v. 12) and it is God who saves Jesus from the wilderness of his crucifixion by raising him from the dead, pushing him forward into new life.

Thus it is with us. We live in a wilderness that is too often of our own creation. Yet, Jesus meets us there. In him, we are reborn. We are strengthened and renewed. The world may still be a wilderness filled with temptations to turn away from God, but we are prepared so that, by the power of Christ, we can face life's temptations and trials yet remain true to our Lord, even as we proclaim him to all who will listen.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In Mark's gospel, Jesus' first public statement challenges listeners to "repent, and believe in the good news."
 - What might this mean in your own life?
 - What agenda do we really follow? Who sets our priorities?
 - What is the good news in which we are called to believe? If it is a proclamation that Jesus is truly Lord, how should this change the priorities in our lives?
2. John proclaims a baptism, a plunging, of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. To repent is not simply to be sorry for what you've done, but to turn 180° from the direction you've been headed. Thus, people brought their sins to the river, were plunged into it by John, and, metaphorically at least, crossed the river into God's renewed people. In practice, most of us find it pretty hard to leave behind all our sins and regrets. It much more likely that we'll hang on to them until we drown in the river!
 - How do we go about truly leaving behind all our "baggage" – our sins, our mistakes, and our regrets?
 - How do we truly, practically, receive the forgiveness freely offered us by God?
 - How can we better at forgiving others?

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own.

This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Genesis

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall on Tuesdays.

Monday Evening Class – now studying Revelation

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall on Monday evenings.

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Beginning this weekend – January 6

Scott Engle will lead an eye-opening series on the seven deadly sins:

Glittering Vices

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org

Sermon Notes
