

The Kingdom of God Has Drawn Near

The Prologue, 1:1-15

Mark begins his story by jumping right into the events that launched Jesus on his mission. After quoting Isaiah, who had promised that God would send someone to “prepare *the way* of the Lord,” Mark announces that John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism for the forgiveness of sins and announcing the coming of one stronger than he who would baptize in the Holy Spirit (1:2-8). We will find “the way of the Lord,” repentance, and the first-century understanding of forgiveness of sins to be important for Mark’s story. For now I invite you to some reflection on *repentance*.

Often in Protestant circles repentance is associated with remorse—we’ve done something wrong, are sorry, and promise not to do it again. I’ve heard preachers declare that it means turning our lives in a different direction. Neither of those ideas, however, is adequate for understanding repentance in Mark. For Mark *to repent* is closest to the idea of “seeing differently,” for if you see differently, you will live differently. Consider the apostle Paul. When he *saw* that God loved Gentiles, he lived his life differently. How could he do otherwise once he *saw* differently? That’s what Mark has in mind by repentance, as we shall see.

John the Baptizer

So John is baptizing, calling people to repent, and announcing the Coming One. And then Mark tells us that Jesus of Nazareth was baptized by John. With no preamble or striking introduction, with few words, Mark brings Jesus into the story. But look what hap-

Lectionary Loop

Second Sunday of Advent, Year B,
Mark 1:1-8

Baptism of the Lord, Year B,
Mark 1:4-11

Third Sunday after Epiphany, Year
B, Mark 1:14-20

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany,
year B, Mark 1:21-28

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, Year
B, Mark 1:29-39

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, Year
B, Mark 1:40-45

First Sunday in Lent, Year B, Mark
1:9-15

Study Bible

Prologues

Read about the function of “Prologues” in ancient narratives, *NISB*, 1804.

Teaching Tips

Apocalyptic Preaching

The image of John the Baptist as Elijah coming “to prepare the way of the Lord” and Jesus’ announcement that “the kingdom of God has drawn near” led many scholars to believe that
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pens next: as Jesus came up from the water he saw the heavens ripped apart and the Spirit descending on him like a dove and heard a voice from heaven saying, “You are my beloved son; in you I am well pleased” (1:11).

Jesus of Nazareth

Notice first that *Jesus* saw and heard. In Mark’s telling, this event was not a grand announcement to many people but a significant moment for Jesus. So, how might we understand the content of this vision Jesus sees and hears? The heavens were thought to be a great cosmic curtain separating creation from God’s presence, but the heavens in Mark’s story are torn open, even ripped apart. The Greek verb *schizo* (from which we get schism) is a strong, almost violent, word. Interpreters have long thought this tearing of the heavens means human beings have new access to God. But maybe it also signals that God will no longer be confined to sacred spaces—where we human beings often try to lock God away—but is on the loose in our realm (Juel, *Master of Surprise*, 35-36). So we should not be surprised that when the heavens were torn open, or that the Spirit came down like a dove to Jesus. God is up to something significant, and this Jesus of Nazareth is involved!

The Spirit’s first act is perhaps unexpected—the Spirit *drives* Jesus into the wilderness. After saying “yes” to a summons from God, those who embark on a spiritual journey often encounter a difficult moment that tells them the way; though it promises to be God’s way, it will not be easy. Driven to the wilderness by the Spirit, Jesus is tempted by Satan for forty days and was with the wild beasts (1:13). Many readers automatically add in their own minds the explicit temptations described by Matthew and Luke. I suspect, however, that Mark hoped we might think along different lines. The associations with Israel’s forty-year wandering in the wilderness and Elijah’s forty days of travel to Horeb call to mind those who were tempted to quit the journey. Satan’s opposition makes clear that Jesus’ way will be difficult. We know that with God’s help (both the Spirit and angels, vv. 12-13), Jesus did not

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Mark understood Jesus’ mission as an apocalyptic turning point in history. Look up the word “apocalyptic” in several contemporary Bible dictionaries and/or commentaries. Be sure to use new resources, for recent studies have offered exciting new views of the concept. Be prepared to discuss the concept with your group, including Mark’s idea that this apocalyptic turning point is currently underway rather than being a future event.

Reflections

A Change of Outlook and in Living

1. Can you recall a time when you *saw* someone or some situation differently and lived differently as a result?
2. What is the impact of considering such a “moment” as an experience of repentance?

Sources

Heavens Ripped Open for God and People

Donald H. Juel, *Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 35-36.

quit but continued on his journey, because after his forty days in the wilderness, he returns to Galilee to preach (1:14).

Jesus Proclaims the Kingdom of God in Galilee, 1:16-45

In his preaching Jesus announced, “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has drawn near. Repent and believe in the gospel!” In the first-century Mediterranean world, the “kingdom” belonged to Caesar, and the “gospel” was the information about peace and security Caesar brought. Of course his “peace” was wrought by conquest, coercion, terror, and enslavement, but it ended civil wars and brought prosperity to the elites and a few others. Therefore, all people should be grateful to Caesar, follow Caesar’s laws, pay their taxes, and be loyal citizens of the empire. This propaganda surrounded and shaped the lives of the people, including the people of Israel. Against this backdrop we can see Jesus’ declarations that the kingdom belonged to God, God’s kingdom had drawn near, and *this news*, this Gospel, was not just a collection of theologically significant words. They were politically loaded statements!

Christians have tended to focus on the future dimension of Jesus’ message of God’s kingdom. But the Greek verb translated “has drawn near” is perfect tense, denoting an action that has already taken place but with effects that continue to be felt. Mark has told us that the heavens were torn open, so that God is on the loose in our world (1:10). God’s dramatic entry into our space means that transformation is *now* underway. The apocalyptic turning point, God’s new age, does not await a future, cataclysmic event—it *has drawn near*! So, “repent,” Jesus says. *See* what God is doing in the world! A new way of living is possible! Then Jesus set out to practice his preaching.

We should note that first-century social relations were pyramid-like in arrangement, with Caesar on top ruling over all others who were situated in a complex set of graduated dominations and subordinations. There were a few other “rulers” near the top, but the vast majority of people had little power or worth in this

Reflections

Theological affirmations of Jesus as the divine Son of God may make it difficult for us to imagine that he could have been genuinely tempted to turn back from the journey to which God called him. But Mark is notorious for taking Jesus’ humanity very seriously.

1. What reactions do you have to Mark’s story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness?
2. What prompts such reactions from you?

Reflections

To Serve or Not to Serve

The Greek word *diakoneo* (meaning to serve, to minister) is used to describe what the angels did for Jesus in 1:13 and what Simon’s mother-in-law did in 1:31.

1. Is this verb translated the same in both verses in your Bible?
2. If they aren’t, what words are used and what reactions or observations do you have about two different English words being used for the one Greek verb, *diakoneo*?

world and fell to the bottom of the pyramid. The “peace” of Rome was maintained when all citizens knew their place.

So, now let’s see Jesus traveling through Galilee calling four fishermen to follow him (1:16-20), touching and healing a woman who got up and ministered to (or with) them (1:29-31), touching and making clean a leper (1:40-45). All of these people were low on the pyramid. Fishermen were coarse and dirty. Women were, well . . . women. Lepers were the most unclean people in that culture and perhaps should be placed under the pyramid. But Jesus valued them and offered them compassion, respect, and wholeness. In the leper story, Jesus sends the leper to the priests “for a witness to them” (1:44). The witness seems to be, “YOU said I am outcast and unclean, but GOD says I matter!”

Indeed religious institutions (including Christian ones) often seem to create or reinforce the outcast place of certain people, thus becoming arenas where self-righteous superiority fills the air. Consequently, I doubt it’s coincidence that, in the midst of these stories of Jesus welcoming outcasts, Mark also tells about Jesus exorcising a demon *in a religious place* (1:21-28). Interestingly, it is the first public event of Jesus’ ministry according to Mark.

In our scientific world ancient exorcism stories present a challenge. Some dismiss them as mere ancient superstitions. Others take them literally despite what we now know about viruses, mental illness, etc. Either approach may leave us oddly dissatisfied with their easy dismissal or easy acceptance of demons. In *The Spirituality of Mark* I suggested we learn from scholars who point to the symbolic power of these narratives and see the demons as evoking the presence of evil that threatens life as God intended. Not all of us are comfortable with the idea of “demons,” but many of us see ethnic cleansing in Bosnia or Rwanda, the terrible events in Oklahoma City and on September 11, 2001, the effect of addiction or violence on someone we love, the persistence of racism and sexism, and are convinced that evil is present in the world.

From this perspective, Mark 1:21-28 narrates Jesus’ encounter with evil within the religious institution in

Teaching Tips

Clean or Unclean?

The ancient understanding of purity/ritual cleanliness/holiness is important in the leper story and will be important again in the Gospel. If you are unfamiliar with newer social science studies of this ancient concept, then do some reading on the topic. You could check the chapter by Jerome Neyrey in *The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation*, ed. by Richard Rohrbaugh (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1996) or the shorter entry in *Biblical Social Values and Their Meaning*, ed. by John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1993), 151-152.

Questions for Discussion

Who Are the Outcasts around You?

A leper was as unclean/unholy as one could get in first-century Israel and was often banished from her or his home. To understand his pain deeply, then, we need to go out to the margins and see where he lived.

1. If you can imagine yourself doing that, what do you think you would see, feel, and experience?
2. Who are the outcasts in your community? Would you say the church in your community (including your own church) has tried to include the outcasts, or has it supported their outcast status?

Capernaum. On the Sabbath he was teaching the people, presumably about the kingdom of God being near, and they were astonished at the power of his words. He was *not* like their usual religious teachers (the scribes, 1:22). At that point evil reared its ugly head. Coincidence?

The demon asks, “What have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us?” (1:24). If, in the symbolics of the narrative, the demon is asking if Jesus will destroy the world as the human powers have made it, the answer is yes. This is an apocalyptic moment. But he will not do it via violence and conquest like the Romans (and their partners, including some of Israel’s religious leadership). He will do it through actions like those in Mark’s first chapter—healing, touching, respecting, calling those who’ve been told they are nothing, enabling them to live in God’s kingdom and turn their backs on “their place” in Caesar’s pyramid.

So Jesus teaches those gathered to learn and exorcises the demon in the religious institution, and the people call this experience “a new teaching with power” (1:27). No wonder! The kingdom of God has drawn near!

Sources

Understanding Demon Exorcisms

Those interested may read pages 78-79 in *The Spirituality of Mark* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996) for further explanation of this approach to reading exorcism stories.