

## Preparing the Way

One of our convictions as a church is that we ought to be a people that takes the Bible seriously. We don't try to pick and choose verses here and there to simply comfort us or bolster the beliefs we already hold, but we want God's Word to transform us and shape our worldview. I like to say that we should never try to avoid or diminish the parts of the Bible that seem strange to us, but instead we should allow the Bible to make us into stranger people.

The only real way for us to allow scripture to do that in our lives is to spend real sustained time studying and meditating upon the Word. So for the next few months we're going to be journeying together through the Gospel of Mark.

We will take it a chapter a week, or else we may never finish - I'll be covering a portion of the text in my sermons, and we'll explore other sections of the chapter more in depth during our midweek Bible Studies.

I was asked recently, why Mark? I've mentioned that I'd like us as a community to read through at least one Gospel a year - but why didn't we start with Matthew? Isn't that the first one?

***I've got TWO answers for that: (1)*** Although Matthew appears first in our bibles, Mark is actually believed to have been written earlier - in fact, both Matthew and Luke appear to have borrowed material from Mark and added their own. ***(2)*** I believe that Mark's Gospel telling has something special to say for our community in this season.

Mark's telling of the Good News is the shortest account we have. It's simple and vivid. It's full of activity, and it tends to let Jesus' words and actions speak for themselves rather than giving extra explanation.

Part of this is simply because when and why Mark is writing. It's generally accepted that Mark was writing to the early Church, likely first for the Christians in Rome, who were experiencing persecution. He's compiling together the resources he's gleaned from Peter's own preaching and compiling them into an orderly account.

So we might keep that in mind when the text seems to jump around or provides few details before moving on. Mark may simply not have had much time present a more polished text.

**But that may also influence the choices that he DOES make in compiling this material together.** These believers in the midst of persecution need a reminder about the hope laid before them and instruction for how to live in light of Jesus' life, teaching, ministry, death, and resurrection.

So Mark is painting a picture for them of what this Gospel is all about - what it was like to be there with Jesus - and what it means for us now to live faithfully even in difficult times.

With that said, let's jump into our text.

## READING

**Mark 1:**<sup>1</sup> The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, <sup>2</sup> as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

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

<sup>4</sup> And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> The 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. <sup>6</sup> John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

<sup>7</sup> And 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. <sup>8</sup> I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

**May God bless the Reading of His Word. Amen**

## I. GOD PREPARES IN THE WILDERNESS (1-3).

The Gospels all have unique and interesting beginnings.

- Matthew begins his with a genealogy - everyone’s favorite thing to read in scripture.
- We just read a good portion of Luke’s opening chapters during the Advent season where he thrusts us in the infant narratives of Jesus and John the Baptist.
- The Gospel of John has a more poetic beginning, calling to mind the book of Genesis as he talks of the Word of God who was present from the very beginning and is now made flesh in the person of Jesus.

Mark doesn’t give us any of that. Instead, he links Jesus’ story with message of the OT prophets. And he does this by first introducing us to a dramatic character named John the Baptist.

We know from Luke’s account that John’s dad was a priest; but since his parents were pretty old when they conceived, they likely passed away while he was still young. Now he’s grown, and he’s decidedly not a priest - instead of operating in the center of all the religious activity in Jerusalem, he’s out living in the wilderness and living off the land.

**By the way, do you all know what John the Baptist and Winnie the Pooh have in common?**

They both love honey and they have the same middle name - “THE”

**John is a prophet, which is important because there haven't been any of those for hundreds of years!**

It is no accident that John the Baptist comes preaching in the wilderness. It is a prophetic sign that God is inviting His people back to where it all began - in the Exodus from Egypt and their formation as a people in the wilderness. They are being called out from their lives in the Roman empire to be prepared for salvation in the wilderness.

It's a place of chaos and uncertainty but it's also a place where God can strip away all the stuff of life and bring clarity and wonder. If you've ever been disarmed by the beauty of the night sky away from city lights, then you know. If you've ever trembled at the majesty of a thunderstorm, then you maybe have some idea.

**When God wants to prepare us, He often calls us into the wilderness.**

When God wants to meet us, God often begins by meeting us in the far-off corners of our heart where the distractions are few and our fears and anxieties are great. God asks us to leave our busyness, our comfort, our regular routine, and to go out and meet Him so that we can be saved.

- If you're looking to gain favor with God through success - you won't find it there.
- If you're looking for comfort in material things - it won't last forever.
- If you're looking for peace in the perfect diet, planner, or self-help book - any help you find there will only be surface level.

God prepares us in the wilderness because that's the only place He can get our full attention. It's where all our junk starts to bubble to the surface and we can't hide it or run away from it.

God says, "Come to me here. Remember how I saved you before and called you my own. Come and make things right with me. I want you. All of you. Let's work this out in the place where it all started."

**God prepares in the wilderness places, and God prepares us THROUGH REPENTANCE.**

## II. GOD PREPARES THROUGH REPENTANCE (4-6).

John had a fairly simple but radical message. Repent and be baptized, because the Lord is coming in power to bring salvation.

John calls out from the wilderness, and calls the people into the waters of the Jordan River to be baptized.

This sort of immersion as a dramatic act of cleansing and repentance was new to the Jewish people. The only that could be likened to it was the act of immersing God-fearing Gentiles as a form of cleansing when they wanted to convert to Judaism. But John wasn't talking to Gentiles -

he was talking to the Jewish people themselves. This was a dramatic and symbolic act, much the same as the other prophets would have used to communicate their messages hundreds of years prior.

It was tactile so that it etched into your memory and your very being. The act of repenting was accompanied by being plunged into the water as a symbol of cleansing. And like the call into the wilderness, the journey through the waters reminded the Jewish people of God's saving action as He brought them out of Egypt through the parted waters of the Red Sea AND later when He stopped the flow of Jordan River so they could cross into the Promised Land. That's the same river John was baptizing them in now.

John's baptism is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This is an important concept to grasp because this repentance and forgiveness happened *before* the cross and resurrection.

I often have people ask me why Jesus seems so different from the God of the OT. They say that Jesus' compassion and forgiveness just seems so foreign compared to God's wrath in the OT. And I often just wanna say, what Bible are you reading?

The truth is that the cross is NOT the first time God has demonstrated His great love and forgiveness. God has ALWAYS been about mercy and forgiveness, and the only thing that He has ever asked for is confession and repentance. Here's some evidence for you:

**2 Chronicles 7:**<sup>14</sup> if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

**Proverbs 28:**<sup>13</sup> Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.

**Ezekiel 18:**<sup>21</sup> "But if a wicked person turns away from all the sins they have committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, that person will surely live; they will not die. <sup>22</sup> None of the offenses they have committed will be remembered against them. Because of the righteous things they have done, they will live. <sup>23</sup> Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign Lord. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?"

**Isaiah 44:**<sup>22</sup> I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you."

**Isaiah 55:**<sup>6</sup> Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. <sup>7</sup> Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

**Joel 2:**<sup>13</sup> Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.

**Hosea 6:**<sup>6</sup> For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.

**Psalms 51:**<sup>16</sup> You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. <sup>17</sup> My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.

**The point is this:** God has always been in the business of redeeming His people. He's always been gracious and merciful. And the repent - turn from your wicked ways - put your trust in God and you will be saved.

Even the sacrificial system of Leviticus was not about giving God some payment of blood as a punishment for our sin. The Law was a gift so that God's people might recognize the weight of sin and the glory of God's grace who had made a way for them to get right with Him.

**So I'll say this as a quick aside:** If you've still got that voice rattling around in your head saying that your sin is too great for God to forgive...get over yourself.

How many more times does God have to say it before we realize that He's not going anywhere? God has covenanted with us, and God will remain faithful to His promises.

There is no reason for us to keep wallowing in our own self-destructive sinful behaviors.

We are not lost to shame. We are not unlovable trash.

This is not the best we can ever hope for.

This isn't "just the way we are".

We are God's creation, His beloved redeemed, and we should start acting like it

**The funny thing is, we often treat forgiveness of sin like it's the big good news.** That's just the Gospel's preamble. It's just getting started!

Effectively, John the Baptist is out there saying, "Get right with God cause you won't believe what He's got in store!"

I'll give you a hint - it has to do with Jesus.

**God prepares us IN THE WILDERNESS, THROUGH REPENTANCE, FOR THE SPIRIT.**

### III. GOD PREPARES FOR THE SPIRIT (7-8).

John says he's preparing the way for another who will be far greater than him. Someone so great that John won't even be worthy to stoop down and undo his sandals like a servant. Which is ironic since he's talking about Jesus, who would later stoop down to wash the feet of His own disciples in a show of humility and love.

John says that this new leader will initiate a different kind of baptism - not with water but with the Holy Spirit.

Not just for the forgiveness of sins but for a new outpouring of God's presence. John's baptism cleansed. Jesus' baptism invites into a new life where we can die to self and come alive in the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is really important for us to understand, because this is the difference between John's baptism and the baptism that we undergo as Christians. When we are baptized in the name of Jesus as an active testimony to our belief in Him as Lord, we are dying to ourselves so that we might come alive in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism isn't just about forgiveness and cleansing - it's about a whole new life!

When Paul talks about baptism to the church in Rome he says

**Romans 6:**<sup>3</sup> Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup> We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. <sup>5</sup> For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. <sup>6</sup> For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— <sup>7</sup> because anyone who has died has been set free from sin. <sup>8</sup> Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

This isn't just about being forgiven of our sins. It's about being freed completely from the power it has over us!

And as soon as Jesus steps on the scene, He begins demonstrating the freedom and power of the kingdom of God. If you read on in chapter 1 of Mark you begin to see a taste of it as he heals many and drives out demonic spirits. But the power Jesus displays through the Holy Spirit isn't meant to impress or garner fame. In fact he seems intent on keeping his identity a secret, and when crowds start seeking him out - he insists that there's other work to be done.

In the same way, the gift of the Holy Spirit given to us is not meant to help us to mighty and miraculous works - although that is certainly within the purview of the Spirit. No, it's given to us so that we can give witness to God's Kingdom in the sacrificial loving power that confronts death with hope and compassion.

**It's the Holy Spirit that gives us the power to LIVE the kind of life that Jesus LIVED and the courage to face the kind of DEATH that Jesus DIED.**

I mentioned earlier that Mark was writing during a time of persecution, and so part of his message was to encourage believers for whom martyrdom was a very real possibility. That's a foreign concept to most of us Christians in America.

We may not enjoy the same privileges we once had in our culture, but we're a far cry away from our lives being threatened for our beliefs. But we need to be careful not to distance ourselves from that reality as part of the universal church.

We dare not fall into the trap of calling it persecution when Starbucks fails to put Merry Christmas on their coffee cups. But we SHOULD live with an appropriate antagonism to the world that realizes the possibility of a world in which we might die the death of Christ. Being baptized into Christ's life means being baptized into His death.

The Holy Spirit gives us love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control for just this reason - so that we might respond to the evil of this world with perfect light and life. With a willingness to confront persecution with unswerving faith that knows death is not the final word.

For most of us that will not mean martyrdom and death. But it may mean giving up the kind of life we thought we'd have.

- It can mean giving up a job because it requires you to do something against God's will or standards.
- It can mean relocating your home so that you can be a more tangible witness of hope and love to those in need.

Whatever it is, I can promise you this - what you give up will most certainly be worth it for the life that you will obtain on the other side.

**God prepares us in the wilderness, through repentance, to receive the Holy Spirit that enables us to live a life we couldn't possibly live on our own.**

## CONCLUSION

**I wonder today what you will do with the gift of life that has been given to you?**

Perhaps you're still in the seeking stage of your faith - you know that there's something not quite right in your life and you need to make that first step to give your life over to God.

Maybe you've made that decision long ago, but things have just gotten out of sorts and you need to come before God again to repent and restart.

Maybe you've believed for a long time, but you've never made the step to make it official and be baptized.

Or perhaps you just need to be refreshed and to pray for an awakening of the Holy Spirit in you to begin living more boldly as a disciple.

**Today, you can make that decision.**

I'm going to invite the band to come back up, and during this last song, I'll invite you to respond in whatever way feels appropriate:

If you'd like to pray with someone about a next step in your faith, whether that's repenting, being baptized, or simply asking for more boldness in the Spirit - I'll be available up here in the front.

It can be scary to come up in front of everyone, but I encourage you not to pass the moment up.