

Advent – Season of Light

LOVE

Mark 1:1-8

1. On the surface.

2. Below the surface.

3. At the bedrock.

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Illuminate: Love¹ Advent 2021

Mark 1:1-8

I hope you've been able to join us in our daily Advent readings this year from the book, *Illuminate*. If you've done the reading for today, you know that today we are focusing on the Advent theme, Illuminate LOVE, and the passage for today is from Mark's Gospel, the first eight verses. I'd like to read it to us, and if you don't mind, I'd like for us to show respect for God's Word by standing as it's read. Thank you! This is what it says:

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

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

And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 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. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (Mark 1:1-8, niv)

If you read that passage this morning like I did, you might have thought the same thing I did: that passage for today doesn't really seem to have *anything* to do with this second Sunday of Advent theme of love!

It's easy to think that because...

1. ***On the surface,***

it seems to just launch into the story of Jesus when he's 30 years old. On the surface, we get

¹ Resources:

- David Smith, *Mark: A Commentary for Bible Students* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007)
- John D. Grassmick, "Mark," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985)
- Bruce Barton et al., *Life Application New Testament Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2001)
- William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible Series: Mark* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975)
- Kent Brower, *New Beacon Bible Commentary: Mark* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2012)

this abrupt beginning, being told that what we're reading is about Jesus.

Anyway, we are given Jesus' name and immediately, and again abruptly, we get a quote from some ancient prophecy thrown at us, and then we are thrust into the desert with this crazy insect-eating man in camel hair clothing running around dunking people in the river.

It might sound like I'm exaggerating, but I'm really not; there's no soft-sell or warm up going on in these first eight verses of Mark's Gospel.

But let me point out what else we're seeing, at least on the surface. Mark uses the word "Gospel" – "the beginning of the good news (Gospel) about Jesus..." First off, just who is this Jesus? It might as well have said "John Doe," because that's how common the name "Jesus" was in those days.

Do you know what the ten most common names for boys are this year?

Liam, Noah, Oliver, Elijah, William, James, Benjamin, Lucas, Henry, Alexander. Michael is twelfth. But the most common boy name for Jews in that day was Jesus. If you threw *one* rock into a crowd you'd hit *three* Jesuses. It was a common name of common people. Then we are told this is the "Gospel." The word Mark uses is a Greek word that we get our word "evangel" and "evangelism" from. It is translated literally to be two words: "good news." That word is telling us what the genre of this book is about; in fact, it came to be used for the first four books of the New Testament, right? The Gospel according to...Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But it's more than that – it is also telling us the *content* of the Christian message. Mark is telling us that this is indeed Good News that we are about to read.

Reading Mark's first words, we can sense his excitement. His account doesn't give background biographical information because he wanted his readers to see Jesus in action as quickly as possible. The power of Jesus' ministry and character alone would impact the reader...For Mark, the purpose of writing was to convey a crucial message, the life-changing Good News about Jesus Christ.²

Before the curtain rises, already we can hear someone shouting. Words about a wilderness come from a man who would be called wild-looking in any age. He lived in a geographical wilderness, and he preached about a spiritual one. We meet John the Baptist as he sets the stage for Jesus' entrance.³

And, by the way, maybe you've noticed that there's no mention made of the author, but since the earliest times, the church and scholars believe it to be John Mark. Mark was not one of the twelve disciples of Jesus but probably knew Jesus personally.⁴ This could actually be called "The Gospel according to Peter," because Mark was a disciple of Peter's, and he probably wrote down much of what Peter said. Mark's book is something called "polyphonic" – that means that he tells a lot of different stories, but the overall message is always greater than the sequence of events in the narrative; Mark is telling a story that is bigger than the sum of the smaller stories.

So we are abruptly thrust into this story and hit the ground running – right into the desert with some crazy man.

² Barton, *Ibid*

³ *ibid*

⁴ *ibid*

But there is more going on than that; we only have to scratch a little bit...

2. ***Below the surface***

...to see that there is a whole bunch more going on.

When Mark writes that this is the beginning, Mark chooses the exact same word that opens Genesis 1:1 (in the beginning...) to show that this is a new beginning of God's good purposes. It evokes the same anticipation as Genesis. The same God who brought order out of chaos was doing a new thing in the face of the Roman occupation under whose heels they live, as well as the disastrous spiritual leadership of the Jewish Temple keepers.

"The beginning of the Gospel about Jesus" ... Mark is telling us that there is more going on than the genre of the book or the content of the message; Mark is telling us that the Good News is the character of the person that this book is about; the good news concerns the person, the teaching, and the life of Jesus, God's Son. The good news is not a genre or a story; the good news is a *person*. Mark is also doing something interesting that you see when you look below the surface.

The same term for "good news" in the original language was used to announce Caesar Augustus' birthday. So Mark was probably intentionally using it in a subversive way – to say that the *truly* good news is *Jesus* Himself, and that Jesus is owed the ultimate allegiance of humanity.

Even though Jesus is a common man with a common name, we see that Mark is saying that this is more than a story about just *any* person. This is the *Christ* – Greek (*christos*), which is a translation of Hebrew *mashiach*, meaning "anointed one." Christ is not Jesus' last name; it is *his title*. Right out of the gate we are informed of Jesus' identity, in no uncertain terms: Jesus the Christ, the Son of God. And Mark also shows the affirmation of this with the substantiating testimony of Isaiah (1:2-3) being fulfilled in the person of John the Baptist. (1:4-8)

So, below the surface in that Old Testament reference, we can see that Mark is also telling us that this Jesus is the fulfillment of all that the Old Testament reveals of God's plans for people. When Mark quotes the prophet Isaiah in verses two and three, he's actually using Isaiah to summarize the overarching message of the Old Testament. That's because the first part (I will send my messenger ahead of you) is actually a quote of Exodus 23:20, the second part (who will prepare your way) is from Malachi 3:1, and then the third part about a voice calling in the wilderness, "prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him," is from Isaiah 40:3. In other words, all of the Old Testament has been telling us that Jesus is the Christ – he is God Himself, and he has arrived. God's ultimate plan, declared in the Old Testament, is on the verge of breaking forth into human history!

Are you following the significance of what's just below the surface of this passage? And there is even more.

For instance, Mark's focal point for John is his *place* of ministry and his preaching. The location seems surprising as he was baptizing in the desert region (1:4). These opening verses describe more than a dry wilderness where we would be thirsty, but a land with

long-term, great spiritual hunger, going back to the days of Isaiah. That's because the note about the desert connects John with the prophetic words of Isaiah in 1:3, but also with a longstanding prophetic tradition that describes the desert as the beginning of a *new exodus* and as the place that God brings his people through to deliver them (Jeremiah 2:2; 31:2; Hosea 2:14; Amos 5:25).

Here's the thing about going out into the wilderness: if you are going out there, you must really want something. If you are going out there seeking something, it's probably something you want and need really badly, right? Mark is telling us that you must be willing to go out of your way to seek Jesus. Let me ask: how hungry and thirsty are you for God?

The people that were going out to John recognized that, not only had the Jewish people been sinning for generations, but they as individuals had been too. They knew they needed to repent and be baptized. But you've got to understand, this was a whole new thing for the Jews. The Jews had cleansing rituals, where they would wash their hands and their feet, but they did not have to be baptized because they were already God's people. That was not true for Gentiles; when a Gentile converted to being a Jew, there were three things that needed to happen: for the men, first they had to be circumcised (ouch). For men and women, they had to offer a blood sacrifice at the Temple, because only blood can atone for sin, and then they had to be baptized to cleanse themselves of all the pollution of their past life. But not Jews; they were already God's people by their race and ethnicity.

So for Jews to have to be baptized – this was a new and condemning thought; they weren't God's chosen people simply by their race or ethnicity; it involved a spiritual cleansing, confession, repentance, and obedience. It was a sin and righteousness issue, not a race issue. It was a spiritual condition, not a sibling condition. John was telling them that they weren't God's people because they were genetically the fortunate ones; they had to deal with their own sin if they were going to be ready for what Jesus would do for them.

So when Mark tells us they were going out there to repent and be baptized, he was also telling you that you must be willing to turn from your sins. Are you? Are you willing to admit that there are things in your life you need to turn away from? Some of you who are Christians heard that and thought, "Yea, there are people here who aren't Christians, and they need to repent." And you are right – they do. But Mark is telling you, Churchgoer, Christian: *so do you*. You need to repent as well.

If the Jews did, then so do you. When you realize that, then God will forgive you! That's a huge part of the great news: God's love and grace is willing to wipe the slate clean! So realize you need confession and baptism. Admit your sin, be immersed in his love and forgiveness and be cleansed and you will receive a new heart and a new spirit in God's new kingdom!

So even though on the surface this passage seems abrupt and obscure, if you look just below the surface, you see that there are some really, really profound things going on. But, still, it doesn't seem like it has much to do with this week's Advent theme of Love. I mean, it's not exactly John 3:16, is it? John 3:16 says that God so loved the world that he willingly gave his one and only Son, so that whoever believes him would not die but would have everlasting, eternal life. But this passage in Mark? It's not like the "love

chapter” in 1 Corinthians 13, or the passage in John’s letters that tell us that God is Love (1 John 4).

But, if you are willing to go below the surface, and then if you will dig deeper, it’s not hard at all to get to the bottom where you are...

3. ***At the bedrock***

you’ll see that the bedrock of this whole passage is, in fact, love. Opening lines matter. I mean, anyone who’s had tenth grade literature class will recognize this line: “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.” *Tale of Two Cities* by Dickens, right? How about this one: “Call me Ishmael.” *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville.

Or this one: “You don’t know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; but that ain’t no matter.” —Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. One scholar writes, “Opening lines etch themselves on the memory. Mark’s opening line is like that: it captures in one pithy sentence the entire theological direction of his story of Jesus. Careful attention to these words gives significant clues to the rest of the narrative.”⁵ These opening lines get us to the bedrock of the good news, and the Good News is: God loves us.

Is Mark’s the gospel *about* Jesus, or the Gospel *proclaimed by* Jesus? Which is it that Mark means? The answer is *Yes*. Jesus is both the object of the Gospel as well as its proclaimer. *The Good News is a message and a person*. And both are LOVE. You see, the first-century Jews expected that the Messiah was going to be a warrior-king-like figure, wielding a sword in one hand and a royal scepter in the other. But shockingly, Mark gives us a gospel whose bedrock truth proclaims a dying Messiah – that God would love us so much he would die in our place.

Mark is saying God’s good news – the Gospel of God’s love – has its beginning with the inauguration of the mission of Jesus. Mark doesn’t start with a birth narrative or the prehistory of Jesus. This Gospel assumes that Jesus the Messiah has arrived; for Mark, the good news has more to do with the arrival of God’s long-standing purposes as laid out in Scripture, than it has to do with Jesus’ birth narrative.

And, I think it’s important to put Mark’s gospel into its historical context. Remember that at that time, the Jews lived under what was called the “Pax Romana” – “the peace of Rome,” which was sustained under the feet of the legions who kept problems in this small Jewish state under control.” Roman peace was enforced with brutal military oppression. Mark is declaring *God’s Shalom* – more than a militarily enforced obedience that resulted in a lack of conflict; this is the arrival of God’s active Kingdom of love, which results in Peace. God’s peace isn’t the absence of war; it is the presence of God’s love.

So then, the message of John the Baptist wasn’t an end-all for becoming a part of God’s inbreaking Kingdom. John wasn’t saying, “Do these things and then you are in!” John’s message was, “If you want to be ready for God’s love, you first need to repent, confess, and be immersed in water. *Then* you can be ready to be immersed in God’s love and

⁵ Brower, *ibid.*

forgiveness; to be immersed by His Spirit.” John’s message was merely preparation for the more effective, full, complete baptism of Jesus. So even with water baptism and sincere repentance, there was something more that needed to be done for *all* the people. John the Baptist’s time was helping people prepare themselves for the coming of Jesus, the one who will baptize ... with the Holy Spirit (1:8).⁶

With Mark’s help, we can picture ourselves in the crowd as Jesus healed and taught, imagine ourselves as one of the disciples, and we can respond to his words of love and encouragement. And, we can remember that Jesus came for not only for those who lived two thousand years ago, but he came for us as well.

The message of Mark is that God loves you so much that he sent his Son into this world, 2,000 years ago, because he knew today, on this day at West Valley Church, his Kingdom of love could break forth into your life. Are you willing to prepare the way for Christ in your life? That means repenting of sin, confessing it to him, and allowing him to forgive you. If you will accept those things, then Mark tells us he will baptize you – immerse you – in his loving presence, by his Holy Spirit.

By the time I was fifteen years old, I had already done things that I was sure God would not forgive me for. Now, this was not the case of a hyperactive conscience; I wasn’t catastrophizing simple sins like telling white lies. I had done things that even adults are not supposed to do, and I knew there was no reversing those decisions. What had been done could not be undone.

So by that time, I had gone to church – not to find Jesus or forgiveness, but to find a girlfriend. That church had some cute girls in the youth group. There was one girl that I was spending some time with. She had grown up in the church, but honestly, she wasn’t a whole lot better than I was. She, too, had been living a pretty sinful life. So when I told her that God could never forgive me, she said, “Don’t you know God loves you? Everyone knows that.” She wasn’t saying it from a place of experience; she wasn’t speaking from a heart that had been transformed, it was almost as if she was simply giving me a factoid that didn’t make a lick of difference in anyone’s life. It was like she was saying, “Don’t you know $2+2 = 4$? Everyone knows that. How ignorant can you be?”

But when she said that, something stuck. God. The God of the world; of the universe! God, who knows everything and created everything and is infinitely smart and powerful, who singlehandedly manages all the atoms of the universe at once. *That* God, knows who I am, knows everything about me, knows everything I’ve done. That God knows my name, as if I was the only one in the universe. And he loves *me*, even though I’ve done all those things. His heart broke over those things I did. So he did the only thing he could do; he sent his Son to die in my place, so that the life of death I was living could be put to death once and for all, and the resurrection life he lives could be mine. I couldn’t undo what I’d done, but he could completely change my life so my past was no longer what defined me; it would now be his future that defined me. So you know what I did? I repented of my past. I confessed it to him. And I walked into his future, and I’m still walking in it.

Do you know why I tell you every Sunday that God loves you as if you were the only one in

⁶ Smith, *ibid*

all the world to love? Because God told that to me when I was a 15- or 16-year-old kid and he changed my life forever.

You know, several years ago I had someone at this church criticize me for saying that every Sunday. This guy said I should stop saying that every Sunday, and instead I should talk more about sin. Listen, I don't have to convince anybody that they are a sinner; their own conscience does that. Their own consequences show that. The fact that you and I are sinners – that's the *bad news*. But Mark starts his story with the Good News of God's love. That's the bedrock of Mark's Gospel and it's the bedrock of the whole Bible. And once we realize that, we are more than willing to repent, to confess, to be baptized, cleansed, forgiven, so that we can be immersed – baptized – in his very own Spirit of love.

That's the bedrock of these opening lines of Mark's.

Prayer: repent, confess, accept forgiveness, the Spirit. Be baptized!

Pastor Jason is coming now to send us all out into this week with a benediction from God's Word:

I ask that Christ will live in your hearts through faith. As a result of having strong roots in love, I ask that you'll have the power to grasp love's width and length, height and depth, together with all believers. I ask that you'll know the love of Christ that is beyond knowledge so that you will be filled entirely with the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:17-19, ceb)