

Gospel Beginnings: Mark

DAVE BAST

Each of the four Gospels begins by introducing Jesus to us. Each of the four Gospel writers has the same purpose. He wants to show who Jesus is and why His story is important. The evangelists are all concerned at the outset with establishing Jesus' identity, and thus, His significance; but they go about doing this in very different ways. Matthew and Luke tell us about Jesus' wonderful, miraculous birth; John begins with a profound theological statement about the nature and incarnation of the divine word; but Mark says it all in one sentence – just a dozen words. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and welcome again, Scott. This is an Advent series that we are doing, and we decided to – in each of the four weeks of Advent – to look at the very opening verses of the four Gospels, and how each one of them introduces Jesus to us; and listen to this. Here is how Mark starts:

^{1:1}The beginning of the Gospel (or Good News) about Jesus the Christ, the Messiah. ²As it is written... and then he goes on to quote from Isaiah. That is it. Boom! What? What happened to Christmas? Where is the Christmas story?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Many scholars think Mark was the first of the four Gospels that were written. They think that Mark probably wrote first, and he skips what we call Christmas altogether. He just brings us right out into the middle of the wilderness in front of John the Baptist and says: This is the beginning. Here it is. So typical of Mark. Mark is an abrupt writer. Mark seems like he is in a hurry to get the story of Jesus out there. He loves the adverb “immediately;” everything is immediately; immediately, immediately.

DAVE BAST

Yes; Jesus did this, this, or this, and then immediately He was over here and doing this, this, and this; yes. The key word in that first sentence is the most unusual one. It would have struck Mark's readers as unusual. It is the word: Gospel. We translate it Gospel. In Greek it is *euaggelion*; but that was a new word that was somewhat used in the ancient world, but it was not a normal... I mean, he does not call it the beginning of the biography of Jesus. He does not even say the beginning of the story of Jesus, or here is my sermon about Jesus. He calls it the *Gospel*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are used to that word now, and even that Greek word *euaggelion*, is our word *evangelical* or *evangelism*. Evangelism, evangelical, gospel – those words have been around for two thousand years for us now, but it was a new word back then.

DAVE BAST

I love the origin of the English word for gospel; it is actually an Anglo-Saxon word, and it comes from the re-evangelization of Britain in the seventh century after Christ. Now, Britain was a Roman colony, and it had

become Christianized, but then, as the Roman Empire fell and the Dark Ages came in, everything fell apart, and there were waves of invaders called the Anglo-Saxons. We have probably heard of them. They came from Germany and Friesland, actually – northern Holland. So, they took over and they were pagans, and Britain once again reverted to paganism; but a pope, Gregory the Great, around the year 600 A.D., sent a group of missionaries from Rome to re-evangelize the island of Britain; and the inhabitants – those tribes – as they heard these people, they called the message that they heard the *godspell*; which meant: Good news. The good story. And that is what the Gospel is.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And here, Mark says, right in this first verse, here is where it begins. It has begun. We do not have to hope for it anymore. It is not a wished-for story. It is not a story we hope will come to the world somewhere down the road by and by. Mark says: It has already begun. The Good News. The best story you will ever hear. It is here, and here is how it begins.

DAVE BAST

And really, it came into a world that was desperately in need of some good news.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, very dark times.

DAVE BAST

We may look around us and think: Wow, we are in tough shape in this country or in our world – economic problems, etc, etc; but the First Century of the Christian era – wow, that was a dark time. Most of people living in the Roman Empire were slaves, literally – the majority of the population. There was widespread abuse of human rights. They did not even have to concept of human rights.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No, no. Often we say that Jesus was born at just the right time; in many ways, He was. The Roman Empire, the system of roads, the greater ease of travel for the first time in human history, all of that made the missionary enterprise of the Church later on succeed much better. So, in many ways, the Roman Empire was an opportune time for the Good News, and for Jesus, to come to the world, so that the news could spread; but in other ways, the downside – the dark side of the Roman Empire was persecution and even the murder and exposure of infants – infanticide. It was a time in which a lot of people really needed good news. I suppose there has never been a time, including today, when people did not, but particularly then. This is the time when God finally brought the Good News to the world, and it begins right here, Mark says.

DAVE BAST

Another thing about that era was that it was marked by a great pessimism and hopelessness. I think people had... they were looking for a savior, and many people had put their hopes in Rome as being the savior. In fact, one of the favorite titles of the emperor was *soter*, which means savior; but obviously, they did not deliver.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and the Roman emperor... you could see it in some of the coins of that day, where the Roman emperor would refer to himself in Latin as *dominus et deus* – lord and god – of the Empire; and the Gospel writers are going to say: Those guys? They were not lord and god; here is the Lord and God; His name is Jesus.

DAVE BAST

There really is a savior, and He has come into the world. It is interesting, too, that Mark says this is the beginning of the Gospel. I am not sure quite exactly what he means. We could play with that idea.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Nobody is sure. The scholars have looked. The beginning. What part...

DAVE BAST

Is it just the first sentence?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Is it just the part we are going to look at next about John the Baptist? Does the beginning end when Jesus starts to preach, or some scholars think what Mark is saying is: This entire Gospel – what we now have broken into sixteen chapters – maybe the whole Gospel is just the beginning of a story that is going to continue on and on, right on up to today as well. And some think that that is why Mark ends so abruptly. So, we just said Mark begins abruptly: Boom! No Christmas story. No birth. Jesus just shows up in the desert, as we will see in a moment; and then it ends very abruptly. You remember, the women flee the tomb. They say nothing to anyone, for they are afraid. End of Gospel. How can the Gospel end that way? Well, it can't. The story goes on. So, maybe the whole thing is the beginning of the Gospel – the whole book.

DAVE BAST

It could very well be. I mean, the book of Acts is, in a sense, Chapter 2, following each of the Gospels, not just Luke; but each of the four says that this is how the story continues, as the Holy Spirit is poured out on the followers of Jesus, they take His Good News – His Gospel – His message – and they bring that salvation out to the nations, and the story continues. In a sense, it has only just begun.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It goes on and on; and as Mark shows us, though, the very, very beginning of it happens in a place that is called the wilderness with a man named John, and we will see that in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Welcome to Groundwork; I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And we are looking at Mark Chapter 1 verse 1, which reads:

The beginning of the Good News about Jesus the Messiah. Actually, that is a bit of an interpretation, the version I just read, because literally it says: The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus the Christ or the Messiah; and that little word *of* has a bit of ambiguity in it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Grammatically speaking, yes.

DAVE BAST

Right. The Gospel is of Jesus Christ. What does that mean? Well, this version I read says it means it is about Him. He is the content of it. But it could also indicate a possessive. It is *His* Gospel.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, this is Jesus' own story, so it can be about Him, He can own it, or He can be the subject of the story...

DAVE BAST

Or even the origin. It comes from Him – the Good News comes from Him. However you slice it and dice it, it focuses on the person of Jesus Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; Mark probably wrote it that way on purpose to say: It is all Jesus in every sense.

DAVE BAST

And then Mark goes on to quote from Isaiah. It is a passage, interestingly, that is quoted in each of the four Gospels, at the beginning or toward the beginning, and it has to do with this character we know as John the Baptist; but I will just read the next few verses from Mark 1:

²As it is written in Isaiah the Prophet, “I will send My messenger ahead of you who will prepare Your way. ³A 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 thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸I baptize you with water; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

This is our Advent series here on Groundwork. Advent, as we said in the first program, is that Christian four-week season of preparation, so that by the time we get to Christmas on December 25, we are ready; and what is interesting about the Gospels is Mark and John both decided you can have the Gospel without the story about the birth in the manger, but all four Gospels said you cannot have the story of Jesus without John the Baptist. He has got to be there. We need Isaiah to tell us he is the one in the wilderness. You do not get to Jesus and to His story without John the Baptist; and yet, in the Church, and in everything we think about for Christmas, we hardly think of John the Baptist at all.

DAVE BAST

Yes; how many Christmas cards does John the Baptist figure on?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and is he ever in a crèche? Is he ever in a manger scene; even the living nativity scenes churches put on; ever see John? Did Hallmark ever issue a Hallmark Keepsake ornament with John the Baptist to hang on the tree? We don’t think he belongs at all, and all four Gospels say he sure does.

DAVE BAST

It is kind of an indication of how selectively we can read, isn’t it? We just do tend to fixate on the gentle, kind of reassuring, comfortable parts of this story; and even there we sort of ignore it. I mean, let’s face it. Next week we are going to look at Luke. That had to be a pretty awful time, when Joseph shows up with Mary, maybe riding on a donkey, traditionally you know, she is in labor already, and they say: Oh, sorry, Joe; no room. Why don’t you go out and bed the donkey down in the stable and Mary can lie down and give birth next to the donkey? The rough, hard, harsh kind of aspects to this story – they just will not go away, and John is one of them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

John is one of them, and so is the wilderness; and so, the Gospels make it clear that John went into the wilderness; that quote from Isaiah so important. Where does the highway of salvation – God’s salvation highway – where does it begin? Well, it starts right in the wilderness; and in the Bible, what is the wilderness? It is the place of chaos, of un-creation; it is the opposite of cosmos; it is the unmaking of creation; a dangerous place, the wilderness; a place of death; a place of temptation; a place where the devil

runs free; and the Gospel writers are saying John had to go there, and as we will see in a moment, Jesus had to go there because where else in the world would you need the Gospel to begin, but its most messed up spot, which is the wilderness.

DAVE BAST

And it is also the opposite of the Promised Land. The wilderness is counterbalanced over against the Promised Land. You are not there yet, you are on the way in the wilderness, and it is the time and place of testing and struggle and pain and suffering, and the Promised Land is home, destination, blessedness. The other thing about John is, not only where he is, but how he sort of parades around out there. He has a special costume; and again, Mark, and all the other Gospel writers, draw attention to his dress; and it is not just kind of a stage direction for the set designer or the costume designer when they do this in Hollywood; this is a cue to John's real identity, and it links him directly to Elijah in the Old Testament. Elijah wore clothes like this and ate food like this and spent a lot of time in the wilderness when Israel was experiencing a drought. Interestingly, if you know the story of Elijah from the Old Testament, the king, who was Ahab, accused him more than once: You troubler of Israel. Is it you, you troubler of Israel? Well, John the Baptist is a "troubler of Israel."

SCOTT HOEZEE

He is a troubler; he would yell at anybody. We will see it – you can see it better in the other Gospels, but it did not matter who you were, if you came out to the wilderness, John was going to tell you the truth, and the truth was, we all have to repent; and in the wilderness, it is an uncomfortable place, a dangerous place; it is a place where all of our usual comforts are stripped away, all of our pretensions, all of the things we pretend to be in life; they are all stripped away in the searing heat of the wilderness; and that is where you are seen for what you really are; which is – John will tell you – a sinner who needs a savior, and before the savior comes, I am here to get you ready by telling you, shape up; repent; be ready; a whole new world is coming and I am here to get you ready.

DAVE BAST

And one of the reasons John is not popular is because of that very message...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right; nobody likes to hear that one.

DAVE BAST

People do not like to hear it. I don't like to hear it. I like to think of myself as a pretty nice guy and a pretty good person; maybe flaws here and there, you know; but I mean, deep down, come on, doesn't everybody love me? And all of a sudden, I hear that if I am going to meet the savior – if I am going to experience the Good News that God has for the world – guess what? I am in rough shape. I need to change. I need to change my mind. That is what repentance means.

SCOTT HOEZEE

When I preached on this when I was a pastor for many years, I often would say that John the Baptist... not only do we not have Christmas cards and stuff, anybody like John the Baptist would not be your first choice as a guest at your Christmas party, because John is going to upset all the niceties of Christmas by pointing out that we still need a savior and none of this other stuff matters. Your Christmas tree does not matter; your nice holiday roast does not matter; the tinsel, the glitter, the lights, it does not matter. You have to get right with God to be ready for Jesus. A hard message to hear, but John takes us out to the wilderness to let us hear exactly that; and as we will see in just a moment, God will take Jesus even deeper into the wilderness before the story can go any further.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. Along with Scott Hoezee, I am Dave Bast, and in this program we are looking at Mark Chapter 1: The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus the Christ, the Son of God; and it starts with this character, John the Baptist, as we have been talking. He preached repentance in the wilderness. He pre-figured the coming of the Messiah. He embodied Elijah. He sort of channeled the spirit of Elijah from the Old Testament; and all of this was pointing to the Messiah – the Promised One – in the person of Jesus; and the next thing Mark tells us is that they came together, also in the wilderness, as Jesus came to be baptized by John.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. John's job is the pointer, and there is some famous art, and there are a number of famous paintings over the centuries that show John always with his index finger extended, always pointing to Jesus: That is the One; that is the One; that is the One; that is John's job, and he does it here as well when Jesus comes out to be baptized.

Now, sometimes people wonder if John's baptism was to cleanse people of sins and repentance, then why did Jesus have to be baptized? He had nothing to repent of, did He? And we say, no, He didn't; so, why do it then?

DAVE BAST

Well, that is a question that occurs naturally. John's baptism is not the same thing as Christian baptism. Christian baptism... we won't get into that in this program, but it is baptism in the Triune name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, and it marks a kind of a claiming of the promises of God – the covenant of God – of salvation in Christ; but John's is clearly intended to be a personal act of contrition, of turning from sin: I want to be cleansed. I want to have a new start. I want to turn away. It happened in the Jordan River, on the banks – on Jordan's banks – the Baptist cries, and people flocked to him. It says the whole country was coming to him. All of Jerusalem – they are going out into the wilderness. So, they are hiking out there. It must have been kind of a holiday atmosphere; and here one day Jesus shows up; who incidentally, we learn from Luke, was John's cousin, so they must have known one another.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And John had a good sense of who Jesus was, and so in one of the other Gospels – Mark does not report it – but in one of the other Gospels, John says: I am not going to baptize You. You don't need it. You know You don't need it. I know You don't need it. And Jesus said: No, just let it go, so that I will identify with all those who do need it. Those are the ones I came for. And so Jesus is identifying with all of us who will need the cleansing of His blood shed on the cross eventually, and that is, in part, why He does this.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; I mean, in another sense, this is the beginning of the Good News; this is the beginning of the Gospel, because Jesus decides not just to become one of us as a human being, but to identify with us. I mean, he could have sort of remained aloof and said: I am so much better than you. I am above you. I am God – I am the God-man. And instead, He says: No, I am one with you. I am one of you. I will begin to take your load of sin – your load of guilt – on Myself, and I will vicariously identify with you in baptism.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is why something very surprising happens, but for the same reason you just said, Dave. So here, starting in verse 10 of Mark 1, Jesus has been baptized, and just 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." ¹²And at once, immediately, 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.

So, here is this surprising thing, where it looks all happy and good. God is pleased, calls Him beloved, sent down a dove, and...

DAVE BAST

There is the Trinity, incidentally, there is the Trinity right there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then immediately, He gets thrown into the worst place in the world – a dangerous place of wild animals and death. Why did Jesus have to go there as the first order of business? It is like the dove – the Holy Spirit as a dove – turned into like an Eagle or something and picked Him up and hurled Him – literally, that is what Mark says – hurled Him – threw Him violently out into the wilderness. Why did He have to go there?

DAVE BAST

And why, if He was so pleasing to the Father – you know, “My beloved Son, My dearest One.” We tend to think if God is pleased with us, if God is happy with us, if we are favored by Him, well then, everything is easy street. We are going to sail along, because doesn’t He bless the people who please Him? Isn’t that what God is all about? And here is the One more pleasing to Him than any, and His immediate experience is to be kind of thrown aside into the dark.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Into chaos.

DAVE BAST

And danger.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Next week when we look at Luke we will see something similar when the angel, Gabriel, comes to Mary – we will see this next week – and says, “You are highly favored with God,” and the text does not say Mary thought, “Oh, good.” It said she was really troubled by this.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

She must know her Bible pretty well; we will see that next time; but here, too: You are highly favored by Me; so now You need to go to a really bad place. Why? Again, the same reason we said earlier that John the Baptist had to be in the wilderness; it stands for all that is wrong with a sinful world – all that is dangerous. If salvation is going to come, it has to start in the place of chaos; and Mark is so clever; he does not tell us the whole story of the temptations. We will get that in other Gospels. He shows how Jesus won the victory so simply. He says just one thing. He was with the wild animals and angels attended Him. In other words, He was with the lion, the tiger, the bear, and none of them hurt Jesus. It was no longer a place of chaos. Jesus brought cosmos. Jesus brought order and shalom, and it is all the prophets’ come to fulfillment. The lion will lie down with the lamb, and the children will play. Mark is saying shalom has come.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you just reminded me of a Woody Allen quip, who said once: The lion may lie down with the lamb, but the lamb won’t get much sleep.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right.

DAVE BAST

But that is the world we live in, because again, I think what the Gospel wants to tell us is: We are walking through the wilderness of the world, and it is dangerous and it is painful and a lot of bad things happen, but Jesus has come – the Good News has arrived; and because it has begun, it will be brought to an end. If nothing else, we know about God. He finishes what He starts, and if the Gospel has had this beginning, it will have a good ending, and we hang on. He is with us even in the wilderness.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is the Good News. Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation, and don't forget it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing and suggest topics or passages you would like to hear on future Groundwork programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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Printed on November 26, 2024