

INTRODUCING KING JESUS

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Mark 1:1-15 and Isa 43:1-4

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January takes its name from the Roman god Janus, the god of new beginnings, the god with two faces so that he can look back to the past as well as look ahead to the future. Of course we don't worship the Roman gods at Church of the Resurrection. But the *idea* of Janus is a good one. The new year is always a good time to reflect on the year past and set a course for the year ahead. I'll say more about this at the conclusion of this message.

In the meantime, we're beginning a new sermon series in the Gospel according to St. Mark, and the two faces of Janus helpfully illustrate the "pivotal role" of Mark's introduction.¹ This is because Mark isn't writing an entirely new story. Rather, he's writing the next chapter of an epic adventure that began in the Old Testament. Think of the narrator's twofold responsibility in the introduction of a book or movie sequel: first to give a quick summary of what happened in the last episode, and then second to set the stage for how the next chapter will unfold. Mark's introduction does the same thing. Like Janus, Mark looks back to the expectations of the Old Testament² and also greatly anticipates their fulfillment in and through Jesus. I hope that as we begin this new series, Mark's enthusiasm about Jesus will be contagious among us.³

As an author, Mark is known for his concise style, which he demonstrates in the opening sentence with a succinct summary of what his book is all about:

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. *Mark 1:1*

This is a very bold and provocative declaration about Jesus! Here Mark efficiently summarizes what he believes and intends to say about Jesus, not only in his introduction, but throughout the whole Gospel. It's a single message in three parts, each a pivot from the Old Testament to Jesus, first as King, then as Messiah, and then as the New Adam.

1. **Jesus the King.** Mark identifies Jesus as King with the words, "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus." This is Mark's way of telling us who Jesus is. The word *gospel* means "good news,"

¹ In fact, all four biblical Gospels begin with "Janus introductions," looking back to the Old Testament as well as looking forward to the ministry and passion of Jesus.

² For more on the expectations of the Old Testament, see the Fall 2013 Sermon Series at the Church of the Resurrection, entitled, "To the Ends of the Earth: The Gospel of the Old Testament." Available on the Resources tab at rezchurch.org.

³ Some years ago, it was through studying the Gospel of Mark that I first began to see the Bible as a complete story. The way this book in particular ties together the loose ends of the Old Testament captivated my attention and has kept me reading ever since. May this series spark your interest as well.

and at the time the Bible was written it was primarily a political word.⁴ To “preach the Gospel” back then didn’t mean giving a sermon or sharing your faith, but instead announced the inauguration of a new emperor or king. In that day, the Gospel of Caesar was preached all over the Roman Empire, to identify Augustus as the one who would bring peace and prosperity to the entire world. This would have been good news if Caesar Augustus really did save and heal the world—but he didn’t. At that very same time in history, Mark wrote, “the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus,” a courageous and provocative announcement that Jesus, not Caesar, is the good news the world needs. In saying it this way, Mark proclaims Jesus’ accession to the throne of the Kingdom of God, foretold long before by the Old Testament prophets. It’s a Janus pivot, from the Old Testament expectation of the Prince of Peace, to the present and future reign of King Jesus, whom Mark believes to be a much better alternative to Caesar.

2. **Jesus the Messiah.** Then Mark identifies Jesus as “Christ,” shifting his focus from who Jesus is to how Jesus’ rule will really be better than Caesar’s. *Christ* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *Messiah*, or ‘anointed one.’ For the Jewish people, the *Christ* or the *Messiah* was the long-awaited descendant of King David who would deliver God’s people from bondage and then somehow reestablish for all people the intimate connection with God that people enjoyed before falling into sin. We don’t know it yet in Mark’s telling, but Jesus as Messiah will be every bit as provocative and controversial as Jesus claim to kingship. This is because Jesus intends to win by losing, to save the world through his own self-sacrifice. Again, in identifying Jesus as the Messiah, Mark is making a Janus pivot from Old Testament promises to Jesus who will reconcile God and mankind.
3. **Jesus the New Adam.** Finally, at the end of v 1, Mark describes Jesus as the “Son of God.” This gets to the *so what?* of Mark’s account of Jesus. It’s Mark’s way of calling the question, so to speak, which is something Mark is particularly good at doing throughout his Gospel. From the very beginning, Mark wants us not only to read and learn about Jesus, but also to choose to follow him as the leader of a new, restored humanity.⁵ How? These three words, “Son of God,” constitute Mark’s genealogy of Jesus.⁶ (Didn’t I tell you Mark’s style is concise?) In identifying Jesus as God’s Son, Mark is contrasting Jesus with Adam, the original Son of God in the Bible.⁷ Again, it’s a Janus pivot, looking back to the failure of our father, Adam, and as a result, the loss of human dignity through sin and sorrow and death. On the other hand, looking forward to Jesus, we see him succeeding wherever Adam failed, thereby ushering in a New Creation free of sin and sorrow and death. So we’re faced with a choice: if we want to be part of God’s New Creation, we’ll have to choose Jesus. What Mark will do from this point

⁴ The Rez Essentials course is a great way to learn more about the Gospel. The next course is scheduled for January 24-25.

⁵ So, “the Gospel of Jesus” is a challenge to Caesar, “the Messiah” is a challenge to the Jews, and the “Son of God” is a challenge to all of humanity, who must choose to follow Jesus as the new Adam.

⁶ All four biblical Gospels address Jesus’ origins in their introductions. Both Matthew and Luke focus on Jesus’ human lineage by providing Old Testament-styled genealogies in Matthew 1:1-17 and Luke 3:23-38. Mark and John, on the other hand, point their readers to Jesus’ divine origins. See John 1:1-18, particularly vv 1-4, 14.

⁷ Luke 3:38.

forward until the very last verse in his story will be to offer us freedom from sin and sorrow and death by choosing to follow Jesus. If you choose to follow him you'll enjoy newfound purpose and dignity in your life.

To review, verse 1 is a summary of Mark's message about Jesus in terms of three themes: Jesus the King, Jesus the Messiah, and Jesus the New Adam. And there's a progression, from the *who?*, to the *how?*, to the *so what?* Now let's turn to the rest of the introduction, which we'll see follows this same progression.

JESUS THE KING. Mark 1:2-8.

John the Baptist was the promised forerunner, whose job it was to prepare the way for Jesus. In vv 2-3, Mark looks back and reminds us of God's promises about John, with one from Isaiah, the first of the prophetic books, and another from Malachi, the last of the prophetic books.⁸ Again, thinking of Mark's Gospel as a sequel, it's like Mark is quoting from the first and last chapters of the previous book, i.e. the Old Testament Prophets. Both quotations say that John will come to prepare the way. When we meet John in Mark 1:4, it's as if Mark is saying, "See? God keeps his promises."

In vv. 4-5, John the Baptist offers a baptism of repentance in the Jordan River for the forgiveness of sins. *Repentance* means turning around and going the other way. Imagine realizing that you're going the wrong way on the highway, so you turn around and go the right way instead. John offers baptism, a ceremonial/ritual cleansing, as a means of demonstrating one's repentance. Baptism signifies on the outside a change of heart happening on the inside. In this case, John's baptism was for people who decided to give up sinful desires and practices, and then turn around and go the other way.

The really, really interesting thing about John's baptism is *where* he was doing it. He wasn't baptizing people up in one of the pools in the capitol city of Jerusalem. Rather, he was down at the border at the Jordan River. Almost 1500 years earlier, under Joshua's leadership, the Jews originally crossed the Jordan to take possession of the Promised Land. Because of their idolatry, they lost possession of the land and began a long period of exile over 500 years earlier such that Israel was now under Roman rule. Remember that John came as the forerunner, to prepare the way for King Jesus. In order to be baptized, people had to go down to the border, wade out to John in the middle of the river, and *turn around*—not just morally and spiritually, but also physically. Then having received John's baptism they could wade back to shore and reenter the Promised Land, dramatizing the end of the exile. All they needed was a new Joshua (Hebrew *Yeshua*, Greek Jesus) to lead them into a new, revitalized kingdom.

John made this very point as he preached about Jesus in vv 7-8. Of course people needed repentance and forgiveness, because they were weighed down by the guilt of sin. All of us have sinned, and we all know the suffocating burden of it. No one will argue that forgiveness isn't a

⁸ Mark 1:2 is taken from Malachi 3:1. Mark 1:3 is taken from Isaiah 40:3. For more on Isaiah 40, see the Advent 2013 Sermon Series at the Church of the Resurrection, entitled, "Why is Jesus Good News?" Available on the Resources tab at rezchurch.org.

tremendous gift. Yet people need more than forgiveness. As those whom John baptized waded back to the shore, they returned to a broken culture, a corrupt totalitarian government, poverty, disease, and violence. They needed a king who would lead them, protect and heal them, and bring peace to their land. So, as the last of the prophets, John offered one more promise of what God would do, saying, “After me comes the stronger one, who is so much greater that I’m not even worthy to take off his dirty shoes. I can only take you halfway there, but he’ll take you all the way, baptizing you with the Holy Spirit.”

John the Baptist was the greatest of all the prophets.⁹ Who could be greater than John? The King of Kings and Lord of Lords, of course, whose reign brings more than forgiveness. Jesus is Emmanuel (meaning, “God with us”), who gives his subjects the greatest gift of all, the indwelling Spirit of God. John’s baptism was good, but it paled in comparison with Jesus’ baptism and the gift of the Spirit.

We need both—both the gift of forgiveness, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. When everything is as it should be in the church and the home, Christian baptism ought to be the outward, visible sign of the inward reality of both of these gifts. Yet sometimes it’s not. There are those who have been baptized who nevertheless lack “the fruit of repentance,”¹⁰ in that they are either still heavily burdened by the guilt of sin, or (more commonly) haven’t repented and turned from their sin. If this describes you, it’s time to make Jesus King of your life in such a way that you experience his forgiveness and you also go and sin no more.

There are also many today who have had some kind of intellectual conversion to Christianity and have been baptized, but they live the rest of their lives without any dynamic experience of God in their lives. It’s as if they have claimed John’s baptism, yet they lack the fruit of the Spirit because they’ve only followed Jesus with their heads and not their hearts and bodies. If this describes you, it’s time to make Jesus King of your life in such a way that you enjoy the power of his indwelling Holy Spirit.

What Mark is joyfully proclaiming in vv 2-8 is that John prepared the way, and now it’s gospel time, good news time, as King Jesus begins his reign. If you choose to follow him, not only will he give you forgiveness of sins, but also he will give you the Spirit of God as he leads you out of exile and into his kingdom. Why not begin this New Year by pledging allegiance to King Jesus?

JESUS THE MESSIAH. Mark 1:9-11.

If you’ve been reflecting on the past year and have been disappointed by the way things turned out, this next section should be a real encouragement to you. After centuries of marvelous promises about King Jesus, including what we’ve just heard from John the Baptist, Jesus arrives in 1:9, but he’s not that impressive. Again, Mark’s portrayal of Jesus as Messiah will be even more

⁹ In fact, Jesus says of John, “among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.” Matthew 11:11.

¹⁰ Luke 3:8.

provocative and controversial than his portrayal of Jesus as King, because this isn't the Messiah anyone was expecting.

First, he's from Nazareth, Galilee. A small town in the middle of a small county in the backwoods of Israel. My wife is from Glen St. Mary, FL, a town of 500. It's a suburb of Macclenny, a town of 6,000. When I met her, I'd never heard of Glen St. Mary or Macclenny. So she told me she was from Baker County (pop. 25,000), which I later had to find on the map. Jesus came from a similar kind of place: tiny Nazareth, a suburb of little Cana, in Galilee district.¹¹

Second, not only did Jesus have surprising origins, but also his arrival was pretty unimpressive, as Jesus wades out into the Jordan to receive John's baptism, just like everyone else. Didn't John just say in v. 7 that he wasn't worthy to untie Jesus' shoes? Now John's bathing Jesus in the river???

See, this is the kind of Christ, or Messiah, that Jesus had to be. In order to save us, he had to become one of us, to so identify with us that he could take our place on the cross, to offer his life for ours, to die for our sins. He doesn't ask us to do anything, including baptism, he didn't already do himself.

From time to time in Mark's Gospel, in the midst of mundane life with this rather unimpressive Messiah, God pulls back the curtains to show us the real Jesus. Verse 10 is the first time this happens, as suddenly the heavens are torn open and something amazing happens. This heavenly *schism* (Mark's word in Greek) points us back to when Isaiah cried out for God to intervene in history and fulfill his promises:

Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains might quake at your presence—
as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil—
to make your name known to your adversaries,
and that the nations might tremble at your presence! *Isaiah 64:1-2.*

Isaiah is asking, "Where are you God? We've been waiting for so, so long. Why haven't you acted? Why haven't you set things right?" It's as if there has been an impenetrable barrier between God and man, such that things have gone from bad to worse for centuries without God's intervention. Then *crack!* The sky is ripped apart in Mark 1:10, the Spirit descends upon Jesus just as the Spirit originally hovered over the waters in creation, and out of the crack God thunders: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." After centuries of waiting, suddenly God's miraculous intervention begins.

There are two more declarations about Jesus like this one in Mark's Gospel. One also comes from heaven during Jesus' transfiguration. It's a similar story: God pulls the curtains back on a dusty,

¹¹ Another wonderful thing about Mark's Gospel is that it's loaded with irony. King Jesus' unimpressive arrival is probably the first instance of it; we'll see it again and again. Mark loves springing these surprises on his readers. It's as if he's saying, "Surprise! Here comes Jesus, the better-than-Caesar king, who grew up in the trailer park!" For more on Mark's use of irony, see Rich Lusk's "The Ironic Gospel: An Examination of Mark's Use of Irony," at <http://trinity-pres.net/essays/ironic-gospel.pdf>.

travel-weary Jesus to reveal him as the brilliant King of Kings, and God thunders from the heavens, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him."¹²

The final declaration comes at the end of Mark when Jesus fulfills his mission as the Messiah:

Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" *Mark 15:37-39.*

In this final declaration, Jesus the Messiah died for our sins. Then there was a *schism* (the only other time Mark uses this word) of the temple curtain, signifying the final, permanent destruction of the barrier between God and mankind. And then a gentile commander in Caesar's army had his eyes opened and was able to see and declare what God and the demons had already said of Jesus many times: "Truly this man was the Son of God."

What Mark is doing in his narration of Jesus' baptism is to connect the baptism, which is a symbol of Jesus' death and resurrection, with both the reestablishment of communication between God and mankind, and also the gift of the Holy Spirit. So the message to readers like us is that if you want to be reconciled with God, and you want to enjoy the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit, then you should be baptized into Christ.¹³

JESUS THE NEW ADAM. Mark 1:12-13.

Mark has progressed from who Jesus is, namely the better King, to how Jesus will reconcile us to God as the Messiah. Now he concludes the introduction with the challenge to follow Jesus as the New Adam.

In vv. 12-13, the Holy Spirit who descended upon Jesus at his baptism, now takes Jesus out into the wilderness to be tested as the New Adam. In these verses we see the serpent tempting Jesus, yet instead of succumbing to temptation and giving his allegiance to Satan, Jesus remains loyal to his heavenly Father. Consequently, the beasts are no longer hostile to Jesus, but instead he rules over them, just as Adam had done before the Fall. And instead of the angels blocking Jesus' way as they had done to Adam when he sinned, they minister to him in the wilderness. In this way, Jesus takes Adam's place as the Son of God who remains faithful to his heavenly Father. Through this faithfulness, Jesus the New Adam opens the gates to God's New Creation.

This is just a small glimpse of what is yet to come, as Mark will show Jesus again and again as the one in whom the Image of God is finally and completely restored. Each time, Mark's point is this: Just as Adam, God's unfaithful son, chose the wrong path, the path that leads to impotence and frustration, Jesus, God's faithful Son, leads the way to restored purpose and dignity and fruitfulness. Follow him and enjoy abundant life.

¹² Mark 9:7.

¹³ Paul writes to the Romans, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." Romans 6:3-4.

CONCLUSION. Mark 1:14-15.

It's January, a good time to look back and to look ahead. For many of us, the Janus thing isn't fun, because the New Year can be a sobering reminder of our weakness—of all that we didn't accomplish last year, of all our unmet expectations, and all that we did with mediocrity rather than excellence. As we resolve to do better in the year ahead, we're also quite aware of the real possibility, or probability, of failure. In fact, some of us will choose not to set any goals or make any changes at this time in order to avoid setting expectations that might not be met.

Whether you're optimistic or cynical about the year ahead, whether you're aware of your expectations or in denial, deep down inside somewhere we all have hopes for the future. And sadly, among those who do make New Year's resolutions, there are those who will indeed achieve everything they set out to do yet still have a very unhappy 2014. That's because, at the end of the day, the secret to a good year is not achieving all our goals. The secret, rather, is experiencing the fruit or consequences of what these goals are supposed to give us, namely, meaning and purpose and satisfaction in our lives.

Mark's Gospel shines a bright light on a different path, a road less travelled, to a joyful life. It was through the Gospel of Mark that I first began to read the Bible as a complete story, and to see Jesus as the great hero of that story, who comes to the rescue at just the right time. Who Jesus is, and what he accomplishes, changes everything in our search for meaning and purpose in life. If you'll pledge allegiance to him as your king, you'll enjoy forgiveness of sins, the indwelling of his Holy Spirit, an open channel of communication with Almighty God, and renewed dignity and purpose in your life. Without him, every goal you achieve in life will be a hollow victory, because it won't move you any further toward what your heart really desires. Won't you follow him in 2014?