

## The Time Has Come!

(The Gospel According to Mark, Chapter 1)

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Today we begin a new series of messages based on the Gospel According to Mark. Our method will be to read a passage from *the Gospel*. Then we'll comment on the passage, and end by asking ourselves a pertinent question raised by the text.

First, a little introduction to Mark. We read about John Mark in the Book of Acts, but he wasn't one of the disciples who followed Jesus during his ministry. Instead, he got his material from what others had told him. The second-century writer Papias says that Mark wrote down the reminiscences of the apostle Peter, and evidence in his Gospel seems to bear that out.

Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels. He begins his narrative rather abruptly:

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God (1:1).

In Greek, that first line is: Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ υἱοῦ θεοῦ, "the beginning of the gospel." The word *arche* can have the sense of "principles" or perhaps "summary," and it's true that Mark seems to abbreviate some incidents we read about in Matthew or Luke, who apparently used him as one of their sources. The original ending of Mark, being perhaps on the outside of a rolled-up scroll, seems to have been lost since ancient sources offer two alternate endings. Perhaps the original beginning has also been lost, since Mark presents no account of the birth of Jesus.

But what is the "gospel" Mark is presenting? To understand this, we have to look ahead to verses 14 and 15, which record the first preaching of Jesus:

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

The gospel is the news about the new entrance of God's rule into human affairs. Mark's whole first chapter — indeed, the entire Gospel — is the development and demonstration of this gospel at work in the mission of Jesus. Let's go back to verse 2:



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 desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.' "

And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and 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 will come one more powerful than I, the thongs 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."

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (1:2-11).

Introducing the account of John the Baptizer, Mark quotes from the prophet Isaiah, working in a quote from Malachi as well. The thrust of these quotations is that the Lord God is coming back to his people, after a long seeming absence. To herald the Lord's return, John is offering baptism: "a baptism of repentance, to forgive sins." The Lord's return to the people of Israel, who had not been faithful to their calling, means the forgiveness of their sin. But Jesus also comes to be baptized — what does that mean?

Jesus' baptism isn't for the forgiveness of sin. It's a baptism into his mission as Messiah of Israel, the Son of God — the title given to the kings of Israel and Judah. When Jesus is baptized, the voice "out of the heavens" utters what is basically a quotation from Psalm 2:7-9:

I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will rule them with an iron scepter; you will dash them to pieces like pottery."

The Lord — *Yahweh*, his divine name in Hebrew — is coming back to his people, in the person of his chosen and anointed one, his Messiah. This is so that the purpose for which the Lord called Abraham is to be completed, as recorded in Genesis 12:2-3:

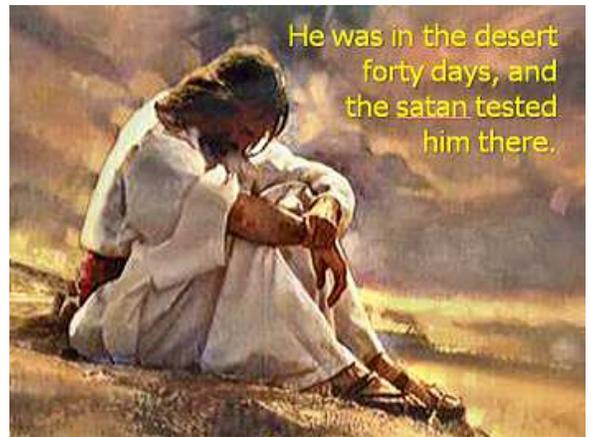
"I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

When believers are baptized, often we say we "follow the Lord in Baptism." We're not called to be Messiah, as Jesus was, but we're baptized "into him" — into his death and resurrection, as the apostle Paul indicates in Romans 6. But, in submitting to John's baptism, Jesus set the pattern for his followers. Being baptized into the Messiah, we take on aspects of his mission to bring the reality of God back into human life. So here's our first question: **How often do I think about my baptism, and what it means for the pattern of my Christian life?**

Having been baptized, Jesus is immediately put to the test: is he up to the task to which he has been called?

At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by the satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him (1:12-13).

Before he begins to announce the arrival of God's kingdom, Jesus is tested by the satan: Are you ready for this Messianic mission? Matthew and Luke offer fuller accounts of Jesus' ordeal in the wilderness; Mark, as is his custom, summarizes the event. Notice we've translated "the satan" not as a proper name, but as a function: the adversary or accuser of those who would be faithful to God. Let's ask ourselves the next question: **Is there an accuser in my life, testing my resolve to follow God's plan for me? Perhaps my own sense of inadequacy or unworthiness?**



<sup>1</sup> After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (1:14-15)

As mentioned before, this passage presents the key verse in the Gospels. The kingdom of God has come; it has arrived with Jesus himself. The gospel — Greek *euangelion*, "evangel," good news — is the announcement of God's return to Israel. The exile of God's people is over, their sin can be forgiven. This gospel has been anticipated by the prophets of Israel, as we read in Isaiah 40:1,2,9:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from

the LORD's hand double for all her sins. . . . You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!"

It was always Yahweh's plan to return to his people, and to restore them to the purpose for which he called them in Abraham. And, in the light of the resurrection of Jesus, the early Christians understood that it was always God's plan that the Messiah should do what Israel had failed to do. The plan, Jesus is saying, is now being put into effect. Therefore he calls his people to repent, or "turn back" to the Lord. The Greek word Mark uses for repentance is *metanoia* or change of mind — a new perspective or "worldview" that allows us to see what the Lord is doing in a way we haven't been able to see before. Our question: **Are we ready to believe the "good news" that God is doing, at last, what he always intended to do — to rescue his people?**



Straightaway they left their nets and followed him

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him.

When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him (1:16-20).

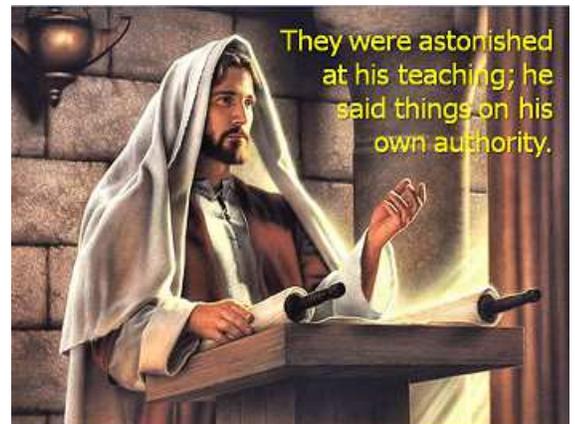
The impression Jesus conveys in his message is so compelling that the men he calls as disciples follow him immediately. In this passage he calls his "inner circle," those who were to be his closest disciples: Peter, James, and John. Did these men already know Jesus? In the community of the

villages along the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, it's certain they had heard of him, and likely that they knew him personally. Mark, in typical summary fashion, gives us no details. But here he introduces his favorite word, *euthus*, "immediately". These fisherman don't hesitate; they leave their family business right away to follow Jesus.

Mark's story of Jesus is an action story: immediately this happens, immediately Jesus does this. There's no hesitation, no waiting around, in the proclamation of the gospel of God. **If Jesus called you and me today to be his disciples, how long would we take to decide? Would we drop everything and follow immediately?** The truth is, of course, that Jesus *is* calling us, and has been calling us all along!

They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law (1:21-22).

In the synagogue Jesus teaches with his own authority as directly from God, not as the traditional teachers. Those teachers were careful to base their teaching about the Law of Moses on the teachers who had come before them. To claim to hear directly from God amounted, in their eyes, to blasphemy — to pretend to speak for God himself. Yet that's how Jesus is presenting the gospel of the kingdom: as a new word from the Lord. Yahweh has finally returned to Israel! No wonder the traditional teachers were astonished — they had never seen anything like this, and it frightened them. Let's ask ourselves this question: **Are we afraid of a fresh move of God? Does it make us nervous to think that strange things might happen?**



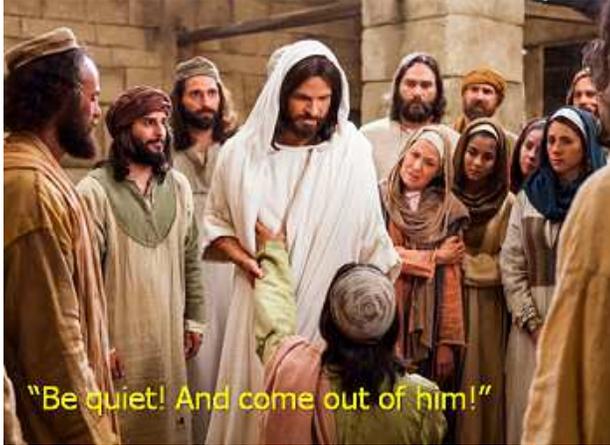
They were astonished at his teaching; he said things on his own authority.

It's been said that nobody fights a revival harder than the people who experienced the previous revival. The Christian churches came out of a revival in early 1800s, and have continued to hold some of the principles of that revival down to this day. But are we, as a Christian church, they open to a revival in the 2010's?

Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are--the Holy One of God!"

"Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching — and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him." News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her. So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.



That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was (1:23-34).

The kingdom of God's presence is demonstrated, made real, by the power of Jesus to heal the sick and demon-possessed. The word is spreading, and people are responding. The Lord is no longer absent or remote; his living presence is immediate, visible in the transformation of the lives of those who come to Jesus. **Is the witness of our church such that people who need hope and healing, physical and spiritual, would seek us out?**

In this passage we get the first hint in Mark of the "Messianic secret." Jesus keeps his identity as Messiah a secret but the demons, who are spiritual entities, recognize who he is. Thus the demons realize Jesus is the Son of God before people do. This "Messianic secret" is a theme throughout Mark's Gospel, and we'll see it expressed again and again.

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!"

Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else — to the nearby villages — so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons (1:35-39).

Jesus' purpose is to proclaim the kingdom of God, to announce that God is on the move again. His work of healing the sick can be a diversion from his mission, unless it demonstrates the presence of God. Jesus wants us to get on board with God's plan for the world, the rebuilding of his good creation. His aim is to build a new community in which the Spirit and power of God are present, anticipating the renewal of heaven and earth, God's "new creation." We can miss that purpose if we focus on the benefits we expect from Jesus in our personal lives. Those things are important, but they're only part of a larger picture. **Do we look for Jesus only because of what we think he can do for us, especially what he can do for us personally?**



A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured.

Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: "See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere (1:40-45).

English translations usually refer to "leprosy," but the skin conditions described in the Bible may not always have been

Hansen's disease, the term used today for leprosy. This incident poses a puzzle: Why does Jesus want to keep his healings a secret? Jesus isn't violating the Torah in healing this man; indeed, he carefully instructs him to comply with the requirement of the Torah for certifying the absence of the skin condition; the local priests were the "board of health" in ancient Jewish communities. That Jesus is able to heal disease is evidence of the return of the Lord and his forgiveness for Israel's sin. Why does Jesus want these healings to remain a secret?

Some have suggested that Jesus is using "reverse psychology"; if he tells the man to keep quiet, he's sure to do the opposite and tell everyone — which he does. I believe that's a superficial explanation, unworthy of Jesus' true motive. Another explanation is the one mentioned above; Jesus' activity as a healer can be a distraction for people, who need to hear about the coming of the kingdom of God. Jesus' message is about God's purpose, not about various benefits we might receive from coming to him.

But I think the main reason has to do with the "Messianic secret." For God's plan for the redemption of his people to be fulfilled, the identity of his Messiah must be hidden from the authorities. The apostle Paul expressed this thought in 1 Corinthians 2:7-8:

But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification.

None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

The Law and the Prophets, the basic Scriptures of Judaism, always envisioned that the Lord would redeem his people, returning to them and setting them free to serve him according to their original calling in Abraham. But Israel, because it partook in the same sinful nature as all humanity, was not able to realize the Lord's purpose. So that the hidden goal of the Torah could be realized, and the Messiah would have die for the sins of Israel and all mankind, Jesus' true identity as Son of God had to be hidden from the authorities — while still being revealed to those God is calling into his new creation. So here's our final question:

**Now that Jesus has been raised as Messiah, do we still need to keep the secret? Are you and I keeping our belief in Jesus, and our loyalty to him, a kind of secret from the people we deal with every day, or do they know from our words and actions that we're Christ-followers?**

Something to think about, isn't it? Let's summarize our questions from Mark, chapter 1:

- Do I remember the meaning of my baptism?
- Am I my own accuser of unworthiness?
- Am I ready to believe God is "on the move," becoming real to me?
- Am I ready to follow Jesus without hesitation?
- Does a fresh move of God somehow scare me?
- Is our church's witness attracting people who need hope and healing?
- Am I looking to Jesus only for what I can get for myself?
- Am I only a *secret* believer in Jesus, or do other people know I follow Him?

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