

Prologue to Mark's Gospel (1:1-15)

With his Gospel in the apocalyptic mode (see Introduction), Mark wants to shake up the reader's world before the story even starts. The prologue does just that, setting the stage for the coming apocalyptic drama. Instead of beginning with a narrated story, Mark's Gospel begins in v. 1 with a title that announces "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ." It quickly moves from the title to the sounding of a series of scriptural voices culminating with the appearance of John the Baptist who proclaims the coming of a stronger one in vv. 2-8. This latter announcement serves among other things as an introduction to the theme of Jesus' strength and ability relative to others, an issue that recurs in Mark's Gospel (3:27; 5:4; 9:18; 14:37). The narrative then shifts surprisingly in vv. 9-11 to Jesus' baptismal appearance marked by a divine voice that from the "ripped open" heavens reveals Jesus as "my son, the beloved." This same divine, verbal revelation will be echoed on the Mount of Transfiguration in 9:7 and in the presence of Jesus' eschatologically sun-darkened cross and "ripped open" temple curtain by the centurion's human voice in 15:39. Jesus subsequently overcomes Satan's wilderness testing in vv. 12-13 and finally appears in Galilee, preaching the gospel good news of God concerning the apocalyptic fulfilling of God's coming reign in vv. 14-15. The fast-paced prologue unit is marked by clear signs of opening and closure by a threefold repetition of the word for gospel or good news (*euaggelion*) at 1:1, 14, and 15.

The fact that this prologue is more thematic and impressionistic than straightforward narrative helps us to understand its role relative to the story about to unfold. Think of the witches' scene at the beginning of *Macbeth*, or Goethe's *Faust* and its "prologue in heaven." We hearers of this announcement are being supplied with information from the start and are given an apocalyptic insider's view of what is about to happen. The focus is the gospel from beginning (1:1) to the end of the unit (1:14, 15). When John the Baptist and Jesus show up, their appearances are marked with the biblical Greek word

for “it came to pass” (*egeneto*, 1:4, 9). Before there are any disciples, religious leaders, demons, or Romans to narrate, we are given access to the apocalyptic-like revelation in several ways. All of these help to frame the narrative about to begin.

First, the heavens are ripped open (*schizomenous*) and we readers are made privy to the divine information that otherwise only Jesus hears: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” The idea of the opening of heaven as a way of signaling apocalyptic revelation is commonplace in apocalypses and related literature (Rev. 4:1, 11:19, 19:11, *T. Levi* 2:6, 18:6, 2 *Bar.* 22:1, *Apoc. Ab.* 19:4). Second, although Jesus is driven out into the wilderness by the Spirit to face temptation, Jesus *defeats* Satan after forty days. Satan will continue to be an adversary throughout Mark’s Gospel, but even here Jesus is enough to defeat him and cope with wild beasts, a pairing that shows up in contemporaneous literature related to apocalypses (*T. Naph.* 8:4, *T. Benj.* 5:2, and *T. Iss.* 7:7). Again, the narrator gives us privileged information about Jesus’ power relative to Satan. Third, Jesus proclaims in direct speech God’s apocalyptic gospel good news of the kingdom. Part of his announcement is to let it be known that the time has been fulfilled.

The apocalyptic character of the prologue is furthered by its connection with Isaiah, whose later tradents in deutero- and trito-Isaiah have been tellingly described as proto-apocalyptic by Hebrew Bible scholar Paul Hanson.¹ New Testament scholar Joel Marcus points out that Deutero-Isaiah seems to prophesy many of the themes that Mark’s prologue announces here:² Isaiah speaks of good news (Isa. 40:9, 41:27, 52:7, 60:6, 61:1), calls for the heavens to be opened (63:19), and announces the reign of God (40:10, 52:7). The fact that the text begins with the “beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ” may also be a marker for one of Deutero-Isaiah’s favorite themes: that the new eschatological thing God is doing surpasses even the beginning. All these deutero- and trito-Isaianic themes have impacted Mark’s take on the apocalyptic tradition and perhaps therefore color from the beginning of Mark an understanding of the gospel that also includes Satanic testing and demonic exorcisms, healings and eschatological announcements of the “forgiveness of sins,” foretastes of heavenly banquets, resurrections from the dead, and cosmic portents of evil and destruction. This may explain also the strange way in which Mark uses Scripture to introduce the appearance of John in 1:2. First, we must notice that the actual Scriptures quoted are not solely from Isaiah but conflated from Mal.

1. Paul Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 27.

2. Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 139.

3:1 and the Septuagint's version of Exod. 23:20. The actual quote from Isa. 40:3 appears only in Mark 1:3! Having said that, we need to note theologically that the first conflated scripture text is a promise. The "beginning of the gospel" begins with a promise from God. Second, the reference to Isaiah helps underline Marcus's point that Isaiah provides a crucial intertext for the apocalyptic mode of the prologue itself. Finally, the use of both texts sets up the dynamic of the arrival of John the Baptist (Mark 1:4-8) and in turn the way he introduces Jesus relative to the gospel of God's apocalyptic kingdom purposes (1:9-15)—for the kingdom itself is an announcement also deeply rooted in Jewish apocalypses and related writings (*1 En.* [The Parable of Enoch] 25:3-5; [Similitudes] 62-63; *As. Mos.* 10:1-3a).

Preachers should note two key terms in the title of 1:1. First, the verse ends with a disputed textual reading "the Son of God." In all likelihood, the phrase has been added here. If it actually belongs there, it is confirmed already in Jesus' baptism by the private heavenly voice. In this way "Son of God" becomes a key to the reader who overhears it for grasping the subsequent story and creating distance between the reader and the disciples and others, who do not know this. Second, Mark characterizes what follows as the "beginning" of the gospel. When a preacher preaches, there is a little potential of a new theological naming of the gospel for this time and place commencing. If Mark conceives the story of Jesus life, ministry, death and resurrection as the beginning of the gospel, perhaps we are also invited as theologians of the gospel to take it up going forward, in this way completing the theologically-driven narrative that Mark leaves incomplete at the strange ending of 16:8. Yet whatever that gospel entails, it needs to be at least as expansive as our Biblical text. The gospel here is not just Jesus (1:1), but also the gospel-of-God kingdom that Jesus himself proclaims (1:14-15) and its resultant faith/repentance, too. This text gives preachers a wonderful opportunity to go deep as homiletical theologians.

LECTIONS

This prologue to the Gospel of Mark is entirely covered in the lectionary, albeit piecemeal and in different seasons of the liturgical calendar. In fact, the lections for three very different days of the church year actually overlap amidst the scant fifteen verses of Mark's opening section. This means that the problem with

preaching with the lectionary any of these days is the way the lections threaten to separate what Mark is trying to hold together. Preachers will want to resist reading these lections in overly isolated ways and be sure to keep Mark's larger narrative agenda in view.

LECTION: THE PREACHING OF JOHN THE BAPTIST
1:1-8; ADVENT 2

The same title that brackets the prologue as a whole, serves to frame even this brief lection for Advent 2. Preachers will find this helpful, for an understanding of the scriptural voices in 1:2-3 and the picture of the prophet Elijah in 1:4-8 will make the most sense when the whole Gospel of the gospel is kept in view: a concern for Jesus' identity (1:1) and for God's reign (1:14, 15) are both part of that gospel frame for Advent 2.

In Mark 1:2-3, the prophet Isaiah is invoked from the very start. We have noted above why this is significant for an apocalyptic Gospel that picks up proto-apocalyptic themes from the later Isaianic corpus: gospel/good news, "ripping open" the heavens, and so on. The connection with v. 2 is a bit problematic because of the conflated nature of the quote, combining as it does elements of Mal. 3:1 and Exod. 23:20. The notion of the way is linked to the wilderness, even though Mark's use of Isaiah 40 as we have it relates it to the voice. Still, the connection with Isaiah is important to Mark's agenda—and not just because it introduces the character of John the Baptist.

John the Baptist indeed appears in vv. 4-8. It is important to begin by noting that he appears "in the wilderness." Clearly this is significant for Mark as an opening setting for the prologue generally. The wilderness is a place of temptation, but also divine redemption. The river Jordan, the site of John's baptizing, is itself connected with important transitions in the Hebrew Bible. The description of John is also evocative, namely of a whole cluster of Hebrew Bible expectations about prophets that Mark plays on allusively, especially Elijah in 2 Kings 1-2. For now, the point is that the Isaiah conflation of prophecy is quoted in 1:2-3, and John "appears" in 1:4. The narrator is therefore already intending that we be persuaded about the reliability of such prophecy—a theme that will recur in Mark's Gospel. At the same time, the narrator also has some surprises in store. John may be described as the prophet *par excellence* associated with the wilderness as a place of return and repentance—a message to which people massively respond. Yet, as great as these moments are, they point ahead

in the narrative. In v. 7 John himself announces that one “stronger” than he is coming. The text quite quickly returns us to *Jesus' identity*. At the same time, the narrator likes to keep people guessing. Both John's and Jesus' identities prove somewhat pliable in the unfolding story: they are confused with one another even as late as 8:28! We shall note that Mark as a narrator is fond of such complexity and seems to inject a sense of apocalyptic mystery around Jesus' identity and his parabolic teachings as well.

Yet that is not all. Mark's agenda goes beyond the gospel of Jesus (1:1) to include the gospel of God's reign that he preaches (1:14, 15). Mark's material in 1:1-8 accomplishes this inclusion by focusing on “the way” (1:2, 3). Again, given the context of Isaiah, the language of “the way” is already freighted intertextually. Eugene Boring points out that the way cited from Isa. 40:3 in Mark 1:3 refers to God's way back to Zion through the wilderness—it is not an ethical term, but a theologically redemptive one.³ This notion of “the way” becomes programmatic for Jesus and his actions from here in the prologue all the way through his ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection. The upshot is that the theme of the way in Mark, which is so important for following Jesus, will nonetheless have this theological meaning in view. God is up to something in Jesus' way—even when disciples are the ones called to follow in it.

All of this then is eventually tied to the promise that John the Baptist offers. As the classic prophet, he only points to Jesus—and the Jesus to whom he points is the focus of an important promise in vv. 7-8: “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with ^h water; but he will baptize you with ^h the Holy Spirit.” We have already touched on the theme of the “stronger one” in the apocalyptic description above. The promise of the Holy Spirit invokes language of the new age, an apocalyptic allusion that begins to take shape already in the subsequent text of Jesus' heaven-ripping baptism in 1:9-11. Yet there is also the element of surprise here. John says he is “unworthy” to untie his sandals. Still, John—in situational irony—will baptize Jesus himself in 1:9! This Jesus is the object of prophetic prediction and longing, though he does not conform to *every* voiced expectation. The narrator signals early on that Jesus will be something like the new wine that bursts the old wineskins (2:22). Even scriptural promises may need to be reinterpreted as this Gospel about Jesus and the kingdom unfolds.

3. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 37.

The Advent 2 reading comprises the section that focuses on the gospel of Jesus' person and the announcement language from the Hebrew Bible. Shrewd preachers will notice that the language of God's reign in the left out material of 1:15 is present in the Isaianic intertext we mentioned above, so perhaps this case can be remedied. It means, however, that our Advent practice will have to live more deeply into the twofold sense of Advent that is its true power: we wait for (baby) Jesus, but we also wait for the fullness of divine promise of God's reign to dawn as well. One way to deal with this is to jump ahead to v. 15 when preaching this text. If the point of Mark's Gospel is a gospel that includes both Jesus' person (1:1) and the reign of God (1:14-15), any Advent 2 preaching would be enhanced by drawing that in as well. The intertext from Isaiah could then serve as a bridge for preachers wanting to place Advent hope in connection not just to Jesus' person but to his announcement of the coming kingdom.

Good Advent preaching will also be enhanced by understanding the notion of "the way" consistent with the Isaianic prophecy in which it is embedded and in the Markan narrative that it grounds. Here the structure of the lectionary is a friend to discerning preaching as Isa. 40:1-11 is the Hebrew Bible lection for the day. The important takeaway here for Advent 2 is that the "way" is not just an ethical concern—as in, "Jesus is coming soon so get your stuff together." Rather, the way is about God's *advent*; preparing for it means getting ready for the new thing God is doing on the "way" from the wilderness to Zion, redeeming God's people. In Jesus' case, the way subsequently means through suffering, death, and resurrection—the way to Jerusalem, the cross, and beyond. We may be called to follow, but the "way" is first God's in Jesus Christ. That may be the best advent good news of all.

LECTION: THE BAPTISM OF JESUS 1:4-11; BAPTISM OF THE LORD

With this lection we begin by taking a step back to the previous section. We incorporate the material about the appearance of John baptizing in 1:4-8 described in the paragraphs above and bring it into close relation to the apocalyptic ripping of the heavens at Jesus' baptism in 1:9-11. Doing this juxtaposes John and Jesus, and precisely around the issue of Jesus' baptism. Again, the important issue is to make sure that all is not reduced to the gospel of Jesus' mysterious identity (1:1), but also includes a vision of the kingdom that Jesus also later proclaims (1:14, 15).

To summarize, John's baptizing connects to the scriptural voice in vv. 2-3 that announces God's *purposes* in sending a messenger to prepare the way.

The way evokes God's redemptive purposes analogous to God's return of God's people through the wilderness to Zion in Isaiah 40. John in proclaiming baptism (not repentance in order to be baptized!) bears witness to God's "redemptive" way unfolding in the one who is coming.

Jesus, therefore, like John "appears" (*egeneto*) in v. 9 "in those days," that is, in eschatological time. Ironically, in the latter half of that verse he is baptized by the very one who thought himself unworthy to untie his sandal, thus subverting at least one expectation—the first of many in the Gospel! In short order, the apocalyptic scene unfolds. It happens "immediately," a favorite Markan word here and going forward. Jesus is coming up from the water in v. 10 and sees a vision of the heavens "ripped" open (see above) and the Spirit as a dove descending into (*eis*) him. The presence of the Spirit adds an eschatological element of the new age to our already apocalyptic scene of the open heaven. The idea that the Spirit broods over the waters at creation may allude to an eschatological act of God in remaking creation here. The role of the Spirit in the subsequent struggle with demonic spirits in the narrative going forward will point to God's decisive engagement. The heavens were ripped open for a reason! As Donald Juell puts it, God is now "on the loose."⁴ To that NT scholar Brian Blount adds that God is committed here to Jesus' boundary-breaking ministry to come.⁵

In v. 11, a heavenly voice spells out the meaning of the event in a private word to Jesus that we readers are privileged to hear: "You are my Son, the Beloved;[†] with you I am well pleased." With these words from heaven, Jesus' identity is indeed decisively invoked. The fact that it is done so that Jesus alone hears it among any narrated characters, while we readers also overhear it, gives us crucial information going forward. Jesus' identity, already slightly blurred by the confusion around the voices of Scripture and John's baptizing, is now set forth for the benefit of Jesus and the reader. Jesus is God's Son, the Beloved, and the object of God's pleasure. It is tricky, of course, to try to explain all this from extant titles. Because we are operating narratively here, it is best to see how Mark narrates the unfolding of Jesus' identity. Suffice it to say, at this early point, the *meaning* of Jesus' status as God's Son is contested and spelled out over sixteen chapters of Mark's Gospel. However, the evaluative stance offered by the divine voice is designed to clue the reader in on its importance

4. Donald Juell, *Mark*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1990), 34.

5. Brian Blount and Gary Charles, *Preaching Mark in Two Voices* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 22.

here and in the narrative going forward. The key here is that the revelation of Jesus' identity by means of the heavenly voice represents an apocalyptic mystery through the "ripped" heavens, one also disclosed to us readers at the beginning of Mark's Gospel. Still, we can and should speak more broadly of the language's context here. The scriptural intertext from Ps. 2:7 speaks of royal anointing. *Son of God* does not mean some full-fledged view of the Father/Son relationship in later Christological or Trinitarian reflection—those come to fruition centuries later in Chalcedon and Nicaea, not in first-century Mark. Instead, this refers chiefly to God's role relative to kingship, thus implying some royal, messianic entailments. The language of Son of God is also common for speaking broadly of agency. Jesus as God's Son does what God intends and purposes as God's agent. The language of being "well pleased" comes from Isa. 42:1, which links this scene to the servant who brings justice to the nations in Isaiah. The language of "beloved" may also point to the binding of Isaac in Gen. 22. Again, the implications of this are not spelled out here, but evocative of the unique sense of Jesus' mysterious identity that will unfold over sixteen chapters. For now, we have this mysterious, boundary-breaking apocalyptic revelation, which both discloses and prompts questions. For the sake of the narrative going forward, this barebones yet evocative description of Jesus' role is important.

Preachers therefore need to read this snippet of text in light of the whole of the prologue and knowing that so much more is to come in Mark's unfolding narrative Gospel of the gospel. In its present truncated state, Mark 1:4-11 does lift up the identity of Jesus in his baptism, but the prologue of 1:1-15 does not do that only. Again, the Isaianic language points to something more than Jesus' person, as does the ripped-open heavens of this baptismal scene. Something is at stake for the apocalyptically split cosmos with Jesus' baptism, beyond his identity alone. It is also about the gospel of God's reign that Jesus will announce (1:14, 15) and embody (1:16ff) in astounding ways. On the Baptism of the Lord, it will be important to make that connection and to underline the unique understanding of baptism here as a profound locus of divine, boundary-breaking engagement through Jesus' messianic and yet servant-like identity. Those preachers who can reach back to the Advent 2 reading will find help in providing a context for doing so. Preachers who can look forward to Jesus' coming reign-of-God ministry in Epiphany will help to name the divine purpose in this baptismal boundary breaking more profoundly. It is not just about Jesus' identity here; it is also about a God who is "on the loose" and whose purposes cannot be contained in the otherwise safe boundary between heaven and earth. Thus, new creation may also be coming into view in Jesus' unusual baptismal scene. And that is worth preaching about this Sunday!

LECTON: THE BAPTISM OF JESUS, THE TEMPTATION OF JESUS,
AND THE BEGINNING OF THE GALILEAN MINISTRY
1:9-15; LENT 1 (AND EPIPHANY 3 PART I)

Of the three lections from this section (1:1-15), this third split of the prologue (vv. 9-15) is most likely to carry the full freight of the whole. Here the disclosure of Jesus' identity, his struggle in the wilderness with Satan, and his proclamation of God's reign help to hold much of the text's breadth together and show why the split heaven of Jesus' baptism is important. In all three lections, the force of these events is to disrupt overly personalistic readings of Advent, Baptism of our Lord, and Lent. There is in fact a cosmos in play and the struggle includes a Jesus who points beyond himself to God's kingdom purposes. Our sermons should do no less.

The previous section explores the significance of the Jesus' baptism in detail (see above). Here it is probably enough to summarize thusly. The apocalyptic revelation of Jesus' identity through the ripped-open heavens sets the stage by disclosing to Jesus and to the reader the preliminary structure of his identity: the royal, messianic Son of God and Isaianic servant operating under the power of the Spirit. The fact that it is a "ripping open" points to the cosmic, eschatological purposes of God. Both parts are crucial for understanding the action that follows vv. 9-11 in vv. 12-15: Jesus' testing in the wilderness and his proclamation of the gospel of God's reign.

Mark's Spirit is not exactly a cosmic chum nor some cozy "comforter." In v. 11, Mark points out that the Spirit "immediately drove him out into the wilderness." The Greek verb Mark uses here is the same for driving out or casting out demons. It is as if Jesus, having received the Spirit in 1:10 through the ripped-open heavens, is now thrust out into the heart of the struggle. The wilderness becomes once again a paradigmatic place of testing. The word "testing" is one chosen here with care. The other gospels go into the substance of Jesus' *temptations*. Mark is not interested in the almost psychological conflict that Matthew or Luke portrays. Instead, Jesus is tested (*peirazomenos*) in the sense of our "time of trial" by Satan for forty days. The mention of wild beasts underlines the kind of eschatological danger he faces that sometimes shows up in apocalyptic literature and related types (see above)—although the mention of "with" the wild beasts may also imply a kind of eschatological healing of creation. And yet, Jesus manages to overcome this with the help of angels, God's intervening agents, who actually serve him. The upshot is that Jesus' ministry begins with a Satanic struggle. When the desert dust clears, he appears

to have won his skirmish in the wilderness. This is no cozy gospel story; it has neither cooing baby Jesus nor bath-robed shepherds. This Gospel begins in an apocalyptic vision of Jesus' identity that pushes him immediately into the fray with Satan in vv. 12-13.

In light of this, Jesus' proclamation in vv. 14-15 makes even more sense. Having come through the time of trial, Jesus, who as the narrator and God have informed us is himself the gospel of God's Son, now preaches back in Jewish/gentile mixed Galilee his own gospel, *the gospel of God*, which Jesus as God's agent mediates. It begins with a somber note in v. 14. John has been handed over (the root verb in Greek is *paradidōmi*, the word for Jesus' handing over and betrayal in the coming Gospel narrative), which here reminds the reader of the cost of such proclamation as John and now Jesus embody. In narrating it this way, John now passes from view and Jesus comes renewed front and center in the narrative. His first words then proclaim this odd gospel of God. What is the gospel of God? Jesus immediately fills in the blank in v. 15: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;[†] repent, and believe in the good news." Jesus himself may be the gospel (1:1) and we readers know that he is Son of God (1:11), but Jesus himself points to God's ultimate purposes that are about to be fulfilled: God's coming reign, which is coming near. Such coming near eventuates in repentance and belief—again it is God's action of bringing the reign close that sets human response in motion. The proclamation confirms some of the earlier intertext from Isaiah that we mentioned in the prologue material above. The language of God's reign and gospel/good news is material that comes from the proto-apocalyptic materials in 2 and 3 Isaiah. Here Jesus places that "gospel" at the center of his own proclamation, and its connection to the immediately preceding struggle with Satan in the wilderness only underlines its meaning. Jesus can proclaim this coming reign of God because in him Satan is already being overcome and eventually even bound and tied up (2:27). The stage is set for Jesus' ministry in Galilee.

Since this text appears in full in Lent 1, it can become a helpful occasion for the preacher to remind hearers after the Epiphany season what was at stake in Jesus' ministry in Galilee. Because it includes elements of the messianic and servant motifs of Jesus' baptism and the ripped-open heavens, it also points forward to elements of the narrative that will be important in Jesus' Jerusalem ministry and passion on Palm/Passion Sunday and Easter. The text sums up important themes that will guide hearers in grasping the unique shape of Mark's Gospel and the gospel it proclaims. Some of this lection also appears in Epiphany 3, in that case joined to some of Jesus' initial calls in 1:16-20. This has the advantage of providing a crucial context for those calls and helps explain

some of the immediacy of their response. When Jesus proclaims the kingdom, he is not offering some timeless message, but a timely one (*kairos*) that provokes such immediacy and struggle as these texts even now at this early stage portray. In this sense, the treatment of the text in Lent is actually enriched—so long as preachers and hearers see the cosmic horizon of the testing and struggle in light of both the gospel of Jesus' identity *and* the gospel Jesus preaches: the gospel of God and God's coming reign.