

Gospel Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God.

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

*Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you;
he will prepare your way.*

A voice of one crying out in the desert:

*"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight his paths."*

John the Baptist appeared in the desert
proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

People of the whole Judean countryside

and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem

were going out to him

and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River

as they acknowledged their sins.

John was clothed in camel's hair,
with a leather belt around his waist.

He fed on locusts and wild honey.

And this is what he proclaimed:

"One mightier than I is coming after me.

I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals.

I have baptized you with water;

he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Gospel Study: *Good News*

Well I don't know about you, but I feel we hear so much bad news these days; in the paper, on the news at night, on television, and all around us that it's time we hear some good news for a change. Amen? Today we have got some good news for a change. The good news is not oblivious to the bad that's happening. In fact, it has a lot to do with all the bad that's happening. The good news is that the good is going to win over the bad.

The first line of this Gospel of St. Mark is, and I quote, "Here begins the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God." I want to zoom in on that word *Gospel* that we take for granted so often, and show off just a little of my Greek—this is about all I know. The Greek word for *Gospel* is *Euangelion*. Now the root word is *angel*. It's spelled exactly like angel, in fact that's where we get the word *angel*, and it means in Greek, a message or a messenger. The prefix to that word *euangel*, EU is translated in Greek to mean: the quality of goodness. So, it's a good message or a good messenger. It's identifying the nature of the news.

Now that word, *Gospel*, was first used by the Greeks referring to military combat and it was used when a messenger from the front line of the battle was sent back to the people to give them the good news that they had won the battle. Mark saw this as the perfect word to introduce Jesus, who comes on the front line of battle in this world, to confront all the evil and the devil, and has

won us the great victory over sin and death and evil for all time. Mark is that angel, that messenger, that carried this good news of Jesus Christ. I just love that, because what we need to hear today, is some messenger to communicate that good news. As bad as this world might seem, or feel, or look, some days, we know that Jesus has already won the battle over evil. Amen?

So that's the good news. The bad news is, Mark is still calling you and me to the front line of battle to fight the evil that still needs to be overcome. This good news that Mark brings in that first line of the Gospel is like a title for the Gospel: "Here begins the good news, the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God." His whole Gospel will show how Jesus is the Son of God. This is why He is able to overcome evil, because He's more powerful than the devil. And even though we are weak—that we can be overcome by the obstacles of life—God is our higher power; we know that truth through Jesus, who is the Son of God, who is and shares fully in His divinity. With that power, He empowers us in the Army of the Lord. He calls us to not only know the good news, but be a part of the good news, that we ourselves are the personification of this Gospel as we engage ourselves in the fight over evil.

As we are introduced then to this title of the Gospel of Mark, "Here begins the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God." We see then Mark immediately beginning with the ministry of Jesus. Now I'll just take a moment to point out that this is where Mark is a little different than the other Gospels. You might recall that in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke we have the infancy narrative of Jesus. It's there we hear the Nativity story of Jesus' birth and then His childhood. In the Gospel of John, we have a very theological prologue that takes us back to the very beginning of Genesis, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God..." Remember?

But here in Mark we begin immediately in the public ministry of Jesus. He sees that this is what is most important. Now remember that Mark's community was struggling themselves. They were overcome with a lot of bad news, just as our church might be today. Christians are persecuted and we risk being overcome by so many forces that hurt us. Mark introduces Jesus in much the same way as someone would introduce a prominent or important speaker, he provides someone to make the introduction and we know that person is John the Baptist.

Just as someone would introduce a speaker on stage, John the Baptist introduces Jesus to focus our attention, raise our anticipation, and call forth the greatest expectation, as Jesus is called forth on the center stage of human history. His call divides history in half, if you will, between before Christ (BC), and after Christ (AD). Jesus is at central stage in this critical time, holding all of the world together, and John the Baptist is given the honor to introduce the Christ to the world. That is what a prophet always does: **point the way to Christ.**

Mark brings the old and the new together in John by quoting a passage from another prophet in the Old Testament, Isaiah, who says, "I send my messenger before you to prepare your way. A herald's voice in the desert crying, 'Make ready the way of the Lord. Clear him a straight path.'" Then on comes John, and Mark says, "Thus it was that John the Baptizer appeared in the desert proclaiming a baptism of repentance," which led to the forgiveness of sins.

Allow me a moment to explain that little phrase, *John appeared in the desert.* It is very important. Now we know that John was like a hermit. He was one who saw such evil in the

world, that he was forced to retreat, to pray, to enter into this spiritual communion with the Lord, so that he could then speak a challenging word to the world. I want to describe for a moment that the desert was also not only a place where Israel met the Lord—and where any hermit, if you will, meets the Lord—but it also was the place where demons lived. Throughout the Scripture, and particularly now in Mark's Gospel, we know that it's in the desert that one faces the evil power. Remember, it was Jesus who went to the desert and was tempted by Satan there. The desert was that place of confrontation—coming face-to-face with the beast, if you will—that threatens us and threatens to overcome us.

John appears in the desert. You could almost find a facsimile today, as if John lived in the inner-city, the place right in the midst of the Projects where so much of the drugs and violence is perpetrated. John would live right there at the heart of it all and he would speak out, drawing the battle line between the battle of good and evil, proclaiming that Jesus will now appear on the scene to start waging the war. Coming out of the desert and on to the scene, John proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Now the Jews in John and Jesus' day, would habitually and ritually wash themselves many times a day. Before every meal they would have ceremonial washings that were not only for the sake of hygiene, but also used for spiritual purification. A devout religious person believes that we sin many times a day and therefore we need to be cleansed of the impurity that invades us many times a day. The Jews would often have these spiritual purifications. A woman in the Old Testament, after her period, would always have to undergo a spiritual purification. A man, before he ever entered the Temple would always have to purify and go through a washing of himself.

But now John appears on the scene to proclaim a washing of the entire body and the whole being of the person, that is, a baptism. Now the Jews only thought that the Gentiles needed an entire washing, an entire purification, because they were the ones with the polluted past life and needed to be completely cleansed of their impurity. It was a radical understanding and preaching for John to come on the scene and proclaim that everybody—Jew and Gentile, Saint and Sinner—needed to be converted and to be washed clean. No wonder he got the nickname John the Baptizer because he was always calling people to enter into the deep waters of this purification rite.

We also know that along with this baptism, part of the ritual was that the person had to make a confession. They had to confess their sins. Remember the word in the Gospel today is, "John proclaimed a baptism of repentance that led to the confession of sin." The person was asked, before they went down under, what sins they wanted to have the Lord wash away. They would make that confession first to him or herself, as they tried to realize and identify what those sins were, but then of course also to God. They were even encouraged to confess their sins to those whom they had wronged. Then, when they went down into the water they were washed clean of that sin and—as I was told when I actually stood there in the river Jordan, just a year ago at this time—John would actually stand above on a rock and make sure that every hair on the top of their head was completely under. After that he would proclaim them baptized and then he would invite them to come out of the water as a way of coming into a whole new life.

We've somehow lost that sense, in our own baptism rite, but in the early churches that I visited back in Israel, they would always have a baptismal bath. It was built so you go down the steps

until you were completely immersed and then come out the steps on the other side to suggest entering into a whole new life. This is a beautiful ritual, but the beauty is that in the ritual you were actually dramatizing this complete and radical conversion. We know from the Gospel today that John's ministry was very effective and powerful because as I quote, "All the Judean countryside and the people of Jerusalem went out to him in great numbers. They were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins."

One might ask why was John so powerful a prophet? We can only guess it's because people recognized him as a true prophet, one who lived everything he preached, and one who was listening to the Lord as well as speaking for the Lord. What really marks him as a true prophet is that he led them to the Lord. Now we hear also in this Gospel that John is wearing camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist. We know that Mark was familiar with the Old Testament, and he is re-viewing in his mind what was reported in 2nd Kings 1:8 where Elijah—who is the greatest of the Old Testament prophets—wore camel's hair with a leather belt and had a highly vegetarian, austere diet. When Mark is describing John, perhaps he's showing that John was like Elijah. He put on the prophet's robe, if you will. That's just an outward sign of his true identity, as being the Herald of Christ's coming. As a true prophet, as I mentioned, he points the way to Christ; that's always the sign of a true prophet. They don't draw attention to themselves but to the Lord.

The Gospel today ends by saying the theme of John's preaching was, "One more powerful than I is to come after me. I am not fit to stoop and untie his sandal straps. I have baptized you in water; He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit." John is the bridge over troubled waters that leads us across this transition of conversion from what we are now, to what God is calling us to be; that leads us to Jesus. John is offering us a cleansing, but he proclaims, Jesus is offering us a whole new life in His Holy Spirit.

All that leads us to the question that I wish to pose now and that I thought long and hard about this week. I wonder what would happen if we had invited John the Baptist himself to come here today. What would John the Baptizer say? Based on today's Gospel passage, I would propose or guess, that John would probably not begin with a joke or cute story, but I think he would get right down to it. We would get right down to it and he would ask us to do what he asked the people who came to him at the Jordan to do: to confess their sins and to accept Jesus into their life. That was the theme of his preaching. John takes that point and presses it further into our mind and heart to make a deep impression on us. I also think he would not stop there. I think he would really hammer it home to us so much so that honestly, I think if John the Baptist were invited on Sunday to many of our churches, some people would just have to get up and leave. They would find it so disturbing. I think so because a prophet disturbs the comfortable and comforts the disturbed.

John would say to us, "You think I'm crazy? I think the world's gone crazy!" I think he would point out that the world has gone crazy with violence. Look at how we're killing ourselves. A priest said to me other day, "I think we're heading into the dark ages where we're afraid of the attack of evil that's threatening the harmony of our community and the safety of our children. We're afraid that drugs are winning out over the rest of us. We're afraid that promiscuity is winning out over chastity in our high schools and colleges." True? This is happening. It's getting

to the point we're having more abortions in this nation than we are live births. True? This is a great evil, I think John would just say: "America, you've got to confess these sins."

It's getting to the point where poverty continues to be a great plague among us even as our technology grows more and more. It's beginning, as they say, to look a lot like Christmas, but to look a lot more like Christ is left out of his own birthday party, right? I think John would point out—in a way that only a prophet could, who would live such a simple and radical life—how we are being overcome in this nation by materialism. As *Newsweek* magazine pointed out in an issue that did an extensive survey about religion in our nation, they found that although most of America professes to believe in God, it's clearer and clearer that faith doesn't mean much during the week. It doesn't impact them in any serious way and so I think John would have us put our life where our mouth is; put our life on the line. He would call us down: "Come on down." And down on our knees, he would say to this world: "This world has got to change." He would say to our country: "This country has got to change." He would say to our city of Cincinnati: "Cincinnati you have got to change." He would say to our families: "Our families need to change." He would say to our church: "Our church needs to change." And then I believe he would say: "And nothing is going to change until we are willing to change." Amen?

We have got to be willing to start the cycle of conversion within ourselves that creates—as we enter into the Jordan River so to speak—ripples out through our society; through our family; out farther, wider, to more people, this effective power of God's Spirit. We've got to know the battle has been won, but it's still being waged and we are the Army of the Lord. I think John would press the point even further, that we need to start identifying exactly what needs to be changed. In other words to identify and confess those sins that keep us from loving God and following God's ways more. We need to identify those sins that keep us from loving others and helping others, especially the poor and the needy. We need to identify those sins that keep us from doing right and fighting the wrong in the world.

The devil is trying to, what I call, almost white out that area where we can no longer differentiate or distinguish between right and wrong. He will get you to think that everything's all right because you've got a right to do whatever you want to do, right? But God alone is right and we give up all our rights to do God's will and God clearly wills that we turn away from evil and know what evil is so we can turn away from that and we can identify the evil in our world; the evil in our society. As someone once said, "You know I used to watch different programs and they didn't affect me. I used to go to the movies and read different literature and I didn't worry, but the more I grow in the spirit of God, the more I realize how all these things affect me, the more we grow in the Spirit the more we grow into the sensitivity of what's Holy and what's healthy. When we grow in the likeness of the Lord, and in His love, we will begin to see that what we thought so little of, what we said about this person, or this little white lie, is hardly anything. No! It's something and we have a tremendous power in us to spread good, or to do evil and we've got to distinguish that and John, I think, as a prophet would point that out.

But we are called to be prophets. We need to point out first for ourselves so we can be a true prophet you know, because a false prophet is one who lives one thing but says another. We've got to be true to ourselves—true to our word—so we've got to be truly living the Gospel

ourselves and then we've earned the right to speak out because we were trying to live the right of God.

As I think about John the Baptist, I'm reminded of a pastor and friend of mine who shared with me—perhaps you've heard me say this before—that he was really concerned about his parish because, as he noted, and is the case of so many of our churches today I believe, we fall under the human tendency of getting lazy and falling into a certain complacency. A mediocrity to feel, where we are, that it's all right. God loves us right? We're fine. I'm okay. You're okay.

He saw that this is the worst mentality for really growing spiritually and he didn't quite know what to do, but one Sunday, he decided to stand up and he announced to his people at the homily, this will probably be the shortest homily of my life. To which they almost applauded you know, but he said I need your help with this short homily. I need to ask you all to please stand. Obediently and immediately they stood. Then he asked them to please come out of their pew and enter into the pew in front of theirs, which they did—which you can always do because the front pews are empty you know—and then he invited them to sit down and he then proceeded to say, "I just want to thank you for being a Parish that's willing not just to sit back, but to keep moving forward. That's what this church is to be all about."

Wow. What a homily. Yet what that points out is that often when we come to church, we tend—and it's a human tendency—to sit in the same pew, always, because we are creatures of habit and we could imagine if we sit in the same pew as a way of saying, we basically say the same prayers and go home more or less the same person, so many times. It is hard to change.

My last thought about John the Baptist: It's not so much what he would say, but what he would do that would really matter. I think he would do what he did back at the Jordan. I think he would point the way to Jesus. I think he would point out that as we enter into this Advent season, we need to prepare the way of the Lord. I think John the Baptist would have us confess our sins. He would have us come on down on our knees, all of us in America, and pray for a new heart and God's Holy Spirit to fill us and to use us that we would come out of that water ready to fight the fight against evil and to win the war against poverty and drugs and all that is harmful to God's people. I think John would end with the good news that he came to proclaim, that Jesus Christ has won our salvation. He has come to win the world to Himself and to his Father. Amen.