

Mark 1:1-15

Intro The Journey Begins February 3, 2008

Who here has been a Christian for more than ten years? (hands) I have a question for you. Would you describe your Christian life as a) victorious or b) struggle? (hands). If a struggle, are you ashamed?

If a struggle, are you disappointed, especially when other Christians seem to glide along the journey of the Christian life with few heartaches, rarely troubled, and never stumbling?

For many believers, the Christian life is assumed to mean that I can have a better me, that I should be improving from day to day, year to year...then I look in the mirror and wonder: "What am I doing wrong?" Why do some believers sail a glassy sea of ease while I fight gale force winds? Why are others destined to bask in a spiritually sunny Florida while my life is more like a Wisconsin winter? Why am I swamped by life's circumstances? Why am I still struggling with the same personality faults, failures, and sins today that I was ten years ago?

What kind of journey are we on? Ever upward, victorious...or something else?

As we enter the Lenten season, which begins this Wednesday in the liturgical calendar, we are going to walk through the Gospel of Mark to discern what this journey is all about, because Mark employs this motif of a journey. Mark is the shortest gospel with the most detail; has the fewest words of Jesus, but emphasizes the works of Jesus, a minimum of discourse and a maximum of deed.

When we open Mark we get a glimpse of what we want the Christian life to be...good news.

What we have is just the beginning of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ.

The very word *gospel* is now Christianized, but in the ancient world it was commonly used of victorious battles in war. The Romans used this term for the festivals which celebrated the birth of Augustus Caesar, as attested by an inscription from 9 B.C. which says of the emperor Octavian (Augustus): "the birthday of the god was for the world the beginning of *joyful tidings* which have been proclaimed on this account.

Mark does not leave us wondering as to whom this good news is about. It is about Jesus Christ, the messiah, the one anointed by God who is the Son of God a title we'd expect to see. Son of God occurs only three times more, twice on the mouths of demons and finally, at the foot of the cross on the lips of the Roman centurion, as he gazed upon Jesus' suffering.

What is more often said, is that he is the Son of man: in the latter portion of his gospel, chapters 8-14 this term is used and will form part of the structure we'll look at during Lent.

The journey described in Mark's recording of good news paints the picture for us what our lives, what our spiritual journeys should look like. If we want a gospel life, a good news journey, this is a great place to go; for here we will see that John initiates a journey, Jesus identifies with our journey, and Jesus invites us on a journey. READ Mark 1:1-15

JOHN INITIATES OUR JOURNEY

1-8

The journey's initiation is foretold

1-3

Mark begins with little explanation, expecting his readers to know the story. There is no birth or lineage given, but he jumps in with the background of the prophets. Isaiah predominates, but v2-3 is a compilation of three writings.

- The messenger he will send quotes Exodus 23:20. As the 12 tribes trek through the wilderness before entering the Promised Land, God speaks of one who will prepare the way.
- The voice crying in the wilderness comes from Isaiah 40:3, where God calls his people from captivity to freedom, through a wilderness where a highway to God will be built.
- The final passage, "prepare the way of the Lord" comes from Malachi 3. This context will conjure up pictures of repentance and the return of the prophet Elijah.

But exactly what the prophets are foretelling is not quite clear.

We see there is a way, a highway that is readied. But this is not just what John does for Jesus, but what the entire gospel story is about. What John unfurls here will be Jesus' journey to the cross. The path prepared, which John initiates for Jesus is a path to his death. But Mark is not just telling us about these historical events, but tells us the story in a framework of the path, the journey initiates for you and I.

Before this background, the foretelling of a journey from the Old Testament gets confusing; Mark introduces us to a messenger named John.

The journey's initiation is foreshadowed 4-6

John comes on the scene as a foreshadowing of what is to come because his appearance is strangely familiar to the Jews of old. Mark introduces him with a title that highlights what he does, he baptizes people, and so the phrase used here is that his name is John the Baptizer.

What he will proclaim foreshadows Jesus' message: repentance and forgiveness, as seen in v15. The assumption is that there is a problem requiring a changed life. The problem of sin, breaking of God's Law, necessitates forgiveness. But for that to take place there must be a turning from sin, to God, by what we call repentance. But John does not simply stand out in the desert and call people to change their ways, they must get wet. Odd...but wait for why.

What he wears helps us to understand what the journey will all be about. While we, with a paltry understanding of the Old Testament, may miss, his readers could figure it out.

You can tell a lot about a person by the way he or she is dressed. If I pulled out a coonskin cap, you should think of whom? Daniel Boone. A stovepipe hat – Lincoln. If I surround myself with paparazzi, police and child protective...I'd be Britney Spears.

Being clothed in camel hair, a leather belt and a cave man diet tells people who this is. 800 years before, in 2 Kings 1 we read of an evil king, Ahaziah, who was injured in a fall and sent his men to inquire of the false god Beelzebub whether he would recover.

Meanwhile, God moves the good prophet Elijah to intercept these messengers and tell them to tell the king will die. They convey the message to the ailing king, who asks who gave this message? All they can do is give a physical description: he wore a garment of hair and a leather belt. The king knew right away – it is Elijah.

John wasn't making a fashion statement; he was making a passion statement, taking the role of a great prophet to let the people know what was coming.

Finally, we must not miss where he is located. He is out in the wilderness, far from the center of religion. In the Old Testament texts that back this up, the picture is being in the wilderness and heading toward Jerusalem. But here all of Jerusalem is heading out to see John.

From the location to the dress, to the message proclaimed, there is a foreshadowing the hardship that is to come. The journey is not an easy one.

The journey's initiation is a foretaste 7-8

John knows that what he is doing is but a foretaste of something greater. But as a foretaste, we should keep this image in mind. He points us in the right direction. The key is not the water poured on the head, but the Holy Spirit who will descend. There is something greater coming.

But what does it mean that this one mightier than John will baptize with the Holy Spirit?

What John does is a foretaste, but something that predicted in the Old Testament. In Isaiah 44 we hear of how God pours water on dry ground, his Spirit on our descendents. What John does in form, Jesus does in reality.

If we wish to know what the Christian life is all about, here's the foretaste: a path in the desert, where one must identify oneself in need of repentance and their sins forgiven. Yet there is also the promise of God's Spirit being poured out on us...a good thing.

But what happens next helps us see what our journey, our lives as Christians will be.

Unlike the other gospels where Jesus' birth is explained or his eternal status as the Word of God is expressed, Jesus appears on the scene and submits to John's baptism.

This should stop us in our tracks. Why would the Son of God, the Messiah be baptized for the forgiveness of sins? What takes place sets the scene for the great exchange that is at the heart of the good news. The story of Jesus is not just a series of facts for us to comprehend, but a story we are a part of. Our journey is Jesus', so expect there to be a connection.

JESUS IDENTIFIES WITH OUR JOURNEY 9-13

Jesus identifies with our need to change 9

Jesus does not need to repent, there are no sins for him to confess, but, unlike those flocking from Jerusalem and Judea to see John, Jesus comes from the least likely place. He comes as the true Israelite, with perfect repentance and identifies with our need to change. In so doing, he does for us what we need to do and the Father will accept him, unlike any of us on our own.

In other words...how good is your repentance? Can you really change enough? As well intended as the hoards from Jerusalem were, how long did their repentance last? How real was the change?

Jesus identifies with our greatest need 10-11

The reason anyone submitted to John's baptism was the desire to change. But behind that there was the greater need: the need to know God is not angry with you, that God accepts you. With Jesus that acceptance is made clear by what takes place next: the heavens open up.

For you and I that would be the beginning of the end, especially as we see how they are opened. It is not just pulling back the veil, a crack in the door, for the word is violent – the heavens are ripped open. Mark uses this word again only in 15:38 to describe the Temple veil being rent in two.

This tearing open of the heavens means they can never be shut again. What takes place here takes us back to Isaiah 64, where the chapter has these same themes of God coming to us, our sin demanding our punishment, but God graciously condescending to us as a Father.

What John predicted now came true. It is not about the pouring out of water on Jesus, but the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, descending as a dove.

What took place in creation, where the Holy Spirit hovers over the face of the waters, so now that same dove-like floating down upon Jesus takes place. This is a new creation; something is happening here that has never happened before. The fulfillment of what Isaiah promised in 44 is now a reality. The Spirit will revive generations to come.

Then come wonderful words of acceptance, words filled with Old Testament imagery.

"You are my son" comes from Psalm 2:7, the messiah crowned king.

"You are my *beloved* son," recalls another Old Testament text that comes out of a story in Genesis 22 when God speaks to his servant Abraham and says, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there as a burnt offering..." This sacrifice will be completed in a few short years when Jesus goes to the cross. The final phrase, "in You I am well-pleased," comes from Isaiah 42:1-2.

The greatest need you and I have, to be loved and accepted is placed on Jesus. Then we have the first glimpse as to how we can have that same promise given to us, if we can be identified with him, then the Father's pleasure can rest on us. But with that wonderful promise we begin to see the tremendous cost having Jesus identify with us, of him taking on our sin and we being counted as the Father's children.

Jesus identifies with our greatest struggle 12-13

What happens next should arrest our attention. It is here that the good news of the gospel, the journey that is our Christian life should once and for all tell us that God's pleasure does not translated into a pleasurable life.

The high point is reached, the Father's affection is poured out in the form of the Holy Spirit... and the same Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness.

If I were to write this story I would have no problem ending it in v11, but Jesus goes from the Father's pleasure to Satan's temptation...all under God's direction. Jesus' journey goes from knowing the Father's love to enduring pain and suffering. We'd expect the next scene to be Jesus basking in the warm glow of spiritual growth.

The disappointment you and I have with the Christian life is that we equate the Father's acceptance with an easy life. It is a lie that Christian growth is the same as victory over sin and temptation. Rather, sin comes as we move from the God in whom we delight to the god of delight. There is an idol, a false god we worship and it is called the easy Christian life. It masks itself with the lie of spiritual growth that means that my marriage will be pleasant, my kids will do well in school, my job will be rewarding and my church will be pleasant.

We confuse the truth that God is the source of our happiness when we only see God as the source that guarantees my happiness. But the truth of the gospel is that the God who is our happiness may not make us happy. We seek God not in order to live a happy life, but we seek God to delight in his presence. It is the presence of God that is the goal, not God as an instrument of happiness.

Here are the guts of the Christian life: Christ takes your place. He repents in your place, forgives the sins by becoming a sinner in your place. There is a great exchange. But exchanges work both ways.

With your sins forgiven, Jesus calls you to follow on a journey...a journey that leads to the cross. But as hard as that journey will be, it is a journey to a full life and a changed life.

We are invited to a full life**14-15a**

In the face of John's arrest, Jesus now proclaims good news.

There is good news in a wilderness where Satan tempts, there is good news where John is arrested and soon decapitated. John continues his role of a forerunner, initiating the journey that Jesus will follow, that you and I are called to follow. The gospel is good news not because it causes our troubles to cease, but because in our troubles God never ceases.

This full life to which Jesus invites us is one in which time has reached its apex. Time is fulfilled.

The promises of the Old Testament await no further implementation. Everything in Scripture points to this man. If you want to understand what your life is going to look like – look here.

The kingdom of God is at hand – God's rightful rule is standing in front of you. It is hard to believe so many people missed it, but they did.

Far too many still miss it today. Our churches are filled with well meaning religious people who imagine that the kingdom of God is found in our comfort, our victory, in our Christian growth. If you have ever been plagued by the nagging fear that since you are not growing, meaning, you are not a better human today than you were five years ago...you will miss the kingdom of God.

If that is what you want, you are grasping at something Christ has not invited you to. What we will see in the coming weeks leading up to Easter is that the normal Christian life is one that is a struggle. If that depresses you, you miss the point of the struggle – for in each difficulty you are going to face, you will come face to face with what Christ has done for you and is doing through you even today. It is in the exchanged life that we have a changed life.

We are invited to a changed life**15b**

The changed life Jesus invites us to is one that is not so much a destination as a journey, a journey that takes us to the cross, that calls us to respond simply by the gospel invitation here.

Repent and believe. When we hear these words we too often envision the craggy finger wagging at us to stop having fun. But repentance is an invitation, a royal invitation in which the King of the universe utters these welcoming words, a summons to a new life.

This is where we find the good news.

If Jesus Christ, who took my place, identifying himself with me in baptism, if he endured Satan's temptations in my place and succeed where I repeatedly fail and he still invites me to a journey with him...there is hope, change is possible.

This changed life is an exchanged life. Repentance is a turning from self, our agenda, our own righteousness to Christ, to his agenda, his righteousness. When that exchange takes place, we will still struggle and still know our need of a savior...but we will also be able to hear the Father's voice announce to us, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

Give up your shallow desires for your own victory, embrace the struggle of a journey that takes us to the cross and know the Father's pleasure is on you, because you are in Christ.

That is why we sing the song from earlier, taken from Zephaniah 3:17:

The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.

As we prepare our hearts to come to this table, let us sing this refrain once again as our closing prayer.