

In the Beginning

Mark's Gospel account is the basis for the Gospel readings in Year B of the Revised Common Lectionary cycle. Since it is a short Gospel, readings from John's Gospel account are interspersed throughout the year. Mark's account is believed to be the first account written, though there was an oral tradition and perhaps some other written materials which have not been preserved or in a complete form. Anyone who wishes to learn about Jesus should be pointed to read this Gospel account. Being the shortest, it is an 'easy' read and can be read in a relatively short period of time. Being the first written and short, it has often been thought that this account was a basic telling of the life of Jesus, without much deep theological undertones. It could almost be imagined that Mark is answering *Dragnet's* Joe Friday's interviewing technique of "Just the facts." However, when we look closely at this Gospel account, we see that there are deep theological implications to it.

The beginning of any piece of literature is important. The first few lines can capture the reader, wanting them to continue reading or it can also cause them to roll their eyes, close the book and put it back on the bookshelf. There is even a tongue-in-cheek contest looking for the worst opening lines for a book. A good opening line can get the reader excited, eager to find out what comes next, regardless of what type of literature it is. The opening lines will let the reader know if it follows a familiar storyline where the ending has basically already been disclosed or if there will be twists to the plot.

The way Mark starts his account, there is no guessing as to the identity of Jesus. He clearly states that Jesus is the Son of God, a Messiah, a deliverer of the people. However, when we jump to this identification, we can easily miss the other thing that Mark is implying in this opening verse. While it isn't an exact quote, it

does evoke a connection with the beginning of the Bible, "In the beginning..." This connection indicates that Mark is seeing the arrival of Jesus as new creation by God, just as God began creating at the beginning of the world. Since God is the Creator in both the world and this new creation begun with Jesus, Mark is intimating that Jesus is not acting on His own, but God is involved.

To further bolster this argument that Jesus is not acting on His own, Mark quotes the prophets to show that Jesus is the One who would be sent to save the people. While he mentions that he was quoting Isaiah, the quote he gives is actually from Malachi and Isaiah. This isn't unusual in that by referring to Isaiah, it was understood to refer to all the prophets. By giving the barest of descriptions of John the Baptist, Mark is telling us that he is fulfilling the prophecy from Malachi that Elijah was going to return as a herald announcing the coming of the Messiah.

In the other Gospel accounts, there is much more detail given as to what John the Baptist preached and what he did. From Mark's viewpoint, this isn't what was the important part to take from John the Baptist. The important thing is that John announced the coming of the Messiah and maybe even more importantly, John pointed to Jesus as being greater than he is. So, while John the Baptist fulfills Scripture, it is not the main point that Mark is making.

By not exactly quoting the beginning of Genesis, Mark is also indicating that this creation that is happening through Jesus is different from the first creation. Mark also hints at this when John the Baptist tells us that someone greater than he will be coming. That this someone will baptize with the Holy Spirit. This is reminiscent of the prophecy from Jeremiah where God makes the New Covenant with the people. In Jeremiah 31, God tells the people, *"But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God,*

and they shall be my people." In order to write something on a person's heart, it cannot be done in a physical sense, but must be done in a spiritual sense, hence John telling us that Jesus will baptize us with the Holy Spirit.

Going out to John to be baptized was somewhat of a change from the normal understanding of immersion or baptism in Jewish beliefs. Typically, there was an immersion that converts to Judaism would undergo to represent the washing away of their old ways and adopting the Jewish customs and traditions. Those who were already Jewish would undergo purification immersions as described in the book of Deuteronomy. John pushed this understanding of baptism being a physical purification further to use it as a call to repentance of one's sins. This repentance would involve a changing of the persons' heart to do the will of God. We will see later in the Gospel accounts how Jesus pushes this understanding of baptism even further to mean the forgiveness of one's sins, not just the repentance of them.

I had heard that John's Gospel account was something of a commentary on Mark's Gospel account, giving further, deeper meaning to what Mark wrote about Jesus as well as more detail. That said, John begins his account in a similar manner, suggesting that a new creation was being made by God through Jesus. What Mark tells us in the eight verses we heard today, John tells us in 34 verses, thus expanding what Mark tells us. This shows that Mark does in fact tell us about Jesus, the fulfillment of Scriptures and about God even though he is rather succinct in his writing. So, while reading this Gospel account may not take long, it would do us good to stay with these words from Mark for a while, delving into the deeper things that he has provided for us and thus getting to know Jesus and God better, getting a better understanding of what it is that God wants for us and wants us to do.

All this considered, how then does this help us in our Advent preparations? First off, it tells us that God had made good on the promise of sending us a Messiah, a deliverer. Throughout the Gospel accounts, we see that God has given us the Deliverer we need, not necessarily the one that we hoped for or were expecting. By being baptized by the Holy Spirit we have the word of God put on our hearts so that we really know what God wants from us. For our part, we need to examine our hearts, not just our actions and see if what we are doing we do for the sake of God and others or if we do them for our own sake, our own benefit. John the Baptist calls us to do this examination in preparation for being baptized with the Holy Spirit. This would be like tilling the soil and getting it ready for planting so that the seed that is sown in our hearts may land on good soil and give a bountiful harvest.

As we continue our Advent journey of waiting and preparing, we are given the instruction by John the Baptist to prepare by repenting, to refocus on God, to orient our hearts to God. While there are other things that we can do to prepare for Jesus' coming, repenting would and should be at the top of the list. It is when we are right with God, when we have our priorities straight as to what is most important, then we will find that other things will fall into place, almost seemingly on their own and without much effort. All we need to do, is to be willing to have an open heart for the Holy Spirit to enter and be willing to go where that Spirit leads.

YouTube Video links:

Gospel and sermon: <https://youtu.be/xCsO8TcgaZg>

Service: <https://youtu.be/-LoYsb7czSQ>