

### **Mark 1:1-8**

*“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,*

*“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;*

*the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:*

*‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’”*

*John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “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 water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”*

After some last-minute Christmas shopping, a woman was rushing her grandchildren into the car. It was then that four-year-old Jason said, “Grandma, Susie has something in her pocket.” He then proceeded to reach into Susie’s pocket and pulled out a new red barrette. Though she was tired, this grandmother knew it was important for Susie to put the item back where she had found it. They did just that. Then they headed to the grocery store. Later at the grocery store checkout, the clerk asked, “Have you children been good so Santa will come?” “I’ve been very good;” replied Jason, “but my sister just robbed a store.”<sup>i</sup> I pray all children are being good with Christmas coming. For that matter, I pray all our adults are being good as well. After all, somebody is watching.

I find it interesting how each of the Gospels tells about the coming of Christ in a different way. Matthew prepares us by giving us a list of Jesus’ ancestors back through the reign of King David, all the way back to Adam. Then he tells us about Mary and Joseph and the announcement by an angel that Mary will conceive a child by the Holy Spirit. This says the angel, is to fulfill a prophecy of Isaiah (found in 7:14),

*“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him*

*Immanuel.”* Then Matthew moves to Jesus’ birth and the story of the star in

the heavens that leads the magi to the house where the young child lay.

Luke tells the story in a slightly different way. Luke begins with an angel announcing to Zechariah and Elizabeth, John the Baptist’s parents that a son will be born to them in their old age. Then Luke tells about the angel’s announcement to Mary that she will bear a child. Then he tells about a visit Mary makes to Elizabeth’s home where Mary delivers her beautiful hymn of praise which the church has termed the *Magnificat*. Then Luke tells about Christ’s birth with the angels praising God in the heavens and the shepherds hurrying to Bethlehem to worship the newborn babe.

The Gospel of John, written much later than the other Gospels, omits the genealogies and the birth narratives altogether. Instead John goes back all the way to the beginning of time to let us know that Christ was present at creation: *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.*

*In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it . . .*” Then John moves almost immediately from the beginning to Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist.

And then there is the Gospel of Mark. Most scholars believe Mark was the first Gospel to be written. It’s thought that Mark was fearful that those who were witnesses to the coming of Christ would die before anyone prepared a written testimony to Christ’s life. So Mark wrote in a hurry, giving us a to the point account of Christ’s life, death and resurrection. So there are no shepherds in Mark’s account, no magi. Neither are there any theological reflections as in John. However, like John, Mark begins with Jesus’ baptism. Mark’s Gospel begins like this: *“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”*

And so John the Baptist appears in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem go out to him. Confessing their sins, they are baptized by him in the Jordan River. John was this strange looking character

who claimed to be a spokesman for God. He wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

And this was John's announcement: "*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 water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*"

So, almost immediately, Mark moves to the meaning of the Gospel, Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist with the Spirit of God descending on Jesus like a dove. And a voice coming from heaven: "*You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.*"

Our introduction to the coming of Christ in Mark's Gospel isn't about angels singing in the heavens or some bright star moving toward Bethlehem. Instead, it's about this guy named John later called John the Baptist out in the wilderness. John has an announcement to make and he is going to be heard.

Pastor Dr. Tom Long tells about a church one Sunday morning in Charlotte, N. C. It came time in the service for the sermon. The preacher was just about to begin when suddenly a man in the balcony a stranger, a man nobody knew stood up and said in a loud clear voice, "I have a word from the Lord." Heads swiveled around. Whatever this word from the Lord was, no

one ever got to hear it because “two bouncers disguised as ushers pounced like gazelles up the balcony stairway and muscled him out of the sanctuary and into the street.”<sup>ii</sup> Everyone was thankful because this stranger could have disrupted the service with his announcement. Don’t you think?

I’m not surprised the ushers hustled this man out. Our first thought is this guy is nuts, but wait, what if he did have a word from God? That’s possible, isn’t it? What if his message was authentic? We will never know, because the ushers were in a hurry to keep him from disrupting the worship service. That’s kind of scary when you think about it. Some person might have a genuine message from God and we might dismiss him as a nut, as a radical, as a trouble maker. John the Baptist wasn’t some regular guy but instead he was someone with a genuine announcement from God.

Let’s think about announcements for a moment, usually they are kind of boring, aren’t they? Who listens to them anyway? That’s when we locate the hymns we’re going to be singing or talking with our friends anyway. That is unless, the announcements get messed up. One pastor chuckled over a typo that changed the meaning of an announcement that appeared in the church bulletin: “Choir rehearsal this afternoon at 3:30.

Everyone who wishes to sin in the choir must come to practice.” I seriously doubt there is more sinning in the choir than anywhere else. And I don’t think they need practice do it.

John the Baptist is out in the wilderness. He is strangely dressed. He contends he has a word from God. He has an announcement the world needs to hear. This is important for us to see. The Christian faith is not a truth that someone has discovered or an idea that someone has carefully thought out. Christian faith is an announcement, it’s a proclamation. It’s an act of revelation. As Dr. Paul S. Rees once put it, “The Gospel is neither a discussion nor a debate. It is an announcement!” It is an announcement of God’s wondrous love for us.

An angel makes an announcement to Elizabeth and Zechariah that Elizabeth will bear a child even at their advanced age. An angel makes an announcement to Mary and then confirms it to Joseph that she will bear a child whose name will be Immanuel. Angel’s make an announcement to the shepherds of the Christ child’s birth. Later John the Baptist will make an announcement to the people of Israel. And what is that announcement that John makes?

*“After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps 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.”*

This is the heart of Advent; this is the heart of Christmas. We all love the preparations for Christmas: the lights, the music, the parties, family coming in, manger scenes, the presents, and all the other wonderful elements of this season of the year. But none of it means anything without this announcement by John of the coming Messiah: *“After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps 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.”* John was announcing the coming of the Messiah.

Really, on the surface, John’s announcement doesn’t sound all that dramatic. Basically all he says is that this Messiah is someone very special, someone much more worthy than John himself. It’s clear that even John could not grasp the full meaning of his announcement. It took more sophisticated theologians to see that this Messiah was not just a messenger of God, but was God Himself in human form. He was the Word made flesh. Isaiah 40:9 prophesied of this very thing hundreds of years before Christ’s birth.



He wrote, *“You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news 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!’”* John’s announcement was greater than even he could realize. He was introducing to the world to God in the flesh.

I read a story that theologian Dale Bruner tells about a little boy named Gabriel Hurles. In January 2009 Gabriel turned six years old. Gabriel was so focused on eating his birthday cake, that he hardly noticed a giant package in the corner of the room. When another child pointed out the large gift, Gabriel ran over and began to tear off the wrapping. When the package was open, Gabriel discovered it wasn’t a bicycle or any of the other items a six-year-old would dream about for Christmas. Rather, it was Gabriel’s dad, Army Specialist Casey Hurles, home on leave from the war in Iraq. Gabriel and his father had been apart for seven months, so when Casey learned his leave would coincide with his son’s birthday, he hatched a plan to offer Gabriel an amazing surprise. He had himself wrapped up as the ultimate birthday gift for his child.<sup>iii</sup>

In essence, that's what God did for us that first Christmas. He offered Himself as an amazing surprise. He wrapped Himself up in the form of a tiny baby. Everything we know about God, we learn from His son, Jesus Christ. He is the Word made flesh.

Early church father Origen, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, offered a different kind of analogy. He told of a village with a huge statue. This statue was so large you couldn't see exactly what or who it was supposed to represent. Finally, someone miniaturized the statue so one could see the person it honored. Origen said, "That is what God did through His Son."

Without even realizing the full scope of his message, John announced that God Himself had come to this world, but there is a second aspect to John's announcement. John also announced that another baptism was coming, a baptism of the Holy Spirit. *"After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps 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."* You and I can take great comfort in our baptism. To say that we are baptized into the Christian faith is one of the most important things that can ever happen to us. It is a sign that we have joined God's family.

It marks us as one of God's children, but it's more than just a mark. It's a sign of new life that awaits each of us in Christ Jesus. Baptism is more than a ceremony. It's more than a symbol. It's the spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit in our life and making us new people.

Pastor C. Thomas Hilton once read of a Christmas pageant with a surprise ending. A certain church was performing Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol. At the end of the play, miserly Ebenezer Scrooge is transformed by the meaning of Christmas. He wants to share his newfound joy with someone, so he calls to a poor newsboy, "Come up here, boy. I've got something wonderful for you." Out of the audience would come a scruffy newsboy to receive a few coins, but on this particular night, but another little boy in the audience was so captivated by the story that he spontaneously rose and walked up to the stage when Scrooge made his announcement. He thought the invitation was for him: "*Come up here, boy. I've got something wonderful for you.*"<sup>iv</sup>

It's something wonderful and we all are invited to receive it. God Himself has come into our world. He offers to all the gift of His Holy Spirit, His presence with us to comfort and empower us. Won't you come and

receive His gift this day? Now as we prepare to head back out into the world  
does anyone have an announcement to make?

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<sup>i</sup> Laugh & Lift - <http://www.laughandlift.com/>.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.nationalcathedral.org/worship/sermonTexts/tl080601.shtml>.

<sup>iii</sup> "Is Jesus Inclusive or Exclusive?" *Theology, News, and Notes of Fuller Seminary* (Oct. 1999), p. 4

<sup>iv</sup> "A World Without Christmas" by C. Thomas Hilton, *The Clergy Journal*, Nov./Dec. 2000, p. 44.