

Sunday April 26, 2020

Lesson 6: John Prepares the Way for Christ

Scripture: Mark 1: 1-8

Context:

As we continue on in the season of Easter, we jump back in our gospel account of Mark as we look at the strange figure of John the Baptist. During this lesson, we will focus upon how God meets us to offer a new start to the world and our lives. An aspect of salvation is the healing of ourselves so we may have a new life. John the Baptist plays a pivotal role in helping others understand salvation and the role of Jesus.

The lesson opens up with the beginning of the gospel. The first verse of the gospel alerts the readers to the basic nature of what will follow: Good News!¹ Because of this beginning, the reader knows the following information is meant to bring hope and healing through Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The information following gives the how and why.

The second and third verses of the text allude to a prophet to help answer how Jesus' identity fits in with the prophets of old. By reminding the reader of God's promises in the past the text is able to present why John's call for his hearers to respond in the present is important as God is doing something for the future.² The reader is given the important themes of the Gospel of Mark: expectancy in the scriptural promises, repentance opportunities for the hearers, and the promise of the coming one.³ Within these two verses, our author gives an outline of why this is the good news and the context clues to help us understand the storyline.

Following these verses, the author introduces the first character of his narrative. Surprisingly it is not Jesus Christ himself, but is instead John the Baptist. Like the prophets of old, John the Baptist is a striking figure in his clothing made of camel hair, his leather belt, and a diet of locusts and honey. He looks the role of those prophets who wandered around preaching and leading the people to experience a renewed spiritual life.

The focus of John the Baptist's message is for repentance and the forgiveness of sins. The Greek word for repentance means "to change one's mind," and behind this word is the Hebrew verb "to turn around."⁴ The word has nuance and implies it is a gift from God.

The other words in conjunction with repentance are baptism and forgiveness. The text makes clear of why repentance, baptism, and forgiveness of sins belong together.⁵ John helps to clarify what this means for the people and how they are to be renewed.

¹ Lamar Williamson Jr. "Mark," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2009), 28.

² Ibid., 30.

³ Ibid., 30.

⁴ Ibid., 31.

⁵ Ibid., 32.

And finally, John helps the people prepare for the coming one. John is a herald sent to prepare the people for what is to come. Jesus will baptize them with even greater things than what John can do. They are to get ready for the Lord's arrival.

Application

At first glance, we might wonder why we read of an Advent passage in the season of Easter. We have celebrated the resurrection of our Lord and we now celebrate seeing the risen Christ live among us. Returning to the time before his arrival seems odd, like rereading a beginning of a book after finishing it.

Yet as I have discovered sometimes you have to go back to the beginning to understand and appreciate the ending. The same goes as we revisit the start of the Gospel of Mark and remember how John the Baptist came to prepare the way of the Lord. Many thought he was the Messiah, the one who would deliver them. His preaching and appearance alluded to how he fit the expectations of those looking for a long-awaited prophet.

John's words reminded the people Jesus offers something totally new. His ministry and his life will not fit in a nice, neat box. Jesus will bring repentance, forgiveness, and baptism in a way the people have never experienced before.

During the Easter season we are reminded how Jesus rocks our world. He comes into it overturning our expectations and offering us something more transforming than what the world offers us. No longer do we have to look to the gods of prestige, money, or success to fill us. Jesus offers us renewal and an opportunity to follow him.

In this passage we are reminded how God calls for us to change from our old selves. We are reminded that repentance and forgiveness are a part of our lifelong journey with our Lord. After going through Lent and now coming into the Easter season, we find ourselves hopefully refreshed. Perhaps during the season of Lent we noticed things about ourselves or we discovered how giving up something drew us closer to our Lord. Maybe there was a new spiritual discipline which has led us into deeper obedience to Jesus.

During the season of Easter we are reminded how Jesus' resurrection was just the beginning of new life. We are a baptized people who continue to repent of our sins and are seeking to live in peace with our neighbors and ourselves. We are called to rejoice how Jesus has paved the way for us and we do not have to earn our way to participate in his death and resurrection. It is a gift meant to empower us and share in proclaiming the good news with our lives.

In practice, it might be good to ask yourself who you will forgive in the season of Easter. Is it someone who has wronged you or is it yourself, giving yourself grace for something you've done? How will you celebrate new life and realize that God has already forgiven you?

Another practice might be for you to repent or turn around. The Greek word for this phrase is "to change one's mind." How might God be inviting you to see something new whether it is your neighbor's behavior which you find bizarre or perhaps issues of violence, racism, or sexism? God continues to work with us revealing to us new insights about how we might love God and others better.

A final practice might be to ask yourself how you practice the discipline of celebration. It might be odd to put celebration with the word discipline, but it is indeed a

Christian practice. Maybe you need to sing songs with your kids or friends, maybe even dance. Perhaps find a friend and share with them a funny meme or joke. Maybe bake a cake or prepare a lavish feast just to do so with those the love the most. If you're an outdoors person, perhaps have outdoor fire or go and pick flowers for your home or to share with neighbors. Celebrate the power of the resurrection that is all around you.

Rev. E. Hunter Pugh
Pastor of Brantley – Brunson Chapel Charge
PO Box 71
Brantley, AL 36009