



Sermon Transcript December 8, 2019

Advent 2019 Christmas Introductions Hope in the Wilderness Mark 1:1-15

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on December 8, 2019 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text
Mark 1:1-15

¹ The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

² As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way,

³ the voice of one crying in the wilderness:

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

⁴ John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey.

⁷ And he preached, saying,

“After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

¹² The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying,

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

Introduction

This Advent Season we are looking at how each of the Gospel writers introduce Jesus to us. How do they begin their accounts of the life of Jesus and what are they telling us about Jesus through the way they introduce him to us?

Last week we looked at Matthew's Gospel account and he began with the genealogy of Jesus that goes back 2000 years to Abraham. By highlighting King David and Abraham in the first verse of Matthew, he was reminding us of the promises God made to Abraham and David. And so the message Matthew was communicating to us in his introduction was that this Jesus is the fulfillment of all of God's promises. Therefore, you can trust God. All the promises of God are fulfilled in Jesus.

This morning we come to the Gospel of Mark. His introduction of Jesus is completely different than Matthew's introduction. Mark doesn't give any information about the genealogy of Jesus, the birth of Jesus or any background to his life leading up to his ministry. Instead, we first meet Jesus in the Gospel of Mark when Jesus is about 30 years of age and about to begin his ministry.

And so, Mark begins his Gospel account with a grand announcement., He begins by telling us what he thinks about Jesus. He introduces Jesus to us with a confessional statement: "*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*" He tells his readers up front that he believes this Jesus is the Son of God and then he spends the rest of the book explaining why he believes this to be so.

As we get started in Mark, it is helpful to know that Mark is writing this Gospel account of the life of Jesus to Christians in Rome. The Gospel of Mark is the first of the four Gospel accounts to be written and it was written to encourage Roman Christians who were suffering severe persecution under Nero. In fact, Mark got his information that he wrote down from Peter, whom Nero executed. You can't get much more of an "inside scoop" on the life and ministry of Jesus than what Mark gleaned from Peter.

Let me give you two reasons why this announcement about Jesus is such a grand announcement. The first thing that makes Mark's opening announcement so grand is what Roman ears would hear when Mark says "*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*" When we see the word "gospel" we think of a religious or Christian word. When we talk about the "Gospel" we immediately think of the good news that is wrapped up in Jesus Christ and what he did for us on the cross—dying for

our sins. But in the Roman world when Mark was writing his Gospel account, the word “gospel” simply meant “good news” or “glad tidings of great joy.” But more importantly, they were words applied to the birth of Caesar Augustus—who Luke tells us was the Emperor of Rome when Jesus was born. And as was often the case—the Caesars were worshiped and considered to be godlike. An inscription dating back to 9 B. C. says of Caesar Augustus, “the birthday of the god was for the world the beginning of joyful tidings (gospel) which have been proclaimed on his account.”¹ So when Roman eyes would read this opening statement about Jesus, they would see the word “gospel” and it would trigger in their mind what was said of the Emperor of Rome. The word “gospel” to Roman eyes and ears meant, “an historical event which introduces a new situation for the world.”² And so Mark announces Jesus’ coming as an event that brings about a radically new state of affairs for mankind³ and rivals the claims of Caesar as Lord. In other words, Mark’s opening statement presents Jesus as the true Son of God, the one who truly brings about a “new state of affairs for mankind.” Or as Mark says later, in Jesus, the kingdom of God has come into the world. This was a grand announcement for these Roman Christians.

But the other thing that makes this opening announcement such a grand announcement is that in verses 2-3 Mark looks back to the Old Testament, and specifically the prophet Isaiah, to announce that with the coming of Jesus the day of God’s long anticipated salvation has come. Quoting from Isaiah 40:3, the ministry of John the Baptist is described as preparing the way for the Lord himself to come and rescue his people and be their king. And so in our passage this morning we hear John the Baptist say of Jesus, “*After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.*” And when Jesus comes out of the waters of baptism, we hear the testimony from heaven, “*You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.*” That is what makes Mark’s announcement so grand. The hope of salvation that was promised in the Old Testament has come in the person of Jesus. That is the message of Jesus in Mark 1:14-15. As his ministry began, “*Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.*” Truly, Mark is announcing that with the coming of Jesus, there is “a new state of affairs.”

Out of the Wilderness

But here is what I want you to see about Mark’s grand announcement at the beginning of his Gospel account. I want you to see where this grand announcement first emerges from in the Gospel of Mark. It is an announcement that emerges from the wilderness—the desert. In this passage, the ministry of John the Baptist took place in the wilderness.

Jesus went out to the wilderness to be baptized by John the Baptist. Jesus then was led to the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. The place—the wilderness—is not just some incidental detail in Mark’s initial announcement about Jesus. Rather, it is a major theme of Mark’s introduction of Jesus to us and it tells us something about Jesus and what he has come to do for us.

When we think of the wilderness—the desert—we think of a place where food is scarce and water is hard to come by. It is a place that is difficult to sustain life and it is fraught with danger. I had a friend in college who studied in Israel for a year and on his own decided to take a hike in the Negev. He wasn’t properly prepared and got lost and he almost died. He was actually chased at one point by a pack of Bedouin dogs. Granted there are settlements in the Negev and nomads have lived for centuries in that area, but it is hard. The wilderness, the desert, is a picture of a world in need of hope. While out and about this week, I had a conversation with someone that turned spiritual and it quickly became clear to me that this person doesn’t know where to find “bread” or “water” and is walking aimlessly through the “wilderness” trying to find meaning. It is a scary place to be. So out of this wilderness comes a grand announcement of hope.

But there is another layer of nuance that emerges out of the wilderness. Significant portions of Israel’s history is shaped by their experience in the wilderness. And by bringing the people of Israel back out into the wilderness through the ministry of John the Baptist and by Jesus going out into the wilderness, he is retracing the history of Israel and Mark is telling us that what Israel could not do, Jesus has come to do. And so with Jesus, there is hope of a new beginning that will bring God’s kingdom to this world.

I heard it said this way this week about this passage. At the end of the day, you and I are not in need of a second chance to do things right . . . “if I had to do it all over again!” In fact, David Strain said “I’ll make as much of a mess of my second and third and fourth and fifth chance as I did my first chance. That is not what I need. That is not good news. And that is not what Jesus comes to give us. Not a second chance, no, but an entirely new beginning.”⁴ What I can not do for myself, Jesus has come into the wilderness to do for me. And so by staging these events in the wilderness, God is communicating to us that he offers us hope—a new beginning. Jesus is providing a fresh new start for us. Jesus is the True Son, the new Israel who brings the blessing of God to this world. And Jesus brings about a real victory by defeating Satan. There is hope in the wilderness. There is hope in your wilderness. If you long for a new beginning this morning, there is hope. Jesus has stepped into the wilderness and he can do for you what you can’t do for yourself. I want you to see the hope there is in Jesus this morning.

Out of the Wilderness Comes A Fresh Start

Mark uses John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness to introduce us to Jesus. John the Baptist is described in verse 3 as *“the voice of one crying in the wilderness.”* To help us understand the essence of John the Baptist’s ministry, we have a quote from the Old Testament. *“As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”* While this quote is attributed to Isaiah, it is actually a quote from Exodus, Malachi and Isaiah. It is helpful to look back from where these quotes come from to understand how Mark is introducing Jesus to us.

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face” is a quote that comes from Exodus 23:20. Here God tells Moses that he will send an angel—a messenger—who will go before the people of Israel and he will bring them safely into the Promised Land. God assures Moses as they leave Egypt and travel through the wilderness that they will indeed arrive at the Promised Land. But now Mark uses this verse to refer to preparing the way for Jesus and it is not an angel that prepares the way, but it is John the Baptist who prepares the way. In this verse, Jesus is taking the place of Israel. In other words, Jesus will act in the place of Israel and do what the people of Israel could not do.

Then he is quoting from Malachi 3:1 when he says *“who will prepare your way.”* Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament. It is the last word the people of Israel hear from God until John the Baptist shows up 400 years later. Here Malachi says, *“Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me.”* Who is “me” in Malachi 3? Malachi then says, *“And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.”* And so this Jesus who comes in the place of Israel is none other than the Lord himself! And by coming to the temple, he is not referring to a building, but the promise that God will dwell with his people. Quite a few years ago we had what we called “Vision Sunday” and we held our service at one of the schools in Rocky Hill and we talked about what Peter said of us in 1 Peter 2. We are living stones, a spiritual building where God dwells. We passed out stones and I encouraged you to walk around with them in your pocket to remind you that we are the dwelling place of God—the temple of God. You bring God’s presence wherever you go. I had two people in the last week pull the stone out from their pocket to show me. This is what Malachi said this Jesus would do. The Lord himself will come and dwell with us.

And then finally, the rest of the quote is taken from Isaiah 40:3. *“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”* At the end of that quote in Isaiah he speaks of a coming

day when “*the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.*” It is that future day when God’s kingdom will come in full. But Mark is saying through the prophet Isaiah, the dawning of that day has come in the arrival of Jesus and the kingdom of God is breaking into this world through Jesus.

Think back to Israel’s story in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. How did they do in the wilderness? An entire generation languished in the wilderness for forty years—an entire generation died in the wilderness—because of their sin. But John the Baptist has come to prepare the way for one who will not sin and who will not fall and who will not fail. How can that be? It will be the Lord himself who will come and rescue us and do for us what we could not do for ourselves. This is the fresh start that is offered to us in the “new exodus” that comes with Jesus. His story of perfect righteousness will overwrite your story and my story of perpetual failure.

And so John the Baptist is out in the wilderness and he is preparing the way for the coming Lord—Jesus. In doing so, he is calling the people of Israel to come to him out in the wilderness and to prepare themselves by repenting of their sin. It is interesting to read in verse 5 how “*all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him.*” You can’t miss this. He is summoning them back out into the wilderness where the story of Israel all began. He is taking them to the border, where again the waters parted and Joshua led the people into the Promised Land. And now through the waters of baptism and through repentance, God is offering them a fresh new start.

I like the way David Strain puts it. “Here John is saying, Come on back out. Time to start over. What a mess you made and what trouble you’re in, but there is a new start coming in Jesus.”⁵ But how do you experience that new start? You need to repent of your sin. Strain says, “Maybe that is a message you need to hear this morning . . . Are you alert to the deep issues of your heart? It is not that you are dysfunctional, merely. It is not that I am a victim and other people are to blame. No, whatever else may be true, whatever dysfunction and victimhood may characterize my life or yours, our deepest problem is we are sinners in the sight of a holy God and we need mercy . . . It is time to get real and it is time to face ourselves. Repent for the forgiveness of sins!”⁶ In repenting we turn to Jesus and he is able to give us a fresh start.

Out of the Wilderness Comes A True Son

There was something else that was happening when Israel was making their way through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. It was here where God was forming

Israel to be his son. Back when Moses appealed to Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go, he says in Exodus 4:22-23, *“Israel is my firstborn son and I say to you, ‘Let my son go.’*” But it is in the wilderness where Israel is learning what it is like to be God’s son.

In Deuteronomy 8, God tells them that the testing they experienced while in the wilderness was to teach them to obey the commandments of God. He allowed them to get hungry and then fed them with manna to remind them that it is God who sustains them and cares for them. He reminded them how for forty years their clothing didn’t wear out and their feet did not swell. (Anyone wearing clothing this morning over 40 years old?—Don’t answer that!) And so he says in Deuteronomy 8:5, *“Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you.”*

In a few moments we will see Jesus driven out into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. In Matthew’s account we have more details about the nature of the temptation and how Jesus responded to the temptation by quoting Scripture. For example, when tempted to turn the stones to bread, Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy 8, *“Man shall not live be bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”* The other two temptations were responded with quotes from Deuteronomy 6. Do you see the parallel? Jesus is demonstrating that he is the True Son of God. How did Israel do with the “testing” in the wilderness? Not so well. In order for Israel to be the blessing to the nations they needed to be obedient. But once again, what they were unable to do, Jesus did. And so when Jesus enters the waters of baptism, the Father says of Jesus, *“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”* On one hand, he is identifying Jesus as the eternal Son of God. On the other hand, out in the wilderness, he is identifying Jesus as the True Israel, the True Son, the one through whom God’s blessings come.

But wait a minute! Why then is Jesus being baptized? John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. And here is the perfect Son of God coming to the waters of baptism. It is because Jesus has come to identify with sinners like you and me. Sinclair Ferguson put it this way, “Here already, Jesus indicates how he will become our Savior—by standing in the river in whose waters penitent Jews had symbolically washed away their sins, and allowing that water, polluted by those sins, to be poured over his perfect being.” He received the baptism we need because the curse we deserved he endured. That is exactly what happened when Jesus went to the cross. He so identified with us that he took on the curse for our sin and took our judgment. And so hope begins to emerge from the wilderness as the True Son—Jesus—so identifies with sinners like us that *“whoever believes in his name has the right to become children of God.”* Hope emerges out of the wilderness.

Out of the Wilderness Comes A Real Victory

After Jesus was baptized, he doesn't leave the wilderness. Instead, we read in verse 12, *“The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.”* This is typical of Mark’s Gospel. It is the shortest of the four Gospels and he moves quickly from event to event. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark doesn’t give us any details about the nature of the temptations Jesus endured and nor does he wrap it up with a concluding thought. For example, in Matthew’s account of the temptation of Jesus it ends by saying, *“Then the devil left him, and behold angels came and were ministering to him.”*

Instead, Mark concentrates his thoughts on what it is like “out there in the wilderness.” There are “*wild animals*” out there. William Lane says that the presence of wild beasts stresses the character of the wilderness. “Jesus confronts the horror, the loneliness and the danger with which the wilderness is fraught . . . Which is not the context of paradise but the realm of Satan.”⁸ The very place where Israel disobeyed God is the place where Jesus was obedient. So once again, Jesus is being presented as the True Israel.

But the reason Mark doesn’t come to a concluding thought with the temptation is that it is not here where the decisive battle over Satan is won. The battle will continue. In fact, in Luke’s account of the temptation it says that *“departed from him until an opportune time.”* It is at the cross where Jesus wins the final battle as he is *“obedient unto death.”*

What a beautiful picture for us this morning. Where Adam failed . . . where Israel failed . . . where you and I failed—Jesus triumphed. By his obedience a real victory over sin and death are offered to us. Hope emerges because Jesus stepped into the wilderness—the curse of sin—and brought us victory. He lived for us. He died for us. He rose for us. We sing this time of year these words, “No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground. He comes to make his blessings flow (like streams in the desert), far as the curse is found, far as the curse is found.”

Introducing Jesus

So how do we take Mark’s introduction of Jesus and introduce others to Jesus? How do we “prepare the way” for others to encounter Jesus?

Very simply, we enter the wilderness of people’s lives like Jesus did. We are daily

surrounded by people who are making their way through the wilderness in need of a fresh start—a new beginning that only Jesus can bring. And so of all people, we should be people filled with hope. We have met the one who brings hope in the wilderness. He is the one who brings about a fresh start—a new exodus. He is the True Son and he is the real victory over sin. Do people see this hope shining through you? Does the good news of Jesus fill your heart with hope?

At the end of one of the Advent Devotionals this week, Christopher Wright wrote this: “God’s new age has begun, the old age is still with us. And so we live in the meantime. Still in the wilderness of this world, we are refreshed by the promised “streams in the desert” as we anticipate the “everlasting joy” of entering the Zion of the new creation with all God’s redeemed.”⁹

Are you a “stream in the desert” where you work? Are you a “stream in the desert” where you live? Are you a “stream in the desert” among your brothers and sisters in Christ? It is a stream that is fed by the hope we have been given in Christ Jesus. *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”*

May the grand announcement that Jesus is the Son of God be your hope and may that hope shine through you this week.

¹William Lane *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 43

³Ibid., 43

³Ibid., 43

⁴David Strain “A Voice in the Wilderness” www.fpcjackson.org April 29, 2018

⁵Ibid

⁶Ibid

⁷Sinclair Ferguson Quoted in “Writing the New Story” by David Strain, www.fpcjackson.org May 6, 2018

⁸Lane, 61

⁹Christopher Wright “Your God Will Come” in *Advent 2019* Kelli Trujillo editor, (CT Publishing, 2019) 13

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