

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

² *It is written in Isaiah the prophet:*

*“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way”—*

³ *“a voice of one calling in the desert,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’ ”*

⁴ *And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: “After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 1:1-8)*

The Gospel Begins

What’s your favorite prequel? They’ve become quite popular these days. Prequels used to be second rate attempts to rake in a little extra money from a movie that was a big hit. But these days, sometimes prequels do better than the original movie. A case in point is *Wonder Woman* which was a prequel to *Batman vs. Superman*. Last year, *Rogue One* was a prequel to the Star Wars movies and *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* was a prequel to the Harry Potter movies. And in my opinion, they were both better than the original movies.

What is a prequel? It’s a movie or a book that supplies some of the backstory for a previous work. So, do we have a prequel in our gospel lesson for today? Mark gives us a summary of the ministry of John the Baptist which came before Jesus’ ministry. Finally, you can’t call this a true prequel since it’s not a separate work. But Mark does give us the backstory. You can’t just start the gospel by saying, “Jesus was born” or “Jesus began to preach and teach.” You have to set the stage at least a little bit. But Mark opens his gospel with the words: **“The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”** The subject of his book is Jesus, the Christ, the promised Savior and the true Son of God. But he gives us the backstory so that we understand Jesus better. This morning as we inch closer and closer to celebrating his birth in Bethlehem, we turn to Mark chapter one. Here, **the gospel begins.**

I.

John the Baptist set the tone. People sat up and took notice of Jesus in part because God stirred up all kinds of important questions by sending John ahead of him. The gospel in the sense of the story of life of Jesus really begins with what God did to prepare for the world to meet him. **The gospel begins with John the Baptist.**

To introduce us to John, Mark points to an Old Testament prophecy from Isaiah. Really, he mashes two Old Testament prophecies together because they both spoke about the same thing. Isaiah said it first, so he gets credit this morning, but Malachi wrote: **“I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way.”** Isaiah really said the same thing, just in different words: **“A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’ ”** What is a voice but a messenger? Making the paths straight is really no different from saying that he would prepare the way for Jesus.

But Isaiah does add something significant: John would be a voice calling in the desert. John didn’t live in Jerusalem. He wasn’t even a country preacher. John preached in the desert. People had to go out to there to hear him. We wouldn’t really consider that to be a great outreach strategy but Mark says, **“The whole Judean countryside”** – that’s the farmers and the people in small towns – **“and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him.”** It wasn’t easy. John was baptizing in the Jordan River way down in the valley. Jerusalem is on the top of the hills. It was a long trip down and a hot, steep climb back up. But they went. Today, we have trouble

getting people to jump into heated cars and drive to church. But God was working here. He moved the people to go and hear this message to prepare them for Christ.

Mark does something that's rare in the gospels: he describes what John looked like. Read the story of Jesus' birth. God didn't say if the stable was smelly or dirty or if there were oxen and cattle watching. He doesn't say how cold it was or how late it was. He doesn't tell us that there was straw in the manger. And God doesn't tell us what the angels looked like when they appeared to the shepherds or that the baby was sleeping peacefully there in the manger. God just tells us what happened and artists have spent the last two thousand years painting pictures and drawing Christmas cards for us, none of which can tell us what any of it actually looked like.

But Mark tells us what John looked like. He says, "**John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.**" OK, it's not much. But it's far more than what the Bible tells us about most of the people we hear about. Why does John get this special treatment? Because he was the messenger who went before Jesus. Malachi had called that messenger the Elijah who was to come. John dressed the way Elijah dressed. They were both prophets from the desert who wore the kind of clothes and ate the kind of food that someone who wandered in the desert at that time would've had.

The coming of that messenger electrified the atmosphere of Israel. When the people made that trek down to the Jordan River, they had one key question on their minds: is this the promised Messiah? God wanted them to ask that question so that John could answer it: he said no. But he also said, "He's coming! He's almost here!" Then when Jesus himself came to be baptized, John was the first person to publicly identify the Savior. He called him the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Then John became less. Later, he compared himself to the best man at a wedding. You're all heard the toasts those guys give, right? Sometimes they tell funny stories and sometimes they give touching accounts of their friendship with the groom. But for one moment, all eyes are on the best man. Then he's done. Because it's not his day. It's the bride and groom's day. John was like the best man. He had a moment of attention that he used to point all Christians of every age to Jesus. That's why the story begins with him.

II.

John prepared the way for Christ. He could have done that in a lot of different ways. Some Old Testament prophets did great miracles, like making the sun stand still. Some New Testament preachers healed people and even raised the dead. John didn't do one single miracle – at least, not one miracle that people could see and ooh and ah over. God sent him to preach and to baptize. But those simple actions really work an even greater miracle: they create faith in Christ. **The gospel begins with God's promises.**

Those promises began in the Old Testament. On the very day that Adam and Eve fell into sin, God promised to send a Savior. In the thousands of years between Eden and Bethlehem, God kept repeating that promise. He promised that through Abraham all nations would be blessed. He promised King David a son who would reign forever. For centuries, in a dozen different ways, God promised a Savior. John was the last prophet to repeat that promise. He did that in two ways. The first way was through an action. Mark says, "**And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.**" Why baptism? To wash their sins away. That is the picture that washing with water conveys. But it's more than a picture. God actually forgives our sins in baptism.

Now was John's baptism the same as ours? In one sense, it was different. John's baptism was temporary. Jesus himself instituted the baptism that we practice which will continue until he returns. But that difference was kind of like the difference between Old Testament and New Testament preachers. Every true Old Testament preacher pointed to Christ. They didn't have all the New Testament details we have. But was their gospel any different than ours? No. It was still the message about Jesus. Every Israelite who trusted those promises had their sins forgiven. They all live with Jesus in heaven today.

The message about Jesus is the power of God that gives salvation to all who believe. The Holy Spirit works through the gospel and gives faith. The sacraments are the gospel. Baptism is the gospel. It washes our sins away and puts faith in our hearts. St Paul says that in baptism, we die and rise with Christ. John's baptism did all that even though it was temporary. How do I know that? Mark says it was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. When Jewish believers confessed their sins and then were baptized, God washed those sins away. That bath pointed to Jesus just as surely as our bath does. That bath drew its power from Jesus' death and resurrection just as surely as our bath does.

John's baptism reminds us what a tremendous gift our baptism is. When I was vicar, I preached a sermon once about baptism. Afterward, one of the members came up to me. She had a large family and her children attended our school. She said, "I really appreciated your sermon, vicar. We don't talk about baptism enough." I thanked her but I don't think I understood at that moment why she said that. But I learned later that she and her husband had lost a little boy. They were visiting friends who had a pool and he went out by himself and fell in. For that Christian lady, knowing that Jesus had claimed her son in the waters of holy baptism was the only comfort she could have.

Baptism is Jesus' love made real and concrete. You can feel the water on your child's forehead. You can watch and hear the words and promises and if you were old enough, you can remember your own baptism. At the moment you're baptized, Jesus is saying to you, "You are my child. I love you. I forgive you. I will never let you go." And even if you're like me, and you don't remember that day or that baptism, it doesn't change the promise. God made it to you and he never lies. Our baptism connects us to what Jesus did on the cross and in the empty tomb. The Holy Spirit himself works through it.

That brings us to the other way that John pointed to Christ. He said, "**After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.**" John always knew he wasn't the Savior. He was the voice crying in the desert. John knew that compared to Jesus, he was nothing. He wasn't even worthy to untie Jesus' sandals. John the Baptist was a sinner, just like we are sinners. He didn't deserve the honor of being Jesus' messenger. But God gave him that honor.

John said, "**I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.**" Now, John was not denying anything I've just said about baptism. Jesus himself gave us the same gift of baptism that the Holy Spirit gave to John. Rather, John was pointing to the power behind it and all our preaching of the gospel. He was pointing to the gift God would give to the Church through Jesus: the gift of the Holy Spirit. That gift actually came on the day of Pentecost. Fifty days after Jesus' rose, God poured the Holy Spirit out on his church. From that day until this one, the church has preached and baptized and celebrated communion. It has reached out into all the world and proclaimed the very message God sent John the Baptist to proclaim: behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.

No one but God could give the Holy Spirit. No one but the Son of God could send the church out into the world equipped to do the work God calls us to do. Jesus has sent us. He has given us the gospel and the Holy Spirit always works through that message. He has given us his Spirit and all the gifts we need to do his work. We are his servants, his proclaimers, his baptizers and teachers.

Mark records for us today the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the next few weeks, we're going to kneel at the manger and wonder at the child lying there. And then we're going to hear of his baptism and his ministry. As the months slide by, we'll watch him do miracles and enter Jerusalem in triumph. We'll see him confound his enemies and institute the Lord's Supper and be betrayed and crucified. We'll stand at the foot of his cross and bend down low and look into his empty tomb. We'll know that we are forgiven through his work. We'll know that all our sins are washed away through the baptism he gave us. We'll hear how he conquered sin and death and made us his. And when he ascends into heaven, we will rejoice in his promise to come again and heal this world of all sin and sorrow. We'll wait to see him in heaven and to rise from the dead.

On Judgment Day, the gospel that began so long ago will finally reach its conclusion with us singing Jesus' praises for all eternity in a new and perfect world. But we aren't there yet. So today, God reminds us of the beginning. He reminds us of the backstory and he points us to the promises he made and kept. He turns our hearts again to the work Jesus did and the forgiveness he won. Rejoice in the beginning and look forward to ending. Amen.