

The Real Jesus, Mark 1:1-8, The Forerunner, 1/2/22

It would be an understatement to say that Jesus is the most significant historical figure the world has ever seen. All the armies that have ever marched, all the kings who have ever reigned, all the philosophers, billionaire tech moguls and social media influencers put together have not affected the life of mankind on this earth as much as the one, solitary life of Jesus. What is it about Jesus that has transformed so many lives from every culture, across generations, given life, purpose and inspiration, hope and a future, courage and power to do daring and beautiful things? Let me first tell you what won't transform you or anyone else- modern, reimagined Jesus. The trending Jesus that lives in the imagination of many- who domesticate and trivialize him, who make him more politically correct and palatable to our sensibilities, The trend is to take some aspects of Jesus (Golden Rule Jesus, social action Jesus, standing up against "the man" Jesus, the Democrat or Republican Jesus or Meek and Mild Jesus) and discard the rest. I love what Tim Keller says, "A Jesus that you invent can't change you because he's too much like you." If you want a Jesus that will transform you have to encounter the real Jesus. That's the Jesus I rediscovered 20 years ago while reading the Bible who confronted me about my sin and my lifestyle and my self-centeredness, who disagreed with me and offended my sensibilities, yet was so compelling, so captivating...and he loved me and called me to a completely new way to see life, has been transforming me from the inside out, giving me new desires and gave me a reason to live. That's the Jesus I want each of us to encounter for the first time or rediscover afresh in 2022.

The best place to encounter the real Jesus is in the eye-witness accounts of the four gospels- Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They are written within a few decades of his life and withstand the most rigorous tests of authenticity. And so we are going to spend the next year or so walking through just one of those Gospels, Mark. Why Mark? Well in addition to being the first gospel account written, likely within 30 years of Jesus' life, it's also the gospel for those with ADD. It's the shortest gospel, it's easy to follow because it's split evenly into two sections- chapters 1-8 the identity of Jesus, chapters 9-16 the mission of Jesus. It is written in story form. There is dramatic dialogue, action, intrigue, mystery and cliffhangers. Traditionally, the Gospel of Mark would have been read out loud in one sitting. I want to challenge you this week to take about an hour and a half and sit down to read it, read it out loud, or listen to it, link on Facebook and e-news. You can split it in two if you need to. There is much more we could say about the author, historical background and audience, we will post tomorrow a helpful Bible Project video that explains that. But we want to jump into the story. So let's go.

1 *The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,* ² *as 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 wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"*

Mark wastes no time in establishing the identity of Jesus. He asserts that Jesus is the Christ and Son of God. Christos- meaning "anointed royalty", a King, the Messiah. But not just a human king, the Son of God- bold term- claim of divinity. Not just King, not just Divine, but the

fulfillment of Jewish prophecy. By quoting Isaiah's prophetic message from 700 years prior to Jesus, Mark roots Jesus in the historic, ancient story of Israel. Christianity is not some new thing, some new religion that some Jews and Gentiles invented to change things up. It is the continuation, it is part two, one seamless thread of God's purposes in history. And the arrival of this divine king is a story of good news because his arrival ushers in the next phase of God's plan of salvation for mankind.

Instead of beginning with his birth like other Gospels, Mark begins at the launch of Jesus' public ministry which was preceded a forerunner who paved the way. Now you see Mark is quoting OT Scripture- it's actually a combination of two prophecies- Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1- two prophets who spoke of this forerunner. This forerunner would be both a sign that the Messiah was coming and also the ministry of this forerunner would help prepare the way through spiritual revival. We are going to see three things about this **Forerunner- His identity, impact and intent.**

The Forerunner's Identity: Mark tells us the identity of this forerunner- **v. 4 John the Baptist.** What do we know about John the Baptist? From other gospels we know he's a pastor's kid...kind of, son of Zachariah the Jewish priest. He's a cousin of Jesus, Mary's sister Elizabeth and Mary were pregnant at the same time. We know that when God made this man, he broke the mold, very unique. His ministry took place not in town but in the Judean wilderness where he also lived like a nomad off the land. I've been there and my guess is that it hasn't changed much since John's day. It's a barren, desolate place with mountains and cliffs and wild goats and in the valley the Jordan river flowed. He also had an interesting fashion style. **⁶John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist.** Not only his dress but look at his diet- **and he ate locusts and wild honey.** You've heard of the Daniel diet which is pretty trendy right now, well this is the Baptist diet, anyone interested in this one? Guaranteed to lose that holiday 5lbs and some. Wilderness, animal skins, eating insects...sounds like this guy should see a psychiatrist. What is going on?

There's a purpose. John is making an **intentional connection to Elijah the Prophet. In 2 Kings 1:8** it says he wore the same outfit, Elijah spent time in the wilderness. And in Luke's Gospel it tells us that Zechariah received a prophesy that John the Baptist would come in the same power and spirit of Elijah. Elijah was a subversive outsider to the Jewish powers of his day. Elijah's ministry was confrontational- he preached against corruption, he called out religious hypocrisy, he was a leader of the resistance to worshipping false gods, he was an agitator, and he called the people to return to faithfulness to God. In John's day, the religious leaders were also corrupt and hypocritical. The faith of the people had become empty religion, traditions and politics. And so John, like Elijah, was the subversive outside agitator to the status quo. Instead of preaching in the temple in Jerusalem which had become a place to be seen, a place to take advantage of the poor and of power plays, he goes out to the wilderness, into the wild. Instead of religious robes, camel hair; instead of hummus and falafel, locust and honey.

The Forerunner's Impact

⁵The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him.

Wow, this is like people from all over the country hitchhiking to Woodstock in 1969. But instead of going for sex, drugs and rock n' roll, these Jewish people were going to the wilderness for spiritual revival. Notice what was happening v.⁴ *And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, 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 and were baptized.*

These crowds were coming out to the wilderness, not to hear a health, wealth and prosperity message. Or an inspirational message about following your heart and finding your inner you. They were coming out to be confronted about their sin. And in one life after another, the Spirit was moving. People were confessing their sins- This word means to testify openly, publicly, "I've committed adultery, I am greedy, I have lost my temper, I have been self-centered." And God's Spirit and grace was active in this raw place of honesty, humility, spiritual brokenness.

And they were demonstrating their repentance through water baptism. Let me make a few comments about this word baptism. What makes us Baptists? There are 100 misconceptions about what a Baptist is. In many ways it is no longer a helpful description. Do you the 5 things that historically marked churches as Baptist? We believe in the **authority of the Bible**, **autonomy of the local church** (that Jesus is the leader of the church, not the pope, a bishop or denominational counsel), **congregationalism** (membership matters and everyone has a voice), in the **priesthood of all believers** (that there is no special class of people who alone can interpret Scripture and mediate God's grace. All of us can read Scripture, access God directly through Jesus, have the Holy Spirit). And of course, that we hold to **believer's baptism** (that water baptism is an outward demonstration of our personal faith in Jesus Christ). I wonder how many of you would pass that quiz? Now certainly churches with Baptist in their name aren't the only ones who believe these 5 things- many non-denominational churches, Bible churches, community churches hold to all five as well. Now, one of those misconceptions is John the Baptist was the founder of the Baptists. Not exactly, John's baptism was essentially a rededication ceremony for Jews who were committing to returning to covenant faithfulness. John's baptism was similar in that it was in the water and was an outward demonstration of repentance. But believer's baptism is uniquely Christian, we are identifying ourselves with Jesus Christ as Lord. Believing in Jesus' death, burial and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins. So with that clarification, John was having extraordinary impact in Israel through his ministry. The Spirit was on the move.

The Forerunner's Intent

⁷ *And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps 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."*

It would have been easy for John the Baptist to look at the crowds, look at the impact he was having on people's lives and say, "Wow, look how amazing I am. My star is rising fast! I can start a megachurch here in the desert!" But this is not John's intent. He understood exactly what his purpose was, he knew it was not about him- his life pointed to a greater one that was to come,

Jesus the Messiah. In another Gospel he says, "I must decrease and He must increase." John knew his ministry was just an onramp to Jesus. He was just a servant in court of the true king, unworthy to even serve as a foot washer for Jesus let alone his forerunner. Notice what he says about his baptism in comparison. In other words, he understood that his baptism was only physical and temporary but Jesus was coming to do something supernatural and irrevocably permanent.

So we see John's identity, impact and intent as the forerunner prepared the way for people to encounter Jesus. Here's the question for us today: **What does John's ministry in the wilderness teach us about being forerunners for Jesus as a church in 2022?** The application of this message isn't that we should all move to the desert and start a commune. That sounds more like a Jim Jones than John the Baptist. But there is something of the wilderness spirit in John's ministry that prepares people to encounter Jesus that can take with us into our lives and our church ministry. Two Ministries

#1 A Ministry of Authentic, Open Confession. No one was holding back, concerned about their reputation in the wilderness- they were honest with God, themselves and one another about their sin. The very word implies that it is out loud. James says, **Confess your sins to one another and be healed.** This was an essential ingredient of what made the early church so powerful- because in open confession there is healing freedom. And yet this is one of the most neglected practices in the church today, to our detriment. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, **"Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of the unexpressed it poisons the whole being of a person."**¹ It was when I began getting honest, not only with God but with others about my pornography problem that I began to see freedom. It was in a group with others who were willing to confront my biting, sarcastic tongue that I began to see freedom. There is a genuine freedom to break chains when you name your sin in the presence of a loving community you can learn to trust.

Here's why confession prepares the way for people to encounter Jesus- Because there is no coming to Jesus unless we acknowledge that we are sinners. It is the prerequisite! Because he's the Savior, if you don't acknowledge you have sin, then you don't think you need a Savior. It's an environment without pretense, where all are welcome no matter what background, that's authentic like John's ministry in the wilderness where Jesus is at home. **Psalm 34:18, The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.**

This is why one of our values is authenticity and restoration. We strive to be a place where people can genuinely let their guards down and be their messy, dysfunctional at times selves. A place where it's OK not to be OK. And we will help each other not stay that way. This is what I try to model from the pulpit. This is what we want to see in the culture of our small groups. It's what Broken Beginnings is after and what we are trying to accomplish in Re|Engage and Student groups. Not because we all want to know everyone's dirty secrets, but because it is in

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

the light where our sin begins to lose its power. Who knows what you are really struggling with? Make 2022 the year you stop hiding and come out into the light to receive grace of Jesus.

#2 A Ministry that is an Onramp to Jesus.

One of the things I love about where I live is I'm a quarter mile to the Marsh Rd. onramp to 95. Quick access to Philly, the shore, Christiana Mall. It's great. John's ministry was an onramp to Jesus. It was not about John, it was all about Jesus. Same for each of us and our church as a whole. Everything we do at Brandywine is an onramp to Jesus. This is in our very mission- to **Introduce people to Jesus and help them follow him.** Brandywine's ministry is not about Pastor Nate or how good the sermon is. I always appreciate hearing encouragements, "Great sermon Nate." But what really encourages me is when people say, "I rededicated my life to Jesus, wow, I really grew in my faith in Jesus. I saw Jesus in a new way." It's not about Pastor Matthew and how cool of an event, it's about students having onramp experiences where they can be introduced to Jesus. It's not about how many good things we do out in the community, it's about utilizing these opportunities to be an onramp to the love of Jesus. It's not about how big our budget is- it's about how our budget is creating onramps for people to meet Jesus and be disciplined here and globally. or online views, or the music, it or having some remodeled spaces... all of these things are onramps to Jesus.

What if your motto for 2022 is "**I want to be an Onramp to Jesus.**" How can you be an onramp for Jesus through your kindness to your enemies? How can you be an onramp for Jesus in your hospitality, welcoming people into your home? How can you be an onramp for Jesus in how you serve our neighbors in Wilmington this year? How can you use your money to be an onramp for Jesus? What about your spiritual gifts and talents?

May the collective voice of Brandywine this year be a voice of one proclaiming, "Prepare the way of the Lord."

communion