

Preparing the Way

- Mark 1:9-13
- Two major events are covered in Mark's Gospel with a mere 5 verses. As I said last week, sometimes Mark gives us more details in a story. But there are times when Mark just gives us the bare bones, as in these two stories today. Two important stories, because they represent the preparation for the beginning of Jesus' ministry. John cried out, "Prepare the way of the Lord." And in these two critical events, Jesus' baptism and temptation, we see God the Father and God the Holy Spirit preparing Jesus to do what he was sent to earth to do. Let's take a look.
- **Baptism (verse 9-12)**
- Mark gives us just a few words about an event that was considered so important to the early church that when they were forced to look for a replacement for Judas, the criteria was that it needed to be "one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day he was taken up from us..." (Acts 1:21-22).
- Mark simply says, "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." Much has been written and debated over the years as to why Jesus was baptized. John's was a baptism of repentance and Jesus had nothing to repent of. Matthew records that Jesus said to John, when John protested, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." (Mt 3:15). William Hendriksen writes, "Jesus did, after all, have sin, namely *ours*... Isaiah wrote, *The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all*... In a sense, by means of baptism Jesus was fulfilling part of his task of laying down his life for his sheep... Moreover, apart from this voluntary self-surrender, symbolized by his baptism, would not all other baptisms have been meaningless?"
- Three signs attended Jesus' baptism, according to Mark's Gospel. The first was that when Jesus came up out of the water, he "saw the heavens being torn open." This is graphic language softened by later Gospels, but Mark uses a term that we find the counterpart to in the Old Testament, often translated "cleave". As in when the Red Sea was parted by God, or when the Psalmist wrote that Moses "split rocks in the wilderness" (Ps 78:15), or when, on the last Day the Mount of Olives will be "split in two" by the feet of the Lord at his return. The only other time Mark uses this word in his Gospel is at the crucifixion, when he writes "And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom." (Mk 15:38). It is no coincidence that when that happens, a Roman centurion confesses, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" And at the first occurrence, when the heavens are torn open at Jesus' baptism, the Spirit and the Father reveal that Jesus is the Son of God!
- The second sign is that Jesus saw the Spirit descending on him like a dove. But the Greek intensifies this in saying the Spirit descended into Him. John the Baptist testifies when he sees this, according to John's Gospel, that he was told by God that the "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." (John 1:33) As we saw last week, only God can baptize with the Holy Spirit.
- The third sign is that God the Father joined with God the Spirit in confirming who Jesus was, and God spoke from heaven saying, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." God did not speak those words to any other man in the Bible. Abraham was

his friend; Moses was his servant, David was a man after God's own heart, but this man was God's beloved Son. And this man, the God-man, was empowered by God not only to speak for or to act for God, but to speak and to act *as* God. This is how he could forgive sins, or cast out demons, or raise the dead...not because he was acting as a representative of God, but because he was, he is God. It is interesting in chapter 11 when the chief priest and the scribes are challenging Jesus, asking him "By what authority are you doing these things," Jesus turns it back on them with a question: "Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?" He boxed them into a corner, because they knew that after John baptized Jesus, he proclaimed the next day, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

- Can I just make one application from the Father's words that he spoke to his son? This is the affirmation that we all seek from God. We all long to hear him say, "You are my beloved son, my beloved daughter; with you I am well pleased." And if you are in Christ, He does say that, He is saying that to you. The acceptance we each crave from birth, we have in Christ. Paul says it plainly: "In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved." (Ephesians 1:5-6) That is who you are. Sons and daughter through Jesus Christ, blessed (accepted!) in the Beloved. Embrace that. Stand there. Live there. **And when you live there, you can give there.** Because your wife, your husband, your children, need to hear that from you. "You are my beloved wife/husband/son/daughter; with you I am well pleased." You don't have to use Bible-ese. You can say, I LOVE you, and I am so PROUD of you! It is water to the soul.
- **Temptation (vs. 12-13)**
- We see God preparing his beloved Son for ministry through baptism. Then that preparation continues through temptation. After God speaks words of affirmation for his Son, he doesn't throw him a party. Instead, the Spirit drives him into the wilderness where the battle between Jesus the Son of God, and Satan the adversary of God, will begin.
- It happened, as Mark will say more than 40 times, immediately. No time to bask in the glory of the baptism and the presence of the Triune God in attendance there. Jesus goes right from baptism to battle. James Edwards writes that the Gospel of Phillip, which did not make the cut to be in the Bible, for good reasons, has Jesus "laughing in contempt at the world, as though his ministry was a melodrama. Not so in Mark, where dead earnestness pervades the temptation narrative." Jesus was not taken into the wilderness as punishment for sin, nor was he tested like Abraham was, to see if he would trust God. But this also was a fulfillment of all righteousness, as Jesus said about his baptism, because the One who saves us had to also be tempted like us. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." (Hebrews 4:15) Because of that, we are able to draw near to the throne of grace with confidence, to find mercy and grace to help in time of need.
- What happens in the wilderness? We know from what we read in Mark, Matthew and Luke that Jesus was in the wilderness for at least 40 days. We know from Matthew and Luke that Jesus fasted for those 40 days. Matthew and Luke say that the tempting

started, Satan appeared, after the 40 days, when Jesus was at his weakest physical point. Mark doesn't say that, so the discussion over the years has been whether or not Jesus was tempted by Satan for the full 40 days. It doesn't matter. How many times did Satan tempt Jesus? We don't know for sure. The three ways we know Satan tempted Jesus, according to Matthew and Luke, are descriptive, not exhaustive. Satan tried to tempt Jesus to turn stone into bread, because he was hungry. He tried to get Jesus to bow down to him and then Satan promised to give Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. And he tried to tempt Jesus to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple, to prove that God the Father would not allow his Son to be hurt. Again, these are hard things to understand, but the principle is clear. **Jesus had to establish his authority over the enemy of God by defeating him in the wilderness.** Satan had home court advantage, as God has allowed him to this day to rule as the Prince of this world. But as 1 John 3:8 tells us, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil." Mark doubles down on this idea in his Gospel with Jesus' very first miracle, casting out a demon in a man in Capernaum (1:21-28), and his very first parable (3:23-27), teaching about how he has come to bind the strong man and plunder his house. I have told you before that when I used to walk to elementary school, about a half mile from my house, uphill both ways and always snowing, that one year, when I was 9, there was another 4th grader who started beating me up nearly every day on the way to school. He didn't take my lunch money or anything, but he just waited for me in a particular spot and then he would push me down, or punch me, or something. I would try to take different ways to school, but then I would forget and go the shortest route again, and get a beating. **Until** I told my older brother what was going on. The next day he walked with me to school, and he showed my personal bully, in a pretty forceful way, that picking on me again would not be worth the, uh, pain he would experience. My brother bound the strong man and set the scrawny little captive free. Jesus came to do that for all of us.

- One final comment that maybe came up in your reading this week, especially if you have spent time with this text around your children. One of them may have asked you, "Dad, what does it mean that Jesus was with the wild animals?" Because there were wild animals in this part of the world: big cats, scavenger animals, wild dogs. This is not a reference to the world to come, when the lion will lie down with the lamb. You know, Jesus walked out into the wilderness and the lions, the jackals, the hyenas, and the panthers all just curled up and purred at his feet. That would not be consistent with the attitude of this text. This is a violent place, and Jesus was standing before a violent enemy, one who has come to kill, steal and destroy. Remember, Mark is writing to the Roman Christians. They knew that Nero would take Christians, and history records that, "they were covered with the hides of wild beasts and torn to pieces by dogs." It is not inconceivable to think that Mark was reminding his readers that Jesus also was driven out to the wilderness and thrown among the wild beasts. And just as angels came and ministered to him in his time of need, they will minister to us when we are being persecuted, even to the death. God did not abandon his Son. God will not abandon us. We do not have to be afraid of wild beasts. Or viruses. Even devils. God holds us and he will not let us go.
- Prayer