

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God,

It is likely that the first audience of the Gospel, according to Mark, were Roman Christians living under the persecution of Nero and the Roman Empire. Blamed for starting the catastrophic fires of Rome by Nero, God's children were tortured and executed in ugly and painful ways and thus, in Rome, met in the underground catacombs to worship in secret. To them, we think, first came this Gospel.

We do not know absolutely who Mark was, but we can be reasonably sure that Mark is the person mentioned in Acts 12:12. We read that he went to John Mark's mother's house after imprisonment. Luke writes this in such a way that it seems to us that John Mark was well-known to the readers of that day. From the rest of the account of Acts, we are made aware that John Mark's mother was a woman of some wealth, seeing she had a servant to answer the door. We read in Acts 13:5 that John Mark accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey, and in Acts 15:36ff, we read that this was the same man with whom Paul and Barnabas had a strong disagreement. Paul wanted John Mark to accompany them, and Barnabas, John Mark's cousin, decided to take John Mark, leave Paul, and go to Cypress. In Colossians 4:10, it seems that Paul and Mark had made up since Paul brings greetings from Mark, the cousin of Barnabas and describes Mark as a fellow worker. Ancient histories also identify this Mark with the writing of the gospel. Finally, some believe that the mention of the young man who, naked, fled away from the scene of Jesus' arrest in Mark 14:51 is Mark's way of referring to Himself.

What inspires us is Christ's work and Spirit in John Mark. We have a man whose beginnings in the ministry saw him falter and even fail. He was raised to be the first Chronicler of the Good News about Jesus Christ, and the early church confirms this. According to Eusebius and Papias, early church historians, based on tradition, always behind Mark's words is Peter's voice. The book of Mark's similarity to the sermon Peter preaches to Cornelius and his house is amazing.

What are we to understand by those first words, "The beginning of the Gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God? When we hear the word "gospel," we tend to think of the Gospel according to Matthew, Luke, or John." For Mark and his first readers, there is a deeper meaning. Mark is writing the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, but the word used there for "good news" (or in the old

English: “glad tidings”) also means the ministry of evangelism or the preaching of the good news proclaimed by Jesus Christ. More to the point, we can understand this opening statement as follows: the beginning of Jesus Christ's testimony of Himself for Jesus Christ is the good news and what Mark will lay out for us, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is the content of that Gospel who brings the Gospel.

Throughout the ages, but especially in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, sadly, even today, many critics attack the gospels. The Gospels, they say, are unbelievable, sloppy history. They point out that the chronological order presented by the four gospels is not the same. But the Gospel writers, including Mark, did not set out to write a history or an authorized biography of Jesus of Nazareth but set out to write the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. They set about to relay to us the gospel (good news) as it is found in Jesus Christ as presented by the teaching, signs and wonders, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to save sinners. His purpose was that people would read, repent, and believe.

What's more, in Mark's case, a church under the horrible persecution under Nero, worshipping among the corpses and water and filth of the catacombs, would be comforted by hearing about the good news of Jesus Christ. Let us keep that in front of us. This is part of God's authoritative Word, so we begin with the presupposition that this is the truth. It is the Word of God about the Word, that is, the Word that became flesh, Jesus Christ, the Son of God!

Thus, Mark begins his account of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Jesus, in the Gospel, according to Mark, was an actual historical person. Jesus is the Messiah, and Jesus is the Son of God. This is a fantastic account we will read and mine the treasure from. Likely, the audience in Rome had already heard the Good News, as mentioned, but now they would listen to that Gospel for the first time as we can read it today. Mark here regards the fact that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah and that Jesus was the Son of God, and this Jesus lived, worked, and died on this earth, yet He lives again. His gospel tells us who Jesus is, what He did, why He did it and finally, the meaning it has for the readers then and now. I bring to you God's Word under the theme:

GOD SENDS A HERALD TO PREPARE THE PEOPLE FOR THE COMING KING:

1. The prophecy about John the Baptist 2. The sign of John the Baptist

3. The Word of John the Baptist.

The Prophecy About John the Baptist Mark links the beginning of the gospel ministry of Jesus Christ to the preparatory work of John the Baptist, connecting John's work to the Old Testament prophecies. The quotation attributed to Isaiah is the only citation of prophecy in the book of Mark. By including this citation, Mark points his gentile readers to the fact that there had, in the past, some 700 years earlier, been a prediction not only about Jesus Christ but also about the one who was to prepare the way for Jesus Christ. We read that it was written in the prophets, "Behold I will send my messenger before your face who will prepare your way before you. The voice of one crying in the wilderness; prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

We know that the words of verse 2 are a quote from Malachi 3:1 and verse 3 a quote from Isaiah 40:3. Some see also in this quote a reference to Exodus 23:20, "See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared." We note that these are not word-for-word quotes from these passages. But let us remember Mark's purpose. His purpose is to inform the reader about Jesus Christ. He is telling us about the preparation made by God for the good news of coming and the work of the Son of God made by one John the Baptist. Mark is not merely giving a verbatim quote but by the power of the Holy Spirit informing us that these verses apply to John the Baptist. He is writing to an audience that likely had heard the preaching of Peter as did John Mark and now was writing down that which he had received from Peter, who, in his preaching, provided the meaning of the quotes. He is presenting the meaning of those quotes in the light of the gospel, considering Jesus Christ and His ministry in whom all the prophets and prophecy found their meaning.

In Malachi's quote, God was telling his people that one would come, the one Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ would come as a King who would purify the nation of Israel. He would come as King and Judge. And one would go before Him to announce His coming. The word "messenger" is the Greek word from which we get our English word "angel." An angel is a messenger of the Lord. It sometimes refers to the angels of heaven and other times to ministers and heralds; in Revelations 2 and 3, it refers to the ministers or preachers of the seven churches (for you at New Horizon, it would be a reference to Pastor Mitchell Persaud or Al Bezuyen). One would go before Jesus to herald, that is, announce the King's coming. Isaiah 40:3

picks up this same sense. In the wilderness, a voice would cry out to prepare the way of the Lord to make the paths straight.

In the ancient Near East, when a King or a dignitary came to town, a herald or crier was sent to announce his coming. Usually, the message was that the King or dignitary was coming, so the people needed to prepare to receive their king. The town would have to be put in order, and the people themselves would be made ready to handle themselves in an orderly fashion to show their respect for the King.

The difference in this case of John's heralding about the coming of Jesus is that God is not sending a king of geo-political might. Instead, God is sending a king of spiritual might who would come to rule the world and judge the nations. The people needed to be spiritually ready. For this purpose, God sent John the Baptist into the desert wilderness of the covenant children who had lived so long without hearing from God. God, now in His Son, was coming to make the paths straight. How special this was. Did Jesus deserve anything less? He was the one who was to be the King of kings. The Lord provides for the announcement of Jesus' coming. He sends a prophet to prepare the people's hearts for their king's coming. He sends a prophet to prepare the way for the prophet who was to be even greater than Moses (Deuteronomy 17:14-20) and invites them into the wilderness.¹

Now, here is something to think about. John the Baptist was sent to the world to declare to the Jewish people that God was king and had sent a King who would rule over Israel and the whole world. John the Baptist was preaching when the Roman emperor considered himself a god and the son of a god who would rule over the world. Into this tension, religious and political, comes John the Baptist, bringing a message of hope to the Jews and a message of hope for the Romans and yet Jesus is not the kind of king that either the Romans or the Jews. Herein, we find the question of the good news: is Jesus the Kind of King you want?

Isn't this whole notion interesting? Do you find motivation in all of this? For in much the same sense, it is church that this work has been given of the heralds. We now must cry out: *the King has come, and the King is coming again!* We, as the Church now, must prepare the World for the great and terrible day of the Lord. We must prepare our hearts for the Day of Judgment and Wonders.

¹ When God meets His people, it is often in the wilderness, Moses at the burning bush, Israel after Egypt at Sinai or Elijah by the brook and later the mountain- not He will meet in the wilderness by John the Baptist.

Christ has come. He died for the sins of His people, and the King hung there on the cross to die as the King of the Jews, our King. But the good news is that the grave could not stop Him. That is the good news! This is the Gospel of Jesus about Himself, and it is Him that we must hold before the world. He has come to fulfill covenant promises made by God to His people, announced by the prophets of the covenant that the covenant may now be complete in Him. And as covenant children, we subject ourselves to our Royal Saviour so that the world may know Christ is the king. This task is now specially carried out by ministers of the Word (the angels) who preach the gospel, Christ and Him crucified, preparing hearts and people for the coming King.

The Sign Of John The Baptist: Mark's Gospel is always fast-paced and moves on relatively quickly to the sign of John the Baptist. He is the one who is going to pave the way. In old English, there is a term for such a thing. It is the term "pavier". A pavier was a person who cut, set out and paved the road. This is precisely what John was doing. He needed to build a literal highway there in the wilderness. The people could take paths out there to hear him preach. He was paving a road in the spiritual wilderness of this world and the wilderness of the spiritual life of Israel. He was a pavier for the Saviour. His work had to be accomplished so that, by God's plan, Christ's work could begin. He came to the Israelites and said they would be part of this preparation.

Everything about who John is and what he did revealed his subservience to Christ. First, he was a desert dweller. He lived apart from the people of his age. Interestingly, all the people left their villages and even the city of God, Jerusalem. They went away from civilization and away from the temple to hear the Word. It is as if God's Word had departed from the land. Now, people had to leave the land and go to the wilderness to hear the Word.

John was the testimony to fulfilled prophecy and a sign pointing to the coming One who fulfilled all prophecy. According to the rules and regulations, John was set apart already at birth to be a Nazarite, for we read about Numbers 6. He would have been a rather hairy man since no razor was to touch his head. He did not drink alcohol nor touch dead bodies and, as such, was a sign of holiness and the call to holiness for all who knew of him or saw him.

He cut quite a figure, then! He wore camel hair and a leather belt- both very cheap garments. Zechariah 13:4 tells us this kind of clothing is/was the usual garb

of one of God's prophets. It is no coincidence that he was dressed as Elijah was. In II Kings 1, we read that King Ahaziah immediately knows that a man described as wearing a hairy garment with a leather girdle is Elijah. Elijah was sent to wicked Ahab and Northern Israel to preach a judgment message and call Israel to repentance. John did this as well. Did you know that Elijah gave his last public address and was lifted to heaven in this same wilderness where John was preaching?

John's garb, then, is a sign of things past. But it is also a sign of things in the future. In the other Gospels, some wondered if John was the promised coming of Elijah as predicted by Malachi 4. John said "no" when asked if he was Elijah because he was not Elijah, but Jesus testified that John was the fulfillment coming of Elijah's work. Did you know that some branches of Orthodox Judaism always have a chair left empty at the household Passover table? If you ask the family why this is so, they will say it is because Elijah might be coming. (Note that they do not believe that John the Baptist is the fulfillment of the coming of Elijah, and so they are still waiting)

John is the sign then and to us today that the LORD God fulfilled the promises made to Israel in the Exodus, the crossing of the Red Sea and the Jordan of glory and honour. John is the sign that the promises made by Adam, Noah, and Abraham are coming to fruition! Everything about John pointed to the One coming. He is dressed very humbly. He is dressed and lived as one who is so little concerned with earthly possessions because His focus is on the higher and purer things of the path of the One whose way he came to pave (is there a lesson perhaps for us towards a more minimalistic lifestyle?). The herald is not more glorious than the king. Yet this herald was not dressed with any pomp or luxury because the king he was preparing the way for was a humble and servant king! John was doing the Father's work, preparing for the Son. He lived and dressed in a manner that identified him to Israel as a prophet and in humbleness to the One to come.

John also provided the sign of a baptism, pointing to Christ's baptism. His was to prepare the way, and he would make the people spiritually ready by having them confess their sins and wash themselves. They were to be purified and made presentable before the King.

You children may know that if a king or someone important comes to town, people prepare themselves. If you were to meet an important person, you would make yourself clean and neat and dress up. This is the thinking behind wearing our best to church. We do this to show respect and honour. It shows honour to our God and our King Jesus. **How you dress is also a matter of respect you show for others.** Jesus required a spiritual honour also. The people were to make themselves ready in their hearts. They had to admit their sins and then ask forgiveness for them. Jesus was coming to make the path straight to God straight once more. John calls the people to confess their sins and to undergo a baptism of forgiveness of sins. It was a sign of the washing away of sins. That word there, "remission," is a sending away of the sin, a sending it away where God cannot see it, where Christ could not look at it. The word their sin means missing the mark. It does not mean to make a mistake or to be guilty of bad judgment, but the word means falling short of God's will and the guilt that comes with that. The word "repentance" means a changing of the mind- a changing of the heart, a turning away from sin and a turning to righteousness. This baptism was a sign that those people received whereby they admitted their sin and guilt. This is what the preachers do. They confront the people with their significant needs and confront people with their sins. He calls them to change their lives and that those sins were cast away from the sight of God. This was what was required for the coming king. The sign of John's baptism covered this.

This was something that had been introduced previously. In Leviticus 14:7-27 all of 15, and Numbers 8:7, we read about different washings and ceremonial cleansings. Naaman underwent the same kind of cleansing we read about in the Book of Kings. Differently, when Gentile's conversion to Judaism occurred, they washed themselves much as Naaman did, but John was now the agent. He baptized them! We do not know whether John immersed, sprinkled, bathed, or dipped. However, the Greek word "baptize" means all those things. The natural reading is that if Jesus entered the water and came out, he must have been immersed. The mode is not so important- instead, the water is. However, there were times when the Jordan did not provide enough water depth for immersion, so sprinkling would likely have been used. John had been sent out to prepare the people. Bringing the Word to people, they were moved and received the sign of an outward washing that indicated their readiness to receive the king. Can you

imagine the Jews of that day being told to be baptized as if they were Gentiles? Indeed, the Pharisees were having none of it, and they refused, told the Israelites to stay away, and, by so doing, refused to be part of the preparation for King Jesus.

That, of course, must speak to us too. We, too, must be cleansed from our sins. But we know it is not baptism or a washing of the body but a cleansing of the heart that saves us. We need the blood of Jesus! What can wash away my sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus! John called the people to confess their sins (the law). He also preached Christ and the Word of Grace. He brings the Good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This is the gospel Word that John preaches.

The Word Of John The Baptist Mark immediately reveals the content of John's preaching: "One who is greater than he is coming." John understands that he, too, has the strength of office and word. That John preaches that Jesus is stronger implies John's strength is in the power of the Spirit of prophecy. John's strength is the Word he brings. John's power is Christ Himself since Christ the Word is the word he preached. Still, the one more powerful was yet to come. In the other Gospels, we read that John understood and preached that the coming was nearby!

John ensures that his hearers (and you and I who today read the Gospel according to Mark) understand the greatness of the coming King. John says, "As strong as I am, I am unworthy to loosen the strap of his sandal." John mean that he was not worthy enough to provide a service for the coming one that only the lowest enslaved person in the house would perform. Even the lowest student did not have the position or honour to take off the sandal of his master. This is how great the one who is coming is.

Why did John use these words, "the one coming"? For Israel, it was the cultural-historical name for the Messiah, The One, the One who comes in the name of the Lord; the One coming was a reference to the Messiah. John ensures that the truth about the need for a spiritual understanding of the messiah was laid before the people. The Jews, in general, were hoping for a king who would bring the glory of Solomon and David back to Israel. They had hoped that Christ, the son of David, would rally a people around Him, form an army to rout the enemies, throw them out of the land and establish Israel's freedom. By calling Israel to repentance and baptism and preaching to Israel about the one coming stronger than John, there could be no mistaking of the purpose of Jesus coming.

John declares, "I baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." John says that his baptism is a sign of the actual baptism that Jesus would perform. John says, "I will drench your body with water, but Jesus' baptism will drench your soul. The one coming came to save souls, not to restore Israel to Promised Land domination but to world domination, restoration, and glory. The greatness of the one coming is what he will provide for the spirit first, not the body.

Here is the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Josephus, who wrote one of the first world histories in AD 325, describes the events surrounding John the Baptist as a revival. Streams of people went out to the wilderness; even the proud Jerusalemites went out to prepare themselves for the coming king and kingdom.

Mark ensures that his readers suffering under the persecution of Nero, hiding in the catacombs and the church around the world today, understand who was coming as well. Our king was prophesied of in history; He came to be part of world history. He was the Son of God, and He would baptize with the Spirit. He demands that we are converted and repent from our sins, yet because he has baptized us with His Spirit, we can live before our King. John could not change hearts, but Jesus Christ can. The kings of Israel were human, and so were the kings of Rome, but this One who was coming was bringing the Kingdom of God and would rule over the earth. Once more, Adam would have dominion over the world as the image bearer of God! He gives His people that which enables us to be the people His Father desires.

You can imagine the excitement. People went out in those days to hear John the Baptist and moved by his preaching of Christ; they were baptized. In Rome, this message about Jesus, John the Baptist, and His baptism and message would provide comfort and confidence! This morning, we have heard His preaching. What would it have been like to see this man who ate locusts and wild honey? It must have been a fantastic time. Yet, is the message any less exciting? Christ is coming, Christ has come, and Christ is coming again, whose kingdom will never end.

Great things He has taught us, great things He has done, and great our rejoicing through Jesus the Son; But purer, and higher, and greater will be our wonder, our gladness when Jesus we see. (TPH #236:3)

*Brothers, this Lord Jesus shall return again!
With His Father's glory, with His angel-train
For all wreaths of the Empire meet upon His brow,
And our hearts confess Him King of Glory now. (TPH #270:5)*

Amen!