

A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

By Scott Grant

The Gospel of Mark has much to say about the way we live our lives. Mark, at the outset, writes of “the way of the Lord,” which is the way of Jesus. In one sense, the way of the Lord is literal: Mark depicts Jesus’ journey from Galilee in the north to Jerusalem in the south. Far more significant are why Jesus takes the journey, how he goes about it and what he accomplishes.

By depicting a literal journey as the setting for the way of the Lord, Mark invites us to step into his narrative and join Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. We learn the way of the Lord by walking with Jesus. The best way to walk with Jesus is to immerse oneself in the gospels. The Gospel of Mark, in particular, beckons us to see discipleship as a journey. It’s a three-act drama, featuring the settings of Galilee, the road, and Jerusalem. As we begin our study of the Gospel of Mark, we might allow ourselves to feel the excitement that comes with setting out on a great adventure. Jesus will take us to places we haven’t been before, including regions of our own hearts.

The prologue, Mark 1:1-15, gives us a map for our journey. The themes Mark outlines at the outset are worked out in the rest of his narrative. If we get lost in Mark, we will find it helpful to consult the prologue, which will help us sort out our interpretive questions. The prologue is also like a musical overture that introduces themes that will be featured later in the composition. The other synoptic gospels, Matthew and Luke, treat the introductory stories in greater detail. Mark, on the other hand, quickly tells us where he’s going and gets right to it. His prologue is jam-packed with treasures. (See below for the structure of the prologue.¹)

The idiom “a voice in the wilderness” is invoked regularly today in reference to unpopular opinions that deserve a hearing. The derivation of the phrase, of course, is biblical. The original voice is an ancient one, belonging to the prophet Isaiah, who cried out some 2,700 years ago. Seven hundred years later, Isaiah’s words shaped another prophet, John the Baptist, who cried out in the wilderness of Israel. The men and women of Judea flocked to John, for he spoke to their hearts. The years have not robbed his voice of its relevance, for his words ring out today with power and beauty. He speaks to our hearts as well. His opinion may be unpopular, but he deserves a hearing. If we listen to him, he will prepare us to follow Jesus.

What is he saying? Listen.

Mark 1:1-8:

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU,
WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY;
THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS,
‘MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD,
MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.’”

John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey. And he was preaching, and saying, "After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals. I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Preparing the way

It's always good to start at the beginning, and Mark does just that, writing about "the beginning of the gospel" in the first 15 verses. With the first verse, we know we're getting in on something big.

The gospel, anticipated by the Hebrew Scriptures and in particular by Isaiah, features the establishment of God's reign, which involves victory over the enemies of God's people (Isaiah 40:9 and 52:7-11). The good news of God's reign concerns God's appointed king, the Jewish Messiah: Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He would be the one to establish God's kingdom.

Mark doesn't introduce us to the Messiah in the first eight verses. Instead, he builds anticipation. The good news of God's reign begins not with the Messiah himself but with a forerunner. In writing of this forerunner, Mark invokes Isaiah, with words from Isaiah 40:3, but also includes two other texts: Malachi 3:1 and Exodus 23:20. The Exodus text reminds us of the Exodus, when God liberated the Israelites from Egypt and formed them as his people in about 1450 B.C. The Isaiah text reminds us of the exile, when Babylon conquered Israel, destroyed its temple and carried away many of its people in 586 B.C. Isaiah looked back to the Exodus in order to look forward to a new Exodus, the return from exile, when God would once again act decisively for his people and call them to himself. After Medo-Persia conquered Babylon, the exiles returned to the Promised Land, but Israel remained a subject people. The return from exile never matched prophetic expectations. Malachi, a post-exilic prophet, was still waiting for something more decisive than what his contemporaries had experienced. From Mark's perspective, Israel in the first century was still waiting for Isaiah's new Exodus.

The hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" well captures Israel's longing as it suffered under Roman rule in the first century:

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear

Mark is saying that Israel's hopes for a new Exodus are on the brink of being realized with the appearance of one who will go before the Messiah.

The forerunner appears in the wilderness, the place where God partnered with Israel after liberating it from Egypt. The wilderness evokes the possibility of a new beginning for Israel. The Lord, speaking of Israel through the prophet Hosea, said:

Therefore, behold, I will allure her,
Bring her into the wilderness
And speak kindly to her. (Hosea 2:14)

Revolutionaries gathered in the wilderness (Acts 21:38). Mark aligns the coming of the Messiah with revolutionary movements, but the revolution he writes about will come in a different sort of way.

The Messiah doesn't appear on the scene unannounced. The forerunner prepares the way of the Lord by telling the people to prepare the way of the Lord. The people needed to be prepared because, as it turns out, "the way of the Lord" was something they didn't anticipate. Although they longed for their God to act in a new way, the way of the Messiah would defy conventional expectations. The way of the Lord would involve a journey from popularity in Galilee to crucifixion in Jerusalem. The forerunner was there, right at the outset, to say, "Yes, this is the one."

A visit by a king or other dignitary called for the reparation of roads. If the king was coming to your city, you didn't want him to get stuck in a pothole. The forerunner will, so to speak, tell Israel to "roll out the red carpet" for the Messiah.

One is coming

Mark identifies the forerunner as John the Baptist, who, consistent with Isaiah's prophecy, appears in the wilderness. He tells Israel that it needs to repent and that its people need to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. He was speaking not only to individual need but to national need as well. Israel as a whole needed to return to the Lord.

Gentiles, not Jews, were incorporated into God's people by ritual washings. The prophet Elisha told Naaman, a pagan military leader, to wash himself in the Jordan River (2 Kings 5:8-14). John is saying that being Jewish isn't enough. Forgiveness had always been available, and the place you went to for that was the temple in Jerusalem. John is offering forgiveness in a new way—the kind of forgiveness that Isaiah spoke of when he predicted the coming of the forerunner, the decisive forgiveness that signaled the true return from exile (Isaiah 40:1-2).

The national character of John's message is evident in that "all the country of Judea" and "all the people of Jerusalem" were going out to him.² Judeans left the place where sins were normally dealt with in order to align themselves with John's counter-temple movement. John baptized them in the Jordan River, which Israel had crossed some 1,450 years earlier in miraculous fashion to enter the Promised Land. What's John doing? He's gathering people in the wilderness for a new Exodus.

Those who followed him into the wilderness were risking their lives. They were agreeing with John that being Jewish wasn't enough, which would have earned the wrath of Jewish authorities. John was acting like a revolutionary, and Rome was none too kind to revolutionaries. Gamaliel, a Jewish leader, recounts in Acts 5:36-37 the killing of two widely known revolutionaries. John, in fact, would later be killed. The people who went out to him were longing for God to act. They were hungry for a fresh word from God. They must have believed that the hopes of Israel were on the verge of being realized.

Mark describes John's dress so as to depict him as a prophet along the lines of Elijah (Zechariah 13:4, 2 Kings 1:8). Like Elijah, John calls Israel to repent and return to

the Lord. Malachi anticipated Elijah's return before "the great and terrible day of the Lord" (1 Kings 18:21, Malachi 4:5). By connecting John to Elijah, Mark brings us to the edge of our seats. Indeed, Mark will later affirm that John represents the return of Elijah (Mark 9:11-13).

John is preparing the way for one who is "mightier" than he. In fact, he deems himself unworthy to perform the lowly task of a slave on behalf of this one. The coming one will be a mighty warrior-king who will do battle with the enemies of God's people. Later, Jesus would illustrate his ability to cast out demons by saying that he has bound the "strong man," Satan (Mark 3:27). The "mightier" (*ischurotos*) one defeats the "strong" (*ischuros*) man. The enemies that the Messiah would come to vanquish were Satan and his demons, who had taken up residence in Israel. Rome, it turns out, was the least of Israel's problems.

John is mighty enough to call people to repentance and baptize them for the forgiveness of sins, but only the coming one is mighty enough to baptize them with the Holy Spirit. After the Lord liberated Israel from Egypt, he resided with them through his Holy Spirit, evidenced by the pillars of cloud and fire (Exodus 13:21-22, Isaiah 63:11). The prophets anticipated the day when God would renew his people and pour out his Holy Spirit in a more lavish way (Isaiah 32:15, 44:3; Ezekiel 36:25-27; Joel 2:28). The Messiah would reconstitute the people of God and plunge them into the very presence of God.

The Messiah, then, would defeat the enemies of God's people, effect a new Exodus and reconstitute God's people. In short, he would establish God's kingdom: God's rule on earth. During the exile, the prophet Ezekiel saw a vision of the Lord leaving the temple, his earthly dwelling place (Ezekiel 11:22-23). Nevertheless, Ezekiel and other prophets held out hope for the return of the Lord to his people. Mark, in the first eight verses, applies to the Messiah texts that referred to God, thereby signaling that the coming of the Messiah is somehow wrapped up in the return of the Lord.

John is preparing Israel for the Messiah by telling it to forsake its conception of what it meant to be God's people, by drawing it away from the temple, and by dramatizing the impending new Exodus. The prophets linked the Lord's return to the people with the people's return to the Lord. The Lord told Israel in Zechariah 1:3, "Return to Me, that I may return to you." In short, John was telling Israel, "Return to the Lord, and get ready for your world to be rocked."

Making a break

Like the Jews of the first century, we in the 21st century dream of a better world—for ourselves, for our children, and for humanity. The scriptures implanted hope in the Jews despite their sorry history and the oppressive presence of Roman rulers. In our day, we hear the echo of the biblical hope even if our culture increasingly dismisses the scriptures. Our songs and stories often reflect this hope, however vaguely. Popular songs often portray an individual—usually a member of the opposite sex—in Messianic terms. Many of our stories, such as the recent film *Children of Men*, embrace a Messianic vision. We're waiting, in one way or another, for a "savior to rise from these streets" (Bruce Springsteen) or "the One" (*The Matrix*).^{3 4} We seem to believe in the Messianic story.

Is it true? A first century prophet says yes. He cried out in the wilderness back then, but if you listen closely, you can hear his voice today: “Make ready the way of the Lord.” He speaks with music that pierces our hearts and awakens our dreams. A new day is coming, but he knows we’re not ready for it. He knows our dreams need to be redefined. So he tells us to repent, to confess our sins, to be baptized—to acknowledge that who we are isn’t enough. Being American isn’t enough. Being born into a good family isn’t enough. Being born into a believing family isn’t enough. Being a good person isn’t enough. Being successful isn’t enough. Finding the love of your life isn’t enough. Rearing successful children isn’t enough. We hear the voice, and we know: we’ve thrown over God to set up our own kingdoms.

We wanted something or someone to deal with evil so that our version of a safe and happy world could be realized. We didn’t want anything or anyone to deal with the evil in our own hearts and create a world we couldn’t begin to imagine. We didn’t realize that we were part of the problem. We have believed in the Messianic story, but a flawed version of it.

We need to break with the status quo—with personal, familial, and cultural definitions of life. We need a new beginning, a new Exodus. We’ve been living in exile, far from God and his vision for our lives, so we need to return to him. If we break with the status quo, we know that our world may strike back at us. But we also know that the status quo is slavery and that we will never be free if we remain where we are. We want freedom—the freedom to serve God, not the status quo, and follow where he leads. We’ve been longing for God to act. We’re hungry for a fresh word from him. Therefore, we disconnect ourselves from our overly connected world—from our computers and cell phones, from our televisions and our iPods. We go out to the wilderness, to some place in our lives where we can hear the prophet.

Listen to his voice: “After me One is coming who is mightier than I.” Mightier than the prophet, who has stirred our hearts like none other? Yes, mightier. What will the mighty one do? He will do what only he can: he will face hell’s fury and take down the evil one. Anything else? The prophet again: “I baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” The mighty one will plunge us into—and fill us with—the presence of God.

This is what we want, isn’t it? Didn’t we hear somewhere that we were made in the image of God? Didn’t we trash the image somewhere along the way? The mighty one will restore us. He will complete our humanity. He will also enlist us, for to be human—to be made in the image of God—is to serve God’s purposes in the world. The mighty one will defeat evil and enlist us in the implementation of God’s victory. For this, we will need the Holy Spirit. The mighty one will baptize us with the Holy Spirit and lead us into battle, not with swords and arrows but with the word of God and prayer. He will make us part of a people, for to be baptized with the Holy Spirit is also to be baptized into a community. One of his followers would later write, “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13). The mighty one will make us the new-Exodus people, the return-from-exile people, the kingdom-of-God people: the people through whom God will establish his rule on earth.

The mighty one will create not only a better world but a new world—for ourselves, for our children and for humanity. He will fulfill our dreams in a way that both redefines them and enlarges them.

Taking down the sign

Have you ever heard a song that made you ache for something? John's voice is like that. He awakens dreams and makes us ache for the Messiah. If John's voice makes you ache for the Messiah, what should you do? Repent and confess your sins. Like the men and women of Judea who left the temple to meet John in the wilderness, forsake other ways of dealing with sin, such as denial, penance, self-condemnation and trying harder. Such methods may have protected you for a while, but like the temple of old, they have served their purpose and their time is past. Face your sin squarely and stop making excuses for it. Make a break with personal, familial, and cultural definitions of life that conflict with biblical definitions. In our world, the sin that we most need to repent of is self-rule.

C.S. Lewis writes of his own proclivity toward self-rule that required repentance:

But of course, what mattered most of all was my deep-seated hatred of authority, my monstrous individualism, my lawlessness. No word in my vocabulary expressed deeper hatred than the word Interference. But Christianity placed at the center what then seemed to me a transcendental Interferer. If its picture were true then no sort of "treaty with reality" could ever be possible. There was no region even in the innermost depth of one's soul (nay, there last of all) which one could surround with a barbed wire fence and guard with a notice No Admittance. And that was what I wanted: some area, however small, of which I could say to all other beings, "This is my business and mine only."⁵

When you repent and confess your sins, you take down the "no admittance" sign. Why should you do so? Because you know you've thrown over God to set up your own kingdom. Because you know you were made for something grander than what you've settled for. Because you know your dreams need to be redefined. Because you want to be plunged into—and filled with—the presence of God. Because you want to be restored. Because you want to be completed as a human. Because you want to serve God's purposes in the world and participate in the implementation of the victory of God. Because you want to be part of God's community. Because you want something better than the definitions of life that have kept you in bondage to the status quo. Because you want larger dreams. Repentance and confession clear a way for the Lord to enter your heart and fill your life with new hope.

Because Mark's prologue emphasizes both individual and national repentance, we would also do well to consider repentance something we do together as a church. We must all repent on an ongoing basis, and it's better if we do it together.

If you haven't yet identified yourself with the Messiah and his people through baptism, you should be baptized. Baptism connects you to God's people, going all the way back to the Exodus, when the children of Israel crossed the Jordan River, and to the new Exodus, when the prophet John baptized men and women in the same river to prepare them for the Messiah. Nothing tells the story of the people of God like baptism: neither a "decision for Christ" nor coming forward at a meeting. Nothing else, in a representative way, lowers you into a grave and raises you to new life. Nothing else tells the world, both seen and unseen, so powerfully that you're willing to risk everything to identify yourself with the Messiah and his people.

Getting ready

Have you, like C.S. Lewis, posted a “no admittance” sign and told God, in so many words, “This is my business and mine only?” If you have, you may have done so because you’re guarding a wounded place in your heart. You don’t want anyone poking around in that place. Repentance involves taking down the sign and letting God in to do his healing work.

By all appearances, Lewis repented, and the mighty one enlarged his dreams and enlisted him in the implementation of the victory of God. Lewis’ service included such works as *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Mere Christianity*, and *The Screwtape Letters*. Your service will not involve such works. There’s only one C.S. Lewis. But there’s only one you. The mighty one will not call you to do what C.S. Lewis did, but he will call you and empower you to do something in service of the kingdom of God that perfectly coincides with who you are—something that even C.S. Lewis, if he were alive today, could not do. When you repent and confess your sins, you’re telling Jesus, “I’m ready.”

John’s voice is beautiful. The status quo is stifling. The mighty one offers freedom. Nevertheless, on my own, I seem incapable of repenting in a way that satisfies me. At times, God has led me to repentance by blocking my way. On such occasions, I no longer had the option of pursuing a self-destructive course, and God left me with almost no choice but to repent. I cannot effect the deep and ongoing repentance for which I ache. There is a deep place in my heart that I cannot penetrate with my will. I’ve been wounded in that place. The “no admittance” sign I’ve posted outside it applies even to my own will. I suppose I prefer sin in that place, because I seem fiercely committed to the status quo.

However, I believe the mighty one is strong enough to help me take down the sign. May he help us all.

Discussion Questions:

1. The Jews of Jesus day dreamed of the coming kingdom of God, which would feature the establishment of his reign. In short, they dreamed of a better world. Describe your dreams for a better world.
2. How do verses 2-3 impact you?
3. John called the Jews of his day to repent and confess their sins, which included making a break with the status quo. Do you sense in any way that you may need to make a break with the status quo—with personal, familiar or cultural definitions of life?
4. John places repentance in the context of hope for something better (the one who is coming will baptize them with the Holy Spirit). How do you think Jesus and the Holy Spirit offer you something better than the comfort of the status quo?
5. The people of Judea and Jerusalem left places of security to listen to John in the wilderness.

How do you think we may need to disconnect from our world and go to the wilderness, to some place in our lives where we can connect with truth?

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¹ A Narrator announces gospel of Jesus Christ (1)

 B John in the wilderness: “Repent” (2-4)

 C Crowd comes to be baptized; coming one will baptize with Spirit (5-8)

 C’ Jesus comes to be baptized; Spirit descends on Jesus (9-11)

 B’ Jesus in the wilderness: temptation (12-13)

 A’ Jesus preaches gospel of God (14-15)

² Mark is exaggerating to make a point; certainly he’s not saying that every resident of the region of Judea and the city of Jerusalem came to John.

³ *Thunder Road*, Bruce Springsteen.

⁴ *The Matrix* (Warner Bos., 1999).

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, San Diego), 172.