

Come Quickly, Lord Jesus: Advent 2020

Week 2 Text: Mark 1:1-8

Background

Bible Translations

ESV: a recent (2001) translation that considers itself a successor to both the beauty and authority of the KJV. The translators attempted to capture the literal sense of individual words while maintaining a timeless quality and high literary English standard. Many of the translators come from an academic Evangelical background.

NirV: The “reader’s” version of the popular NIV is intended to give the experience of reading a colloquial English translation to readers of a more beginning level. Simpler sentences are used, and technical terms are defined in the text or paraphrased for easier comprehension.

Prophets: ahead of their time

Mark, in typical Markan fashion, cuts right to the action at the beginning of his gospel. There’s no angels announcing the birth of a savior, no magi come to pay homage. Fully grown Jesus is about to burst onto the scene. But first, we have to name drop some prophets. All four gospels quote this verse from Isaiah 40 (“a voice crying out...”). Mark also quotes another prophet, Malachi (“behold I send my messenger...”). These quotes act as an introduction to a new prophet, John the Baptist.

John is very much working in the tradition of the Hebrew Bible prophets. He does strange hermit-like things (eating locusts and honey??), and makes inflammatory speeches. Biblical prophets have a reputation in modern times for predicting the future. But their original vision was perhaps more down to earth: they were calling people to repent and recommit themselves to following God’s ways...or all these bad things would happen. Most often, the people did not listen to the prophets and so the bad things did happen. Isaiah 40 (quoted in Mark 1) speaks of “preparing a way for the Lord” to return from exile: a hopeful message rather than a condemnation.

“Preparing the way” still takes work though: and that is what John the Baptist is here to do.

Some historical (and geographic) context

One important date: 539 BC/E

- The edict of Cyrus allowed the captured Jewish people living in Babylon to return to Israel
- Isaiah 40 (quoted in Mark 1) was probably written around this time

One academic term: Messiah

- A Hebrew term meaning “anointed”, referring to the practice of anointing royal figures with oil to indicate their royalty
- “Christ” is the same term, but in Greek
- “Messiah” or “Christ” was applied to various earthly saviors, including Cyrus the Great, the Persian king who allowed Israel to be rebuilt after the Babylonian exile

One geographical fact: While we tend to think of Israel and Iraq (Babylon) as barren desert, the climate was and is more like the Central Valley of California: very good for growing things, if you irrigate. It wasn’t called the “Fertile Crescent” for no reason!

Questions

1. On a first read of the passage from Mark what stuck out at you? Was there anything surprising? What did you notice this time that you might not have noticed if you read this last year?
2. How do you think the original readers of Mark would have understood these opening paragraphs of the gospel according to Mark? What is different between 1st century Jewish Palestine and 21st century America? What is the same?
3. How do you see God speaking through prophets today? Where do you see God in these opening verses of Mark?
4. How are we “preparing a way” for God today? Where is our “wilderness”? What might God be calling you to do?

Mark 1:1-8 English Standard Version

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.[a]

2 As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,[b]

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
who will prepare your way,

3 the voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘Prepare[c] the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”

4 John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. 7 And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8 I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Footnotes

Mark 1:1 Some manuscripts omit *the Son of God*

Mark 1:2 Some manuscripts *in the prophets*

Mark 1:3 Or *crying: Prepare in the wilderness*

Mark 1:1-8 New International Reader's Version

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

1 This is the beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. 2 Long ago Isaiah the prophet wrote,

“I will send my messenger ahead of you.

He will prepare your way.” (Malachi 3:1)

3 “A messenger is calling out in the desert,

‘Prepare the way for the Lord.

Make straight paths for him.’” (Isaiah 40:3)

4 And so John the Baptist appeared in the desert. He preached that people should be baptized and turn away from their sins. Then God would forgive them. 5 All the people from the countryside of Judea went out to him. All the people from Jerusalem went too. When they admitted they had sinned, John baptized them in the Jordan River. 6 John wore clothes made out of camel's hair. He had a leather belt around his waist. And he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 Here is what John was preaching. “After me, there is someone coming who is more powerful than I am. I'm not good enough to bend down and untie his sandals. 8 I baptize you with water. But he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”