

“Who Is This Man? Jesus in the Gospel of Mark—The Baptism of Jesus”

Today we’re starting a new series where we’re going to dig into the Gospel of Mark and see who Jesus is through Mark’s eyes. There are four Gospels that start the New Testament in our Bibles--Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. All four tell the story of Jesus, but all four tell it from a different perspective. We’re going to look at Jesus through Mark’s perspective.

Now, the goal of this series is to answer two questions every week: **Who is this man Jesus?** What can we learn about him, what can we know about him? The second question is: **What does his life mean for our lives today?** We’re going to ask and answer these two questions every week. So let’s get started.

Now, there are about 100,000 different books in print about Jesus. More books than any other historical figure. We could have chosen any one of those 100,000 books to teach us about Jesus. But in choosing the Gospel of Mark, we’re picking the very first book ever written about Jesus. Scholars believe that the Gospel of Mark is the very first book published about Jesus—at least that we still have in existence today.

Let’s start with a little bit of background. Let’s start by asking who Mark was and why he wrote down this stuff about Jesus. Mark is also known as John Mark. In the New Testament he’s named 9 times. He’s the cousin of another man in the New Testament, a guy by the name of Barnabas. Mark and Barnabas went with Paul on Paul’s first journey to start churches and teach people about Jesus. Mark was probably just a teenager and went as a helper. In fact, he was probably a little too immature for the trip. After the first stop on that journey he got cold feet and abandoned Paul and Barnabas and went home.

That caused a falling out with Paul. On a later trip, Barnabas wanted to invite Mark again, and Paul refused and that caused a rift between Paul and Barnabas. So Barnabas took Mark on travels with him, and Paul would travel with others. There was a division, but that was healed later on. In his last days Paul invites Mark to come be with him and Mark takes care of Paul when he’s in prison and Paul speaks very highly of him then.

Now as you read the Gospel of Mark you’ll realize that it doesn’t say that Mark wrote it. It’s the early church, in the early 100’s, that says that it was Mark who wrote this.

It’s also important to know that Mark was not with Jesus. Mark was not a disciple. He came on board the faith later and traveled with Peter who was a disciple of Jesus, who was with him through his ministry. What scholars say is that Mark wrote down what he heard Peter teaching over and over again as they traveled together. They believe that it was just after Peter died that Mark sat down and wrote this out so that Peter’s teachings about Jesus would not be lost.

When was that? When was this Gospel written? We know that Peter died in the early 60s AD, so this Gospel is dated right around 65 AD. Peter was killed for being a Christian by the Roman Emperor Nero. Remember, Nero wanted to rebuild parts of Rome, so he set parts on fire and blamed the Christians. Rome got a new face and Nero had a reason to kill as many Christians as he could get his hands on. Peter and Paul died at that time. Mark wrote down this Gospel to encourage the survivors and tell them not to give up, to show them the Jesus that they had chosen to follow. He was telling them, “Don’t forget who Jesus is. Don’t forget who he called you to be. Don’t forget his mission and don’t forget your mission. Keep the faith.”

By 65 AD there was also some misinformation circulating about Jesus. Some people were saying that he was strictly God, some were saying that he was strictly human, Mark wanted to show that Jesus was fully Son of God, and fully Son of Man. So over and over in the Gospel of Mark you see the humanity of Jesus and then you see the divinity of Jesus. That was a very important theme in Mark.

But Mark is all about answering those two questions: Who is this man Jesus? And what does his life mean for our lives today.

So that’s a little bit of background. We’ll flesh that out even more in the next few talks, but let’s go ahead and dive into the text. I want to start with Jesus’ baptism. **“At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan” (Mark 1:9, NIV).** Jesus has made his way from his home town, his home turf, and makes his way south to where John the Baptist is baptizing people. John’s doing this in the Jordan River which is the largest river in that area, not very big by our standards, but the biggest river there. The Jordan flows into the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea is the lowest body of water on the planet. Water

flows in from the Jordan but nothing flows out. That means that all the minerals and salts from hundreds and hundreds of years are concentrated there and nothing lives in that body of water—thus the Dead Sea.

Jesus goes to John to be baptized in the Jordan River near the Dead Sea. It's kind of murky, somewhat of a desert on either side, a very arid area. Now, we're told that many, many people followed John out there to be baptized. Crowds of thousands. Who were they? This is really important. The crowds that came out to John were a mix of people. The crowds were described as sinners—tax collectors, prostitutes, people on the fringe of society, along with some of the religious leaders of the day, the Pharisees. The Pharisees were there to check out what was going on and we're told that they came with these judgmental attitudes and skeptical postures. They watched, but they didn't go in to the water. They didn't need to be baptized—they thought they were righteous. They didn't know they were the ones who most needed to be baptized.

Here's what the scene would have looked like: John would have waded out into the water and said something like, "If you know you've missed the mark; if you know you've fallen short of what God wants; if you need to be made clean, join me in the water. Wade out into this water and God will wash your sins away." From that place on the river, people could see the Dead Sea and know that those sins had symbolically washed downstream into the Dead Sea where nothing could live. What a powerful image of God's forgiveness and grace.

The sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, people on the fringe, they knew they needed this so they went out into the water. John would baptize them. If you think about it they were just like us. All of us have times in our lives when we desperately want to be clean. And we'd like to wipe the slate clean and start fresh. We all have those times in our lives. Times when we know we've done things and we just want to be clean; times we're so thirsty for forgiveness. The people there that day wanted a fresh start; they wanted to wash away the sin.

But that raises a really interesting question for us. **Why was Jesus baptized?** He didn't need to be cleansed. Scripture says that he was tempted in every way like we are but he was without sin. John's baptism was for the repentance of sin. Why did Jesus go to be baptized?

Many people believe that Jesus was baptized, not because he needed it for his forgiveness, but to fully identify with our humanity. He's identifying with us. He's identifying with the sinners and prostitutes and tax collectors. He's not embarrassed or ashamed to say, "I'm with you. This is why I came. So that you might be forgiven. I came so that you might be clean and whole. I'll give my life to be with people like you."

Imagine a friend of yours who is struggling with an addiction—a very embarrassing addiction—whatever you can think of that would be the most embarrassing thing. And let's say we offer a recovery group for that thing and you tell your friend, "Hey, we have this recovery group and I think you should go and be a part of it." Your friend says, "Great! I need that so much. But, would you go with me?"

You agree to go with your friend. You come up to the building and you realize that there are lots of people you know walking back and forth past the room where that recovery group is meeting, and maybe there are people in the room you know. And you know that you don't have this problem; you're just there for your friend. What are you going to do?

I know what I'd be tempted to do. I'd be tempted to tell my friend, "You know, I don't have this problem, I'm just here to support you, I probably should be seen in there. So you go on in and I'll wait in the lobby." I'd like to think I'd overcome those thoughts and go in. But in that room I'd want to tell everybody, "Hey, just so you know, I don't have this problem! He does! Not me. I'm just here to support my friend."

That's what I'd probably do. Not Jesus. Not Jesus. He just goes into the water, no image management, no explanations or clarifications. He just goes on in with everybody else who needs to be cleansed. How awesome is that! That is so God!

Throughout the gospels Jesus eats with sinners and tax collectors, he associates with them, he loves them, he's not ashamed of them. Not like the Pharisees who stand on the bank of the Jordan, arms crossed, believing they don't need what these others people need. Jesus jumps into the water with the rest of the riff-raff. How awesome is that!

Jesus is identifying with our humanity, but he's also about to have a profound religious experience. For Jesus this would be the most defining moment of his life. What happens when he is baptized catapults him forward into his mission. This is the moment when his public mission, his public ministry begins.

The last two years we've had a day in the Summer when we've gone down to Shoal Creek and done river baptisms. It's an amazing day. We've done it twice and had about 75 or 80 people there and about 30 actually come out into the water. Pastor Mark and Pastor Ben and I are all out there baptizing or helping people reclaim their past baptism.

I got to tell you it's a little bit unnatural. If you're swimming you typically go face forward. But in baptism you lean backward. When I immerse someone I have them hold their nose with one hand, hold their arm and then I guide them back into the water. I tell them to just relax and trust me and fall backwards. It's an act of utter surrender. After everybody else was baptized Mark and Ben and I baptized each other. It's an act of surrender. "God, I give you everything." I think that's part of what Jesus was doing when John baptized him. I think he was saying, "Father, all I am and have, I give to you. I surrender."

Now when Jesus came up out of the water, this is when he had a profound religious experience. Three very important things happened. First, **Jesus' identity is established**. He heard the voice of God that said, "**You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.**" If there were any questions about his identity, they're clarified. Scripture says that Jesus while Jesus was fully God, he emptied himself of certain things (Philippians 2:4-8). So there were things that he didn't know as he walked on earth. He admits that! He didn't even know when he was going to return. So at this point, God is confirming something really important. God is saying, "This is who you are, you are my son." And in that God is saying, "Not only are you my son, but I love you, and I am proud of you." His identity is established.

Then in this act of his baptism **Jesus receives the power of the Holy Spirit**. Jesus receives the gift of the Holy Spirit that will empower him for all the things he has ahead of him. The confrontations with religious leaders, times of healing the sick, times of driving out demons, times of teaching his disciples and other crowds of people. The Holy Spirit gives him the power to do what he came to do.

And finally, **Jesus is ordained to go on the mission**. He was ordained for his ministry when he came out of that water. In the act of his baptism, God set him aside for the mission and ministry he would pursue—to heal the sick, to proclaim the good news, and ultimately to die on the cross for the sins of the world.

So three things happened in Jesus baptism. His identity is established. He received the power of the Holy Spirit; and he is sent out in mission to the world. And Jesus would never forget this

Now here's where all this relates to you. The earliest Christians believed that what happened in Jesus' baptism is what happens in our baptisms. And whether you remember your baptism or not, whether that happened when you were a baby, or when you were a youth, or adult, in your baptism the same three things that happened to Jesus happen to you. **Your** identity was established—God said, "You are my child and I love you, and you belong to me." Do you know that you belong to Jesus, that you're his child, and that you are loved by God and nothing can separate you from that love—not your own stupidity, not the things you do, not the things other people say? Nothing can separate you from the love of God. You can run from his love, but that doesn't keep him from reaching out to you. That should shape your life. What does it mean to know that you are loved by God the Father? That's a profound thing.

Your identity was established and **you** received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Now it's up to you to live into that, to experience the fullness of that presence of the Holy Spirit, but you have that gift. That gift of the Holy Spirit that empowers you to do things that on your own, you would not have the power to do. Power to confront injustice, power to bring hope and healing, power to bring change and transformation, power to live a life that bigger than your life. The Holy Spirit is in you to guide you and direct you. So are you living out that presence?

And finally in your baptism **you** were ordained to follow Jesus on his mission in the world. You were ordained and commissioned by God to go and serve the world. And sometimes that's very hard, and

sometimes it requires sacrifice and taking risks. But you were commissioned and ordained to follow Jesus in mission and self-sacrifice; living for other people and serving God in the world.

Listen! Baptism matters. Jesus' baptism matters. Your baptism matters! When you own your baptism it changes everything.

Over the past year I've walked with two friends through some of the hardest things in their lives, and through it all, they've had peace in the darkest times. They're trusting in the one who claimed them in their baptism and said, "You belong to me. You are my child. I committed to you in your baptism. I am with you."

And part of my baptism and yours is to be bearers of good news, to carry out Jesus' mission of hope and healing to the people we encounter who are hurting and struggling. My baptism and yours has ordained us to be bearers of good news in the face of pain, and suffering, and difficulties. To be Jesus' presence in the good times too. My baptism and yours have commissioned me and you to seek out, and go to, and be with, and help, those who are in need.

If you've never been baptized, maybe it's time, just call and we will talk about that and set a time for you to be baptized. Every Summer we go down to the Shoal Creek, but don't wait for that if you're ready to be a disciple and follower of Jesus. Do it soon.

The Apostle Paul said this, **"I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge-- that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:17-19, NIV).**

That's my prayer for you and for me. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, for his resources in this message.