

Even Now—Something Waits to be Born In the Already...and the Not Yet

[Mark 1:1-15](#)

In these four weeks of Advent, as we wait for the coming of Christmas, we're looking at the first chapter of each of the New Testament Gospels, the stories of Jesus. What's the first thing those writers wanted us to know? What did they think their readers needed to hear right off the bat, so that they (we) could understand this person who had changed everything: how to live in the world, what to hope for, a new understanding of God. So today—Mark.

Curiously, Mark is the only one of the Gospel writers who doesn't tell us anything about Jesus' birth. In fact for Mark, the story doesn't even begin until Jesus is already an adult. The first time we see Jesus, he is just a regular guy. An anonymous person who has come to hear a charismatic preacher, just like thousands of other people. Nothing special, no holy light hovering around his head. Nothing to indicate that he was different from any other person who lived then or who might be sitting right here next to you.

And there was a crowd. I'm always curious about the size of crowds. They tell us something about the significance of what's going on. This week, when President-Elect Trump held a rally in Cincinnati, I scanned pictures of that crowd. How many people are there who are so enthusiastic about this new president that they keep going to campaign rallies after the election is over? In South Korea, more than a million people have demonstrated each of the last several weekends, demanding that their president resign. Millions of people followed Gandhi in a 240-mile "salt march" to the sea, to protest British rule over India. We measure the strength of a movement, in part, by the number of people who feel compelled to leave the comfort of their homes and join a multitude of people ready to be part of something bigger than themselves.

That's the scene that Mark opens with. Out in the wilderness—which means far from the city, out at the edge of where life is comfortable and predictable. People from the whole Judean countryside and *all* the people of Jerusalem went out to into the wilderness, Mark says, to hear what John the Baptist had to say. The population of Jerusalem at that point was somewhere between 50,000 and 80,000 people. So when Mark says *everyone* went to the river, he's making a point. This wasn't a small church. It was a stadium's worth of people. A very large stadium. And the preacher they were going to hear wasn't Jesus; it was John the Baptist.

Historians tell us that John was well known—maybe as popular as Jesus later became. He might have had even more followers than Jesus. He was a significant enough figure that he came to the attention of the king, who executed John not long after this scene. That's what Roman kings did with people who threatened the security of the order, who stirred up large crowds of people, who raised their voices for change.

John's message was: This is not a world God can live in. You are not a person God can live with. So repent. Turn around; change your ways. You have to live differently. Stop giving in to the culture around you; pay attention to God instead. If you do that; if we all do that; God will

come and God will make things happen. God will rip this oppressive government out of power, replace Caesar with a good king. Maybe God will even do it soon. Very soon.

This was good news to those Jews who were living then like Palestinian refugees live now. God would come and save them. It hadn't happened yet, but maybe it would soon. Over the course of their history, they'd spent more time in captivity than in independence. Their Temple—the most precious spot in their country, the place where they believed God physically lived—had been destroyed, burned to the ground. Twice, by the time Mark wrote his book. The promise John the Baptist reminded them of—that God would come and re-claim the land for God's people—had been deferred over and over again. It's because you have not yet been obedient enough, was John's message to them. You have to clean up your lives first. Do it. Now.

John was sort of a wild man, but Jesus was drawn to his vision. He went to the river that day to hear John speak. He was so convinced by what he heard that he decided to join John's movement. He stepped into the river that day to be baptized, to become a follower of John the Baptist.

But the very first chapter of Mark's story says something happened for Jesus that day as he lifted his head out of the river, with John's hand on his back. He had an epiphany. The light shifted. His thoughts re-sorted. Have you ever had a moment like that? Something you have always sort of known suddenly comes clear in a new way. Finally, you understand, in a way that changes everything.

That's what happened for Jesus. As he came up out of the water, with his head back and his hair dripping, it was as if the sky split open and something warm came over him. And the words he heard weren't threatening or harsh, a warning to clean up his behavior. "You're my child," the voice said. "I love you dearly. You make me happy."

It was a life-changing moment for Jesus. Not everyone heard God's voice that day, but Jesus heard it. And immediately, Mark says, Jesus felt the need to go out by himself—even further into the wilderness. He stayed out there for forty days—a long time. You know what happens when people go out into the wilderness by themselves. They change. They find themselves. They become themselves.

When Jesus came out, something had shifted for him. He turned in a different direction from John the Baptist. He still believed in John's vision of the kind of world that God intended. But he no longer believed that the work of faithful people was to keep hoping for a perfect future, waiting for a time when God would come to sweep away everything that is wrong; or to wait for a heaven that would come in the next life. No; the kingdom of God—a world as peaceful and loving and just as God intended it to be—is for here, now. And it is something *we* are responsible for.

Jesus began to preach himself. "Now is the time," he said. "God's kingdom is here, already." Turn around. Change your heart. Not to convince God to come, but so you can see that this has already happened. God is present—here, in this life. Now.

Jesus believed in the same things his teacher John the Baptist hoped for. That God wills an end to suffering. That people who are poor and oppressed and invisible come first to God's attention. That *every* person should be able to expect generosity, justice, kindness. Food, healing. But for Jesus, God was present enough already to make those things reality. Not someday. Now. It won't happen by some supernatural intervention in the universe. It will happen in us.

There's a whole theological framework that's come out of Mark's Gospel, a different way of thinking about God and what God is doing. I learned it in seminary. It's called "realized eschatology". *Eschatology* means the end times, the time when God will make everything right. There's a lot of eschatology in the Bible—in both the Old and New Testaments. Verses that are often read as predictions, hope for the future. *Realized* eschatology means that God isn't about doing this someday. God is doing it now. That God's purpose—to reclaim creation for the good, life-giving wholeness that it was made for—is happening already. That life with God among us is not just a hope, way out there in the future. It's for now.

What Mark wanted us to know right from the start is that Jesus saw a God who says, "I'm not waiting for the future to give you all I've got." Now is the time, Jesus said. Here it is: God's kingdom. Good news. Right here, in front of you. In us. Not in a someday-perfect government, not in some unflawed church you might wish for, not just after you die. It will happen in people, in you. In the relationships we make with one another. In the commitments we make, and keep with our lives.

Mark's story of Jesus is different from Matthew's and Luke's and John's. Mark understands differently how Jesus came to be the One God sent. Jesus wasn't born into holiness, Mark suggests; he discovered it. Something happened that day he stood in the water and heard God say, "I love you. You make me happy." Jesus heard those words and he took them seriously. He understood they were meant for him, and that they called him to a purpose bigger than his own happiness or well-being.

Because of that story, there's a sort of wonderful democracy in Mark's Gospel. It says that God is speaking to you the same words Jesus heard: "I love you. You make me happy. Now." Jesus spent the rest of his life, the rest of this story, telling people: Turn around so you can hear the voice, so you can see what I've seen. Live like you belong to God's kingdom in *this* life. Be part of a movement to open the doors of that kingdom to everyone. Here. Now.

"Realized eschatology" is what that's called. Toss that term around in casual conversation. You'll sound really smart. But you'll know what it means:

We live in darkness.
But the light is coming.
In fact, it's already here.