

Rational human beings ask questions. I imagine you have asked tens of thousands of questions in your life. From those early moments, as you were learning to talk and discover the world around you, you asked so many questions that you probably drove your parents crazy.

What? Why? Where? When? How? And every answer was followed by another question! We haven't stopped asking questions. Sometimes we ask deep, theological questions in moments of confusion or pain. Sometimes we just wonder why someone around us has done or said the thing that they've done or said.

Sometimes you just ask questions in irritation: why does a flank steak at Trader Joe's cost over \$13? Or what happened to all those lime-colored rental bikes that used to be scattered all around downtown San Mateo?

If you could think with me for a moment, what's the most important question you have ever asked? It's been said that smart people are not the first people with the right answers; they're people who ask the right questions because you don't get to the right answers without asking the right questions.

Perhaps there could be no more important questions than the three questions that are asked and answered by Mark in his gospel. First one: "Who in the world is Jesus?" What an important question. Second question: "Why in the world did He come?" And the third question: "What does it mean to follow Him?"

In these early chapters, Mark is answering that first important question, who is Jesus?

Who Is Jesus?

But before we get into that, let's ask, "Who is Mark?" Mark was raised in the early church in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Mary. In Acts chapter 12, we read that Christians would gather in his mother's house. Mark had an uncle named Barnabas. When Paul and Barnabas went on their first missionary journey, they took Mark along. But for some reason, Paul didn't like Mark and fired him. But later, Mark did redeem himself. In his later years, Paul saw Mark as valuable for his work. We also know that Mark spent a lot of time with Peter. He recorded Peter's preaching material. In fact, he was so close to Peter that Peter called him "*My son Mark*" in 1 Peter 5.

So most scholars believe that this gospel we are studying is what Mark recorded from Peter's first-hand eyewitness accounts of

his life with Jesus. Peter's living memories of Jesus. Mark seems urgent in his writing. Unlike most preachers, he doesn't waste words. Forty-two times he uses the Greek word "*Euthus*," which means immediately. *Euthus* is only used 12 other times in the entire New Testament.

We can better understand Mark's urgency when we understand that Mark wrote this gospel to the Christians in Rome shortly after AD 65. At this time, Christians in Rome were under dangerous, life-threatening persecution at the hands of the crazy emperor Nero. It was illegal for Christians to meet in public for worship, so historians record that they met in catacombs under the city. And I imagine the first reading of Mark to these discouraged Christians must have truly been living water and bread of life.

Last week, Kevin unpacked verse 1 beautifully for us. Now we have our first quoted words. The first voice we hear in Mark is not Jesus' voice. It's quoted from the ancient prophets. First, we hear from the prophet Malachi. His words come from the last chapters of the last book of the Old Testament.

A little context here. After the Old Testament was completed, there were no more accounts of anyone hearing the word of the Lord for about 400 years. Imagine that. The prophets go silent. And people are beginning to think, "I guess God doesn't send prophets like that anymore."

And now, in verse 2, Mark tells us that the final Old Testament promise in Malachi 3:1 is being fulfilled through the forerunner of Jesus. A man named John the Baptist who helps us answer the question, "Who is Jesus?"

John prepared the way for Jesus

Just a heads up, Mark writes Isaiah here because he is merging prophecies together. Isaiah is a major prophet who would be more well known by his Roman gentile audience. Malachi is known as a minor prophet. I think Malachi gets short-changed here. How would you like to be known as the minor Christian? To keep it simple for a Roman audience, Mark will major on the major thing. "*as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way'*" (Mark 1:2).

Four hundred years later, the messenger has now arrived to announce the arrival of the king. It was a common understanding that wherever a king would go, there would be someone who goes ahead announcing the good news that the king was about

to arrive. But we know from verse 1 that this isn't just another king who is the son of some monarch. We know that his name is Jesus, his title is King, which is what the title Christ means, and his heritage is the Son of God.

When we read Malachi's prophecy 400 years earlier, where God says that one day,

"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty. Malachi 3:1

See the "before me?" in Malachi? It's slightly different from what Mark said. It's called an interpretive quote, and it's common for New Testament writers to do this to make their point that the prophecy is being fulfilled. Mark is saying that it was Jesus who delivered this message to Malachi. It is Jesus who is co-equal, co-existent, and co-eternal as the son of God, who is saying, "This King? This King is me! And this forerunner is here to announce me and my arrival."

And then one of the first things I will do is to purify the temple. And what was one of Jesus' first public acts, he went to the temple in Jerusalem and cleaned out the thieves and dishonest money changers. And what did he say? *"My house will be called a house of prayer..." (Matt. 21:13b)*

Now let's read Mark 1:3, where Mark gives us an interpretive quote from Isaiah chapter 40, verse 3.

"a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him'" (Mark 1:3). The context of Isaiah is about the return of the Jews from Babylonian captivity. That God would lead them out of captivity, and they would make the long journey back to their land, and that God's temple would be rebuilt in the Holy City of Jerusalem. This prophecy of Isaiah had a present fulfillment when the temple was rebuilt in the days of Ezra. But as Mark tells us, there will be a future fulfillment, where John will announce that the future fulfillment will be when Jesus comes and inaugurates his kingdom and that Jesus would ascend to the throne, establish his kingdom, and bring salvation, blessing, and peace. And Jesus will release people from their captivity.

So John's job is to make the way ready for whom? For the Lord! And as we read earlier, Jesus will give us the Holy Spirit. Who else could give us the Holy Spirit but God himself? *"A voice of one calling: 'In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God'" (Isaiah 40:3).*

Mark is telling us God himself will come to his people, just as God came to his people and met them in the temple after their captivity, just as God came and met the Israelites as they left their captivity in Egypt.

The Good News that Mark tells us in verse one is that God has come. The God of the universe has broken into history. The new king is here! The new kingdom is here! And it's a new day for the whole world.

It's interesting; in the Greek and Roman world, the word Good News, or Euangelion, is always used in the plural. In the New Testament, Good News is always used in the singular. Why? Because there is no other good news but Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God.

I want us to notice what is missing from the Gospel of Mark. There is no genealogy of Jesus like we find in Luke and Matthew; there is no virgin birth account, no Bethlehem, and no Christmas story to his Gentile Christian audience in Rome. It is simply that King Jesus is the Son of God.

Now let's get to know John the Baptist better. First of all, John wasn't the original baptist. He wasn't even a Baptist. And Baptist wasn't his last name. The text refers to John as the baptizer. John's birth was also a miracle. His mother, Elizebeth, was past her childbearing years when she was carrying John. And we learn that there was a special anointing on John's life while he was in the womb.

And remember, David in the Psalms reminds us that we are all fearfully and wonderfully made and that we carry a special and unique purpose that begins in the womb. Luke tells us that while Elizabeth was carrying John, she went to visit her relative Mary when Mary was carrying Jesus in her womb

We'll let Luke tell us all what happened when these two mothers met. *"When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit" (Luke 1:41).* Even in his mother's womb, John was aware of the anointing on Jesus while Jesus was in his mother's womb

Historians generally recognize that John was raised to be a priest. But at some point, he realized that he was called to be a prophet—a prophet of old like Elijah. Here is what Luke says about him, *"And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel" (Luke 1:80).*

We saw that wilderness reference in both Mark 1:3 and Isaiah 40:3. The forerunner calls out from a place in the wilderness or desert. When you see wilderness in the Bible, don't think of wilderness as Yosemite Valley with meadows, deer, and picnic baskets. When you think of wilderness, think more like the Salton Sea—dry, arid, hot, brutal desert, barely survivable. So in typical Mark fashion, we are rushed out to the wilderness to meet John. What was his message?

John preached baptism and repentance in the wilderness

“And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4). So we learn that John was a man of the wilderness and preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The call to baptism was unique. Jews were not baptized. Prior prophets didn't baptize. Jews did regular, even daily, ritual cleansing to prepare for worship and especially before entering the temple. But baptism was something different. The only people who were baptized were gentiles who converted to Judaism.

But John was calling out to all Jews to come to the wilderness to hear the call to repentance and to be baptized. The idea was for them to turn. That's what repentance means: turn or come back to God. And there is something significant about the wilderness. John wasn't preaching this in the plush temple with priests in their fine robes affirming his message. He was calling people out of their shallow religious experiences, their dead traditions, their earthly comforts, their places of social prominence, and saying, “Let's get real. The time has now come. The kingdom of God is at hand.”

What an amazing thing that God orchestrated that we would meet him in the desert and not in the temple in the Holy City of Jerusalem. The theologian William L Lane states,

John's call to repentance and his call to come out to him in the wilderness to be baptized are two aspects of the same reality. It is a call to renew sonship in the wilderness. The peculiar urgency in the call lies in the fact that the crisis of God's final act is close at hand.

The same correlation should be seen between baptism and the wilderness. The summons to be baptized in the Jordan meant that Israel must come once more to the wilderness. As Israel long ago had been separated from Egypt by a pilgrimage through the waters of the Red Sea, the nation is exhorted again to experience separation; the people are called to a second exodus in preparation for a new covenant with God.

“The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River” (Mark 1:5). The wilderness area is about 30 miles south of the Sea of Galilee. And it was also about 30 miles from Jerusalem. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem could have been upwards of 300,000 people who made their way to the Jordan River to hear John preach and then repent and get baptized.

By doing this, the people were saying, “I am no more ready to meet the king than a gentile.” It was a huge admission. A genuine turning that brings the fruit of repentance. Getting baptized like a Gentile proselyte. John's water baptism was a symbol pointing to a future baptism of the Holy Spirit that comes to all who call on Jesus Christ to be saved.

It's interesting to read in Acts 19 that some of John's followers ended up far away in Ephesus, and they heard Paul's preaching. And Paul told them about followers of Jesus being baptized in the Holy Spirit. So when they received the message of Paul and believed the good news of Jesus Christ and received forgiveness and salvation, Paul baptized them in the name of the Lord Jesus, and the Holy Spirit came upon them.

“John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey” (Mark 1:6). Mark is the only gospel writer who focuses on John's fashion. Men of the wilderness didn't care about fashion. His garment was not camel skin; it was scratchy camel hair. A leather belt held his outfit together. Mark says he ate locusts and wild honey. Both are plentiful in the desert. Locust? Really? A locust is a type of grasshopper. They could be boiled, roasted, ground up, and added to bread for protein. I've never eaten a locust before, at least not that I know of. But I hear they are crunchy and salty. I think I would want to use the wild honey as a dipping sauce for my locusts.

John's look and his lifestyle had a parallel. In 2 Kings 1, it says that Elijah the Tishbite was a hairy man who wore a leather girdle. It was Elijah who set the fashion trends for prophets. And John looked the part. Prophets were hairy and probably skinny.

Whether John explicitly said it, John was a type of Elijah; the one prophesied to come before the arrival of the King. If you have ever participated in a Jewish Passover Seder meal, there is the symbol of the empty chair at the table. Who was that empty chair for? It was for Elijah, and the Passover Sedar reminded the Jews that they were waiting for Elijah to return because he was to return before the Messiah would come.

Who did Jesus say John was? In Matthew, Jesus says, *“And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. Whoever has ears let them hear” (Matt. 11:14-15).* And it fits with the prophets of old like Hosea, Amos, and Isaiah, who spoke of Israel's time in the wilderness as a time when the people who were raw, exposed, dependent, and searching would repent and meet God in the Judean desert.

John is all that is old and everything that is new. He stands with one foot planted in the Old Testament and one foot planted in the New Testament. He was a celebrity. Everyone wanted to hang with John. But John knew his place, and here is a great lesson for us.

John pointed people to Jesus

“And this was his message: ‘After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie’ (Mark 1:7). Forerunners to Jesus like John and followers of Jesus like us should always point people to Christ. Remember what John said when he saw Jesus, “He is greater than I.” How far above me is Jesus?

Everyone alive at the time of Jesus knew that the lowliest job one could do was to remove someone's dirty sandals from their dirty feet. It was a job for a slave. A scum job. And John was not even worthy of doing that job. He is saying, "Don't look at me; look at who I am pointing you to."

"I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:8). All I can do is stick you in the water and tell you important things, but this Jesus, he can transform you on the inside; he will wash your heart. John's baptism was a preparation; it was a sign of what was to come, but it was limited to water baptism, and he said, "The one who comes will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

What is he saying? He's saying, "This one will deal with the ultimate damage of sin." What does sin bring? Sin brings death! And this one, by his Spirit, will give life to you. He will regenerate you; I don't have the power to give you a new birth, forgive your sins, or give you eternal life. I can't do that, but Jesus can!

At one time or another, every Christian goes through a period that is referred to as a "desert experience." But I want us to be encouraged because, thanks to our scripture today, we know that in the desert, God is present. Whatever you are going through, God is present.

None of us want to go to the desert. It's harsh, full of challenges, overwhelming, and to most people, not what they would call a scenic place! But in deserts, we must depend on God. Moses met God in the desert. Elijah was fed by ravens in the desert.

What if we could get to a place where we understood that there might be really important work that God wants to do in our hearts, and it won't happen unless we follow him into the desert. How might you and I create space in the desert? Away from distraction, from noise, from comfort, from external things that promise more than they can ever possibly deliver.

When you hear these words of Mark today, what do you think about? Are you enmeshed in the external things of life? How is your posture? Humility, a contrite heart, confession, and repentance, are the things God loves. These are the things that prepare us for the King.

As I reflected on a desert experience and tried to get into the setting here in Mark 1, I think I would have made that 30-mile trek to see this famous preacher who ate bugs, but when I arrived in the desert and heard him preach, I think my dreams, my goals, my vision for my life, my ego, my empire would be exposed.

John would have cut open my heart to show me that what I project externally is not a true reflection of what I struggle to value on the inside as a man of God. And I would have a choice. I will always have a choice here on earth, heed John's exhortation to repent so I might follow the King unhindered by sin, by false beliefs, by ego driving me to project something I am not.

I read this week that the desert is the place of great undoing. When we encounter truth, it is disruptive. Actually, it will be easier to forget what we learn each week about Jesus than it will be to surrender to it. We may be called to let go of our preconceived notions, our traditional ways of seeing the world, and our role in it. What we find may threaten our identity if our identity is based on the power structures of the world.

Ryan Kuja, in *The Desert is a Place of Great Undoing*, said, "The desert invites us to go into the vulnerable places inside to face and to let go of what we find, to leave the God we know and meet a God we don't know and can't possibly imagine." You need to understand again how radical this is. The ministry of John the Baptist is a stinging indictment of the religious order of the day! John is saying religion has become external. He could have said, "Ladies and Gentlemen, God has left the building, and he has come to the desert. Look for him there."

And so, God raises someone outside of the religious system of the day, outside of its deadening externalism, outside of its spiritual pride, to call people once again to what every human being needs to do: confess how deep their sin is and seek the one thing that you can't earn—forgiveness!

Let's keep being honest here. Externalism is not dead. It might even rear itself here at CPC. We can sing with such enthusiasm in our worship gatherings and yet be an ungracious father and an ungracious husband. We can explain a theology of the love of God yet live selfish, me-oriented, unloving lives and not be bothered at all by our hypocrisy. We can talk about the righteousness of Christ that saved us and the next day look at something we shouldn't look at on our screens. We can talk about the sovereignty of God, and we can exegete that doctrine well, but we try to move ourselves into control of situations and circumstances, and we worry all the time.

At one point in our elder meeting this week, we discussed that the heart of our faith cannot be external habits; it must be a heart that loves and worships God and is ruled by him, makes space for him in all situations, and relationships. Humility is the product of worship. As John tells us, it's not about me; it's about Jesus.

You see, this introduction to the ministry of Christ is like a great knife that slices its way through the middle of our humanity because if we believe these words, if we believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the Mighty One, the Savior who will give us new life, it will change us and everything about our life. And it doesn't surprise God in the least that you might be frightened by that.

This "Who is Jesus Question" is intended to define everything we think about God, about ourselves, what we think about our world, and what we think about others. Or, is your "Who is Jesus Question?" just deserve a "Whoever you want him to be" kind

of answer. We believe the gospel reveals the deity of Christ, the humanity of Christ, and the historical reality of a real Jesus who came into our broken world to save all who will believe in Him as Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.

I would ask you: What are you doing with Jesus? Have you placed your faith in Him for the forgiveness of sins and a new life with him for all of eternity? If you're a believer, what are you doing with Jesus? Do you live by faith in Him? Is that belief in Jesus enough to trust him to shape your life decisions about your money, your marriage, your parenting, and your job.? Is he calling you from the desert to come to him to get things right?

I'm glad we are on this journey through Mark together. The journey could get bumpy, and we will need to encourage each other along the way. May the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, move you, motivate you, and shape your life.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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