

# Scripture Comments

Mark 1.4-11

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What's next?

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We looked at a portion of this text on the Second Sunday of Advent (Mark 1.1-8). You may remember that Mark is “frugal” with his descriptions. Comparatively speaking, Mark is the most frugal of the Gospel writers, if the comparison is made on volume alone. Mark seems to have no interest in explaining the content of the preaching of John the Baptist (compare Mtt. 3.7-12; Luke 3.7-17) or in having John distinguish his identity from that of Jesus (see John 1.19-27). In the same manner, Mark exhibits no concern for questions of authority that arise from the baptism. If John baptizes Jesus, does that suggest that John was somehow superior to Jesus? The other Gospels address this issue, but Mark appears not to recognize the potential for confusion. If we go with the theory that the different Gospels were written for particular congregations, to address particular issues that were alive in those congregations, we can speculate that the competition between followers of John the Baptist and Jesus was not an issue in Mark's church. If we go with the theory that Mark was the earliest existing Gospel written, it could be that this competition between the followers of John the Baptist and Jesus had not yet arisen. For either of these reasons and possibly others, Mark does not address this issue.

What is important for Mark to convey is the revelation. In this story, the baptism is an epiphany. In verses 10-11 we read the revelation of Jesus' identity. For Mark, it is this revelation that drives Jesus into the wilderness and the beginning of his public ministry. The baptism is the setting for the revelation, not its cause. Mark also uses this story to establish continuity between Israel's tradition and Jesus. The baptism by John connects Jesus with the long line of Hebrew prophets. Jesus, at first, appears to be one more step in the long procession of God's actions on behalf of Israel. The revelation (vss. 10-11) marks Jesus as something greater than any of Israel's prophets.

The opening of the heavens indicates that divine revelation is at hand (see Ezek. 1.1; Acts 7.56; 10.11; Rev. 19.11). We cannot be sure how Mark understood the Spirit, but he clearly shows that it is connected to the presence of God. Hearing the heavenly voice becomes the climactic point of the story. We get bogged down in questions that lead us nowhere, by asking about the Spirit's appearance. Saying that the Spirit “appears like a dove” does not mean that the Spirit is a dove, but rather that the Spirit could somehow be seen. What others saw and understood is of no concern here (which is contrasted with Mark 9.2-8), the reader of this story becomes the bystander who sees, hears and puzzles over what is said.

The voice from heaven says that Jesus is “my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (see Psalm 2.7). Even though Mark does not have a nativity story, he tells us at the outset who Jesus is. At crucial points in the story, Mark reinforces this identification: at the transfiguration, when a voice from the clouds again says that Jesus is “my Son, the Beloved” (9.7); at Jesus' trial, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” (14.61-62); and most importantly at the cross, when the Roman Centurion says, “Truly this man is God's Son!”

With typical Gospel paradox, the declaration at the baptism also conceals who Jesus is, even as it reveals him. What does it mean to be “my Son, the Beloved”? Throughout Mark’s story, characters struggle to understand what Jesus’ words and actions mean. Whose power stands behind Jesus’ healings? What do his enigmatic teachings in the parables mean? How can he be the Messiah and undergo suffering and even crucifixion?

Just in case there may be any misunderstanding, the baptism of Jesus is not a prototype for Christian baptism. The saying of John the Baptist that Jesus “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” is a connection between Jesus’ baptism and the Christian practice. Jesus’ bringing of the Spirit enables us to be baptized into the community called into being by the Spirit.

Because Mark is a frugal storyteller, we must take seriously each word. Jesus is introduced as a Galilean from Nazareth. The point is that Galilee, and not Judea, is home. After the resurrection, the disciples are told to return to Galilee. It is important for us to know that Jesus is from Galilee. Just as important is the fact that at the baptism the voice from heaven and the “dove” are seen and heard by Jesus alone. This is not a public declaration about Jesus. Only Jesus and the readers receive heaven’s testimony.

Three significant things happen in this baptism story. First, the splitting of the heavens at the baptism ushers in the new, eschatological age. Jesus means the new age has begun. Second, the message from the heavenly voice combines two sources from Hebrew Scripture. Psalm 2.7 is the declaration of God’s sonship at the coronation of the king of Israel, and Isaiah 42.1 refers to the description of the Servant of the Lord. The combination of these two different texts portrays Jesus as both sovereign and servant. Third, we hear the commission given to Jesus. Jesus is more powerful than John, but with no arrogant display of power. Jesus is the servant of God whose ministry will take him to the cross.

The baptism story in Mark is a statement of the church’s understanding of itself. As followers of Jesus, we are the people of the new age. We connect our baptism with the Holy Spirit. Our baptism is our commissioning to serve. Through our baptism we are all called to serve. One piece of the definition of discipleship is made clear for us in Jesus’ declaration, “I came not to be served but to serve” (10.45).

#### References:

Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa and James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year B*; 1993.  
Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching through the Christian Year: Year B, A Comprehensive Commentary on the Lectionary*; 1993.