

OUT OF THE WILDERNESS

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Scripture: Mark 1: 1-8

Mark 1:1-8

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

² As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

*“Behold, I send My messenger ahead of You,
Who will prepare Your way;*

³ The voice of one crying in the wilderness,

*‘Make ready the way of the Lord,
Make His paths straight.’”*

⁴ John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. ⁶ John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And he was preaching, and saying, “After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals. ⁸ I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

The gospel of Mark is a book that refuses to waste time. if you ever want to suggest a gospel to somebody who’s not familiar with the bible, the best gospel to recommend is Mark’s gospel. It’s succinct, it’s concise and it’s fast-paced. While Matthew begins with a genealogy that all of you know by heart, Luke begins with the detailed birth narratives that we read aloud at Christmas sometimes, and John begins with before creation itself.

Mark is distinct for his urgency. His favourite word is ‘immediately’. He doesn’t begin with a genealogy or birth story or long introductions. Mark launches straight into the ministry of Jesus with clarity and with some amount of force. It is the gospel of movement, of mission and action, and he shows us what Jesus does as much as what Jesus says.

John Mark was a close companion of the apostle Peter, and this gospel is essentially Peter’s eyewitness memories of Jesus, arranged and recorded for the early church. And Mark begins with a voice, not the voice of Jesus yet, but the voice preparing the way for Him. And Mark is writing to believers who were under great pressure – persecuted, tired, and tempted to lose heart.

And his first message is this. Before Jesus steps onto the scene, God is preparing the way. Before the Messiah comes, the heart must be ready. And so, we meet John the Baptist, the forerunner, the messenger, and the voice in the wilderness.

As we look at these eight verses in Mark’s gospel, let’s see not only who John was, but what his ministry means for us. and as we prepare our hearts for the upcoming Advent season, which begins on the 30th of November, let’s ask the Lord: What does He want to be born again in us? Besides the Lord who already resides, what else needs to be birthed in us?

1:1 “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

This is not a soft opening. It’s a declaration. It’s a banner raised over the entire book. The gospel is not a theory. It’s about a person. The gospel news is not an idea. It is Jesus Himself. Mark doesn’t

hide His identity. Jesus – the historical man. He was a real person who walked in real places, lived in real time, and entered fully into our own human experience. His life is rooted not in myth or imagination, but in verifiable history and eyewitness testimony.

Christ, the promised Messiah, the long-awaited anointed one foretold by the prophets. The fulfillment of centuries of longing and expectation. In Him, all the promises of God are Amen and yes. Son of God, divine, eternal, true. Not merely a teacher, but a great miracle worker. God Himself who has come in the flesh. Eternal, uncreated, and sharing the very nature of the Father. His authority, His power, and His mission all flow from His divine identity.

So, before we are told what Jesus will do, Mark tells us who Jesus is. Because the Christian life doesn't begin with our efforts. It cannot. It begins with Jesus' identity. And to prepare the world to receive this Jesus, God sends a messenger, John the Baptist.

1:2-3 As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: and then he quotes Isaiah saying, ***“Behold, I send My messenger before your face; the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.’”***

So, John's ministry should not and was not a surprise. It was prophesied, it was planned, and it was promised. After Malachi, the last prophet in the Old Testament, Israel endured nearly 400 years of complete prophetic silence. Not a word. The longest silence in their history.

And the silence was broken, not by an ordinary messenger, but by this pivotal, world-shifting figure called John the Baptist. And Mark wants his readers to kind of feel the weight of this moment. The silence of centuries breaking with the sound of one solitary voice, not in Jerusalem, not in the temple courts, but out in the wilderness.

Out in the wilderness, a place of testing, often a place of humility and new beginnings. If you remember, the wilderness was where Israel learned to depend on God, where hearts were stripped of distractions and God reshaped His people. And once again, God begins a new work in a barren place.

Sometimes, God does His deepest preparation in the wilderness seasons of our lives. Those seasons when prayer feels dry, when answers seem delayed, when nothing around us looks like it's moving forward. And the wilderness can feel lonely. It can feel confusing and even be quite discouraging.

But it is often the very place where God is quietly doing His greatest work in us. It's in the wilderness that He slows us down, slows down our pace long enough to listen to Him, to strip away distractions that we didn't realize were even controlling us, and teaches us to depend on Him in ways that we never did before. It's where our faith is refined, our character is shaped, and our hearts are softened to receive what He wants to do next.

1:4 John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

This was not a comfortable message to hear. It was confrontational. It demanded change. It called people to examine their hearts and to turn back to God.

John's message was confrontational because it went straight to the heart. He didn't blame Rome or the politics of the place or even the circumstances and situations that were surrounding the people at that time. He confronted the sin within. He challenged the religious confidence of the people who

assumed they were spiritually safe simply because they were children of Abraham, and he exposed their hypocrisy, called them out of their comfort, and demanded visible, practical repentance. In fact, John's preaching insisted that real preparation for the Messiah required real change, new attitudes, new behaviors, and a heart genuinely turned back to God.

Repentance simply means a change of mind. It's a change of direction, a change of the heart. John called the people to repent because they were spiritually asleep, caught in religious routine, moral compromise, and false confidence. Their hearts had grown hard. Their worship had become empty, and their lives no longer reflected the holiness that God had desired for them. And repentance for them meant turning from complacency, from corruption, from hypocrisy, and from sin, and preparing their hearts to receive the Messiah who was about to appear. Not about guilt so much as about grace, or shame as much as surrender, or condemnation as much as an invitation.

Maybe today, you're in a wilderness of your own, not physically, but spiritually, where your heart feels dry, where you're doing all the right things, but nothing seems to land. Where prayer feels like just routine. And even as you read God's word, His voice seems strangely silent. And if that's where yourself, take heart, because perhaps just as God was preparing Israel through John the Baptist, He's preparing you.

Maybe as you get ready to step into this period of Advent, maybe God wants to birth something new in you – maybe a fresh work of His Spirit, a new perspective of who Jesus is, a deeper awareness of what He can do in your life. But for that new work to take root, He may be calling you into a place of complete dependence on Him, a place of honest examination, of letting Him cleanse and reorder your life, where repentance becomes not a burden but the doorway through which He prepares you for what may be coming next.

And perhaps, this very wilderness is not a kind of punishment that maybe you thought it was, but it's preparation. It's not silence, but it's a time of shaping. It's not the absence of God, but the quiet work of God going on within you.

And the neat thing about repentance is that forgiveness follows repentance. And then healing follows honesty, which is a part of repentance. And restoration follows returning back to God.

Look at the people at that time.

1:5 And all the country of Judea and Jerusalem was going out to him.

Why did the people come in such large numbers to a hard confrontational message? Why would you go there? to be castigated, to be called a brood of vipers and all those kinds of names which he reserved for those people. It wasn't a gentle message of love. It was a hard message challenging the sin within them. But they came. They came to listen to him.

Deep down, the people of Israel knew that they were spiritually dry. They knew that something was missing. They had endured 400 years without a prophet. Their religion had become routine. Their leaders were corrupt. The nation was weary under Roman rule. And many felt far from God.

This was the space that John stepped into. He preached with an authority they had never heard from their religious leaders. His words were sharp, but they were true. His message was hard, but honest. John wasn't manipulating them or flattering them or telling them what they wanted to hear.

He was telling them what their souls already knew. There's something in the human heart that responds to truth that is spoken with conviction. People are drawn to authenticity even when it confronts them.

As we look at our own lives this morning in light of this word, it's possible that we don't need to look or think too much to figure out whether we are in a good place spiritually or in a dry and barren land. Because only we know whether we're going through the motions, whether we're putting up a façade, or whether we have strayed far from the Lord. whether joy and peace are forgotten attributes of being a child of God. Only we know.

They felt the weight of their sin, the dryness of their religion, and the longing for God's promised Messiah. They wanted hope, and John gave language to that ache in their hearts.

John's final words in this passage kind of brings everything into focus.

1:7-8 *After me comes One who is mightier than I. I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*

John knew his place. His job was to prepare the soil, not do any planting of seeds. He could awaken the conscience, but he couldn't lead them into the waters of cleanse their hearts. He couldn't change the human heart. He could point people to God, but he could not unite them with God. He could wash the outside, but he could not purify the inside. That kind of transforming work belonged to the One who was coming, who was far greater.

John's baptism was outward, symbolic; a sign of repentance, a way of saying, "I want to be clean." Jesus' baptism – inward, supernatural, a work of the Holy Spirit, a cleansing that reaches the deepest places of our heart. John's baptism could get people ready. Jesus' baptism would make people new. John was the voice, but Jesus was the Word. John was the messenger, but Jesus was the Messiah. John could stir the waters of repentance, but Jesus could pour out the Spirit of renewal.

Let's unpack a little but what John meant when he said that Jesus would baptize you with the Holy Spirit. *I baptize with water, but One coming will baptize you in the Holy Spirit.*

When John uses that phrase, he was pointing forward to something completely new, something the Old Testament saints had never experienced and that he, himself, would not live to see. John knew that his own baptism was outward and symbolic, but the Messiah's baptism would be inward, transformative, and supernatural. And Jesus later confirms this directly when He tells the disciples in Acts 1:5, "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

He was connecting John's prophecy to the coming of Pentecost. John was announcing the very same baptism of the Spirit that the first century believers experienced in Acts 2, the moment when God began to dwell within His people, empower them, and form the church. John's audience wouldn't have understood all of this, but they did know it meant that God would pour out His presence in a way that had only been hinted about by prophets of yore.

Ezekiel talked about a new heart. Joel talked about a time when God's Spirit would be poured out on all flesh. So, John could prepare hearts, cleanse consciences, and call people back to God, but only Jesus could immerse people in the very life and power of God Himself. So, John made people ready through his baptism, but Jesus' baptism made people new.

But here's the question that we must wrestle with. What does this mean for us, for you and me? What does it mean for us who already have the Holy Spirit? We stand on the other side of history, on the side of the cross, the resurrection, and Pentecost. We know that the Holy Spirit dwells within us. If you know Jesus today, you have the Holy Spirit indwelling you. That's a no-brainer.

That's the word of God, but something that John's listeners could not yet fully grasp. They had no category for the Spirit's permanent presence, His cleansing work, His guiding voice that we hear, His convicting whisper, His comforting ministry. But we do. We understand these things because we have experienced all of them.

So, what do we do with a passage like this? What do we make of it? John the Baptist calling people to repentance, something that almost feels historical. That was 2,000 years ago, something that feels like it belongs to another time and to another people. That was my struggle as I wrestled with this text, unpacking it. and all of that was good. But how could I take it and make it relevant for you and me? How was I to bridge the gap between then and now?

And I sensed the Holy Spirit nudging me towards this very simple truth – the call to repent didn't expire with John's ministry. It still speaks, it still convicts, and it still matters. Because the truth is: it is entirely possible to have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us and yet not give Him full control. Isn't it? it's possible for Him to live in our hearts and yet hold back rooms in our lives where He is not allowed to enter. And it's possible to walk with God and still keep a corner of the heart reserved for our own will, our own habits, and our own stubbornness. And over time, those unyielded places can become dark stains, dark places for the evil one to manipulate.

Maybe today, beloved, repentance is exactly what clears the way for each one of us. Because repentance brings forgiveness. Forgiveness brings cleansing. And cleansing creates a space for the Holy Spirit to come and reside, take charge, and fully rule and transform our lives.

So, perhaps the voice of John the Baptist crying out in the Judean wilderness can still echo in this sanctuary, in this moment – repent, turn, come back, make room for the Lord. so, as we approach the season of Advent that starts two Sundays hence, maybe the days leading up to it are meant to be a time of preparation, days of honest reflection, days of surrender, days where we invite the Holy Spirit to shine His light on those hidden corners.

Maybe today, John's ancient call is just as true for us as it was for Israel in the first century. Maybe today is the day for us to heed that call. And maybe today is the day for us to respond to the call.

Would you pray with me? In these moments as we always let the Holy Spirit do what He does best, in helping us fine-tune a message in our hearts, maybe the call to you this morning is to repent. Maybe repent of hidden tucked-away anger – anger that you've held for a long time against something or someone who hurt you. Maybe it's unforgiveness that you have nurtured over many years that you've never forgiven someone. Or maybe it's just anger toward God for where you find yourself, for what has happened to you or what is not happening to you. Maybe for prayers that seem to be unanswered or that heaven is silent.

Or maybe it's about the double life that you are leading; one for the outside world, but one that you know is not under the control of the Holy Spirit. And I wonder whether in these moments that is your cry: Lord, I want to repent.

And if God is inviting you to do that, would you take this time to do so? Then take heart from His word that says that if we confess our sins, then He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Cleanse, Lord. make that space or those spaces holy. Take charge of those spaces that have been vacated by sin and rebuild and renew and restore right fellowship with you. And may joy and peace and well-being settle upon our hearts. For we pray this through the beautiful, majestic, magnificent name of Jesus.

Amen.
