

As we enter in to Mark's gospel, the first 13 verses are like the opening crawl of a Star Wars movie, giving us the essential background information we need to catch up to where the story is at the moment we join our main characters. We learn what kind of story we're jumping into, who the good guys are, who the bad guys are, and what the overall plot is going to be about.

Last week, we learned that we're encountering a gospel story, a story about Israel's royal Son Jesus the Christ, and the *way* of His coming kingdom. We were introduced to John the Baptizer, the King's herald, and we learned that the plot was about bringing God's people out of the wilderness of sin, through the Jordan of forgiveness, into the Promised Land of the new kingdom. John's water baptism of preparation was meant to get Israel ready for the real Spirit baptism that would usher people into the kingdom, and John told everyone to get ready for the Mighty Spirit-Washer to come.

Today, in verses 9-13, we actually meet Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, the Mighty One, He who baptizes with the Spirit. We also meet His great adversary, Satan, the one who is going to fight Jesus and oppose His kingdom to the death. Satan is introduced in v.13, but then he doesn't show up again, except through his agents and minions, but his presence looms large behind the scenes throughout the whole book.

Mark also uses v.13 to set a *cosmic* stage for this struggle by referencing the non-human world of devils, angels, and wild beasts before zooming in to focus on the human drama. These characters only make brief appearances, but it's important for us to remember that the events of Jesus' life have *universal* implications. This isn't just a story about the province of Galilee. What happens here concerns everything in heaven, on earth, and under the earth.

And notice that all these events happen in the wilderness, which is why v.1-13 are the first scene in Mark's drama. The stage is set in the wilderness, but the action finally begins in v. 14, when Jesus comes into Galilee, which is what we'll look at next week, *dv*.

Today, though, when Jesus appears on the scene, the first thing that happens is the *opposite* of what we would expect, which in itself is actually a big clue for the rest of the gospel. Mark is full of ironic surprises, and what surprises us here is that John has us all waiting expectantly for a mighty Baptizer who comes with an unbelievably powerful baptism. And yet, when Jesus appears, John not only doesn't just untie His sandals, *John baptizes Jesus!* This would be like if Michael Jordan asked James Naismith to shoot his free throws, or if Steve Jobs asked Alexander Graham Bell to make him a phone! Jesus is the greater baptizer, but John baptizes Jesus.

But where other gospels record how confused John was by this, Mark simply moves on. When Jesus comes up out of the water, immediately, he sees the heavens being ripped open, and the Spirit descends on Him like a dove. Why a dove? What Bible story does that make you think of

– a man passing through the water, and a dove coming down? That’s Noah, preparing to re-inhabit the earth after a cleansing flood-baptism. Jesus is about to do something similar.

But it’s not just *waters* parting this time, like for Noah, and for Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, but *heaven itself* opens up to Jesus. And this is important, because it signals that not only is the barrier between wilderness and promised kingdom being removed, but also the barrier between God and His people. And watch for this: Mark bookends his gospel with barriers between God and man being torn in two. [Children, see if you can remember something else being torn in two in the gospel, and come and tell me after the service if you figure it out!]

By coming to be baptized by John, Jesus presents Himself humbly, as just one of many Jews preparing for the coming kingdom, but a voice from heaven singles Him out and declares, “You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased.” The baptism of Jesus is one of the key moments in our understanding of who God is as a Trinity of persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We see Jesus being baptized, the Spirit descending as a dove, and the Father’s voice speaking from heaven, and this forever puts to rest the heresy called modalism, the idea that God is really *one person* who represents Himself as different people in different situations. No, here we see *three persons* involved, and yet we know as all Israel knew that the Lord our God, the Lord is one. This is the biblical mystery of the Trinity: the Lord is One God, eternally existing in three persons.

But by making that point about the Trinity, we risk getting the wrong idea about what it means to be the “Son of God”: To be called a Son of God is to be recognized as a unique representative of God. Adam is God’s son, the only created being made in God’s image. David is God’s son, as the representative of God’s wisdom, justice, and authority to His people. And now Jesus is given the title of Son by God Himself, speaking from heaven. God the Son is how we refer to the second person of the Trinity, but usually, when the Bible talks about “the Son of God”, it’s a title used for God’s representative, not the name of the Trinitarian person.

Here in Mark, we’re talking about the title. It’s not clear exactly who hears this voice from heaven, but even if a crowd of people heard it, they didn’t hear God saying that Jesus was God; they heard God say that this man was a new representative of God, a son like David. Of course, Jesus is much more than another man like David, but that’s not the point being made here.

But interestingly, being identified as a “beloved Son” not only connects Jesus to David; it also connects Him to *Isaac*. And this should be another clue that Jesus’ path to kingship is going to be different than you might think. Isaac is called Abraham’s “beloved son” by God when God calls Abraham to sacrifice him on Mt. Moriah. So yes, sons of God are *kingly representatives*, but beloved sons are also *sacrifices*. If you remember both of those things, then what happens to Jesus will make much more sense. But right now, the main point is that Jesus has been baptized and

identified by God as His beloved Son, *in whom He is well pleased*. John was sent to prepare His way; and now God declares He is *pleased* with the way that Jesus is going.

This leads to another unexpected irony – right after God says He is pleased with Jesus, the Spirit throws Jesus out *deeper* into the wilderness for forty days, where He is tempted by Satan. What does God do to sons who *displease* Him? But, O friends, if you get this, then your Christian life will make so much more sense: God's pleasure does not show up in your life as comfort and ease. It shows up as testing and temptation. Many Christians who are doing their best to follow God are surprised when life gets hard. But this is *what God does* with His beloved sons! He sends them out to fight battles against the evil one! If your Christian life is *easy*, it's probably because God is leaving you on the bench and not putting you into the game! And if you are following God faithfully, don't be surprised by trouble and testing: God sends sons that please Him into battle.

But here again, other gospels give us much more detail about Jesus' fight with Satan. Here, Mark simply mentions it, and moves on. By doing this, though, Mark isn't a bad storyteller leaving out all the best bits. He's actually pulling something of a Hitchcock here. The movie director Alfred Hitchcock was famous for creating terrifying situations without showing you a bunch of monsters or gore or anything like that. He left a lot of the scary stuff to your imagination, so that you would scare yourself with a thousand monsters in your mind as opposed to the one monster that his mind would shown you.

And so Mark sets the scene, counting on *you* to fill it in with connecting details. Just like the phrase "beloved Son" would trigger "Isaac" in every Jew's mind, so a one on one battle with Satan right after a declaration of God's approval would trigger thoughts of Adam in the garden, thoughts of God's faithful servant Job. Similarly, the ministering angels should remind you of Elijah, who spent forty days in the wilderness after his great victory over Baal, after God sent water to wash the world, and the angels ministered to him. That's 1 Kings 19.

And only Mark out of all the gospels mentions that Jesus was with the wild animals. The Church has come up with two major interpretations of this little phrase: one connects to Adam, who named the animals, and whose sin shattered the peace of paradise and caused a curse to fall on the rest of creation which will not be rolled back until the new creation. In the new creation, as Isaiah says, the wolf will dwell with the lamb, the lion will eat straw like the ox, and a little child will lead them. Maybe that's the picture here: Jesus is restoring the peace of all creation.

But the second interpretation runs through King David: how did that Son of God prepare for his kingdom? By overcoming the wild animals as a shepherd in the wilderness, defeating the lion and the bear in preparation for becoming a warrior king among men. Here we have Jesus preparing for *His* kingdom, so maybe that's what it means that Jesus was with the wild animals.

But all Mark says is that Jesus was “with” the animals. Not *against* the animals. Not *caring* for the animals. We don’t know whether they are *attacking* him like Satan, or *ministering* to him like the angels, and I actually believe that’s because Mark wants us to have *both* of these connections in our minds, and more: Daniel’s lions, Abraham’s ram in the thicket, Elijah’s ravens, and so on.

With all these details, Mark is introducing Jesus as the embodying and fulfilling all of Israel’s greatest stories. Everything that God had done for His people, He was preparing to do again through this Beloved Son. So over lunch today, read through this section again, naming all the Bible stories that you can think of that connect, and don’t stop until you have at least twelve! That’s how you will be prepared to understand Mark’s gospel, the story of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.

And as you consider today’s text, think about this: through the love of God, we are children of God, sons in the Son, because we’ve been united to Christ by faith. So be encouraged: God sends His angels to minister to His Son, and He gives His angels charge over you, too. You might feel like you are alone in the wilderness, but you are not out of reach of God’s ministering servants.

As you meditate on what it means to be with the wild animals, remember God’s protection and God’s goal for harmony between man and beast. God made us to be with the animals. What does that mean for you this week?

And as you battle against sin and Satan this week, remember that you aren’t facing trouble because God hates you; but because He is well-pleased with you. You are fighting under His smile, not His frown.

And parents, especially dads, learn good parenting from God the Father: before He sends His Son out to fight, He assures Him of His approval. God calls you to ask your children to do things that seem very hard to them. They need to know that your pleasure in them doesn’t rest on their performance, so make it a point this week to let your children know that you are delighted in them, and do it before they start, and not just at the end.

And most importantly, realize that whatever you find to imitate in this passage, ultimately, it isn’t about you. How does this passage show you Jesus? God ripped heaven open and the Spirit descended on Jesus so that you would know that He is God’s beloved Son. So worship Jesus, who was baptized for you, who opened the heavens for you, who battled Satan for you, so that you too could be called sons and daughters of God.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*