

# *Sermon-Based Study Guide*

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*January 3, 2010*

**Sermon Title: *The Beginning***

**Texts: Mark 1:1-8 and Isaiah 40:1-11**

A new year often brings the feeling that we can have a new beginning. Resolutions to diet, exercise, quit smoking, go back to school, or change one's lifestyle are common. It's about new beginnings. The Gospel According to Mark opens with the promise of a new beginning. Good news is beginning to unfold among the people of Israel – good news of God's rule coming into the world.

## **I. Start It – Connecting With One Another**

What “New Years Resolutions” have you made? What hope underlies peoples’ resolutions?

## **II. Study the Text –Read the Gospel of Mark 1:1-8**

**Introduction:** The Gospel of Mark is the earliest written of the four gospels. The opening verses assume an understanding of Israel's history that includes Jerusalem being overtaken and exiles carried off to Babylon in 587 B.C., exiles returning 70 years later (beginning in 538 B.C.), 400 years without a prophet sent from God, surrender to the Roman General Pompey in 63 B.C., and the building of a new temple in Jerusalem – a ploy of Herod to further control and contain the leaders of Israel. It was a tumultuous history that left the people of Israel waiting and hoping for good news about the promised deliverer – God's Anointed One, the Christ.

- 1) Try to imagine yourself among the people of Israel, first century A.D. How would verse 1 cause you to react with some kind of hope and anticipation (Remember the word “gospel” is literally “good news”)?
- 2) Mark writes “the beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ” then in verses 2 and 3 he moves to the prophetic hope of a messenger who comes in advance of the Christ presented in Isaiah 40:3, and Malachi 3:1. Look at those verses. How do these prophecies serve as part of the beginning of the good news? What do they promise? What hope do they give the people? How does Mark's introduction rekindle that hope?
- 3) Mark introduces John the Baptist in verses 4-6. Look at 1 Kings 17:1-6. How does John's description compare to Elijah's?
- 4) Verse 4 begins, “And so John came...” How does Mark connect John the Baptist with both Elijah and the messenger promised in Isaiah and Malachi?
- 5) Notice where John the Baptist is preaching and baptizing – in the wilderness east of Jerusalem. If the center of Jewish religious life was the temple in Jerusalem but now John is out in the wilderness – and the people are flocking to him there – what does this suggest about “the beginning of the good news” in relation to Jewish religion?

**Note:** It may not be as clear to us as it would have been to those reading Mark's gospel for the first time, but the good news of Christ is unfolding in the wilderness. One would expect this good news to be unfolding or beginning in the temple in Jerusalem. Mark seems to be setting the stage for the fact that the good news of Jesus Christ is something bigger than and not contained by Jewish religion, ritual, and tradition.

- 6) How does John's "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (verse 4) prepare people for the coming of the Christ?
- 7) Finally, look at verses 7-8. What is the essence of John's message? What unique thing will be done by this one who is to come, according to verse 8? Take a look at Joel 2:28. God says "I will pour out my Spirit on all people..." What does this imply about the one who is to come, who will "baptize (the word can denote "pour out" or "pour into") you with the Holy Spirit?"

### **III. Apply It -Reflect and Respond**

**Reflect:** The coming of Jesus Christ fulfills the promise of the prophets and expectation of God's people. To prepare for it, John called people to repent - turn from sin and self-will, and turn toward God's Anointed One. Are there ways you need to repent today? How can you turn toward Jesus more wholeheartedly in this new year?

**Respond:** As you recall your baptism (if you were an infant you can do so with imagination) prayerfully ask God to turn your heart from everything that would keep you distanced from the Lord and to turn your heart toward Jesus. Acknowledge your falling short of God's perfection. Accept forgiveness. Let your resolve to live closely to Jesus be deepened by God.

### **IV. Pray It - Responding in Prayer**

**Prayer Requests:** How can your group pray for you?

**Prayer for our Community and World:** Please pray for Good Shepherd to be faithful to do what Mark has done - proclaim the good news about Jesus Christ - to our friends, colleagues, and neighbors. Ask God to use us to help others become Jesus' disciples who connect with God in worship, grow in faith, and serve others in love.

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*To tell Jewish people that they had to be baptized or repent the same way non-Jews (converts to Judaism) did would have been offensive, because it challenged the prevalent Jewish belief about salvation. Most Jewish people thought that if they were born into a Jewish family and did not reject God's Law, they would be saved. John told them instead that they had to come to God the same way non-Jews did... everyone has to come to God on the same terms.*

Craig S. Keener in *The Bible Background Commentary*