

12/6/2020

“Messengers” Mark



### Mark 1:1-3

1 The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,  
2 as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way”—

3 “a voice of one calling in the wilderness,  
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.’”

Special Music: “Go Tell It On the Mountain” Pentatonix  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJ15s6nha94>

**Beginning on April 2, 1860 one of the most unique messenger services the world has ever known moved mail from Missouri to California. This short lived messenger service, employing horses and mounted riders in relay teams, captured the hearts and imaginations of all Americans as it greatly reduced the time to get a message from the East Coast to the West Coast. It cost a dollar, about \$20 in today's money, to send a letter by Pony Express. The service became even more significant as the Civil War broke out and the demands for faster communication increased. The Pony Express was originally operated by the Central Overland California and Pikes Peak Express Company, but was bought out by Wells Fargo in early 1861. Although people heavily invested in the service, the cost of operations far outpaced its income. As telegraph poles were erected around the riders as they raced their ponies across the prairie, the Pony Express ended its eighteen-month existence on October 26, 1861. In its short life span, it proved the need and led the way for faster communication between the coasts of North America. It provided fodder for the pens of writers as they told tales of the old west and living life on the edge as these young men drove their steeds across the prairie and through the mountains. Because it was so dangerous, many of the ads calling for riders were directed at orphans who had little to lose and much to gain. The stories and the posters fascinated the minds of young boys dreaming of living a life of danger, excitement, and passion. Every boy wanted to be a rider for the Pony Express.**

From foot runners in Greece, Rome and the jungles of Africa, to horse riders, freight wagons, tall ships, telegrams, trains, trucks, telephones, radios, cargo ships, airmail, mistles, satellites, television, cell phones and the internet, man has been on a constant quest to deliver information from one location to another in the quickest and most accurate way possible. Where once it might take months and sometimes years to get a message delivered, today messages are almost instantaneous, even to the remotest corners of the earth. Most of us live for messages. “How is Aunt Sadie doing?” “Have you heard the latest news?” “Haven’t heard from Joe in a while. Maybe I should check in on him.” “Look, Judy sent me a postcard! Can you believe it?” If someone sends us an actual letter, we can hardly wait to read it. And today, in spite of all the electronic delivery systems, bike messengers still take their life in their hands, dodging traffic and pedestrians, to deliver messages and packages in New York City.

Messengers are important. They keep us informed. They are the purveyors of all kinds of information in both times of plenty and times of hardship. When Mark quotes Isaiah by saying:

**“I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way”—  
“a voice of one calling in the wilderness,  
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.’”**

he is starting the Gospel of Mark by telling us that something extraordinary is about to happen. It is so very extraordinary that God is sending a messenger specifically for this event and that this messenger is being sent to us to prepare us for the arrival of God's chosen one; the Messiah.

The Gospel of Mark is believed to have been written around 70 AD and was the first gospel to appear. It is considered to have been a resource for Matthew and Luke when they wrote their gospels.

There is an old joke where someone asks the rhetorical question, "Who is buried in Grant's tomb?" When we talk about the author of The Gospel of Mark, it may seem that we are being somewhat rhetorical when we ask, "Who wrote the Gospel of Mark?" While it is traditionally held and that there is evidence to suggest that The Gospel of Mark was written by John Mark, the companion of Paul, there are many modern theologians that believe that it was only attributed to John Mark in order to give it credibility. I personally believe that it was written by John Mark, but I am not sure that the evidence completely supports that conclusion

The Gospel of Mark is nestled between the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. There were many in the early church that believed that Matthew's Gospel was written first, which is why it appears first, and Mark appears second. When we look at all

four gospels, we note some strange differences. Not discrepancies. Not contradictions. Just differences. For instance, Matthew talks about the lineage of Joseph, even though he was not the biological father of Jesus. Matthew goes on to talk about the Magi, the Wise men. The Gospel of Luke, the third Gospel, talks about the lineage of Mary and tells us the story of the shepherds and the Angels.

The Gospel of Mark, which is sandwiched in between the two, doesn't talk about the nativity at all, but instead begins with the story of John the Baptist appearing as the messenger in the wilderness, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah. It is the time of Jesus' baptism and the beginning of His three-year ministry. We know that John was 6 to 8 months older than Jesus. Jesus is already around thirty years old when the story starts in Mark.

Each of the four gospel writers, starts the story at a point in time that they think is the most significant place to start the story. It does not mean that one is right and the others are wrong. And while we may think it odd that Mark starts with the story of John the Baptist's ministry, John begins the story of Christ with the creation of the universe.

**So why even talk about Mark in our Christmas messages if he doesn't even mention the nativity? After all, Christmas is all about the birth of Jesus, is it not?**

**Each of the four gospel writers, starts the story at a point in time that they think is the most significant place to start the story, Mark included. And Mark did not have the benefit of the Gospels of Matthew, Luke or John. We have to remember that John the Baptist was born before Jesus was born and he was the Herald for the coming Messiah, so, it seems logical in a sense that the story can start here.**

**Verses 4-8 of the first chapter of Mark say this:**

**4 And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.**

**5 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.**

**6 John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.**

**7 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.**

**8 I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."**

John the Baptist was born a Levite. We know this because Luke tells the story of Zachariah, John the Baptist's father, who was a Levite and was serving in the temple when the angel of Lord appeared to him and told him that his elderly wife Elizabeth was going to have a child. But we should note that we don't find any reference for John the Baptist serving in the Temple or performing regular priestly duties. Instead, we find him living and serving God in the wilderness by doing ministry where there is no temple. We should also note that John is serving a large flock. We see this clearly in verse 5.

**The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him.**

I don't want to read too much into what is being said, but I find it very interesting that the people in and around Jerusalem did not seem to be getting what they needed spiritually from the temple in Jerusalem. Instead, they sought out John in the wilderness to meet their spiritual needs. This is a different approach falling well outside the norm. We are seeing a change in the way ministry is being done. The message is being taken to the people rather than expecting the people to show up at the temple to hear the message. John is performing outreach in a new and significant way. There are no front row seats. There is no preference for status. It is a way of doing ministry that Jesus will continue when He arrives on the scene.

**We also learn in verse 5 that John is meeting their spiritual needs at three distinct levels.**

- 1. He is encouraging them to confess their sins. He is wanting them to admit before God that they had failed God; that they are not being obedient to His commands.**
- 2. He was baptizing those who confessed. Baptism is not a Christian invention. There are many cases in the Old Testament where people are involved in ritual cleansing. This ritual cleansing is referred to as Tevilah. Tevilah was a full body immersion in water (or, in some cases, blood) as a representation of the washing away of sinful or unclean practices and usually involved a priest.**
- 3. The third thing that John is doing for these people is acting as a messenger to let them know that, although they are welcome to come to him for their spiritual needs, there is one that is greater than him that is coming, and that someone is far more qualified to serve them as priest because he will baptize them with the Spirit. This is not a new message. But it is a message telling them that the time is at hand. That the Messiah that they have been waiting for for so long for is soon to arrive.**

**There is something else significant about messengers. Although these days, we treat the messenger as simply the deliverer of news, throughout history messengers have often been held responsible for the content of the message that they delivered. If a king did not like the message he received, he might end the**



life of the messenger. If the people are excited and happy with the message that they receive, they might raise the messenger up as a hero. Neither scenario was appropriate, but it still often held true. Many a prophet's life was held in the balance of the message that he or she delivered from God.

And messengers that carried words from God often had unrealistic expectations on how those messages would be received. When Jonah finally gave in and delivered God's message to Nineveh, he fully expected the message to be ignored or rejected. And when it wasn't, he became dejected and upset, even though the acceptance of the message led to repentance and was a great thing.

When Moses delivered the message from God to Pharaoh "Let my people go!" it wasn't well received. Paul was beaten, imprisoned and stoned when he delivered the message of Christ on his missionary journeys. And John the Baptist brought a message of chastisement to Herod for having relations with Herodias, the wife of his brother, John wound up in prison and eventually beheaded for it. The life of a messenger, especially a messenger of God, was extremely dangerous and seldom uplifting. The hours were long, the expectations were high and the trophies almost non-existent in terms of earthly rewards.

But the rewards of God's messengers are not meant to be counted here on earth. We, as disciples, are called to deliver that same message that was delivered by

**our gospel writers. And during this season, we are blessed to also be able to carry the message of Hope, Love, Grace and mercy that was delivered to us with the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

**We shall not flinch with the opportunity to bring that message. The message is one of Joy. And just like the messenger in Luke, the angel of the Lord that appeared to the shepherds claiming with excitement, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”**

**Being a messenger of the Good News is not for the faint of heart. It requires faith, commitment and constant communication with God to be effective. But we are all called to it. It is our purpose as Christians. To deliver the Good News to every corner of the earth. Every country, every state, every town, every street every house, every human being. “For while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”**

**Having this story to tell is a blessing beyond compare. It’s exciting! It’s wondrous! It’s miraculous! To think that the creator of all that we know sent His only son to earth to live for us, die for us, and be raised for us! This is not just a story to be told. It is a story to be shouted from the mountaintops. Joy to the World. Glory to God in the Highest. Alleluia! Praise be to God for this story!**

**Praise be to God for His Gift. Praise be to God for His blessings. And praise God for each and every one of His messengers!**

**AMEN**