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Mark 1:1-11

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*“What Child is this
Who laid to rest
On Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom Angels greet with anthems sweet,
While shepherds watch are keeping?”*

What child is this?

This is the question we'll be asking today...

Who is this child whose birth we celebrate every year?

Why the fuss?

Why the ruckus over Jesus, whose name was as common as they come in his time.

To do this we're going to look to the opening of Mark's Gospel...

A lot of time we focus on John the Baptist in this passage...

But we're going to set our gaze this morning on Jesus...

John the Baptist is pointing away from himself in this passage...

Pointing to Jesus...

So we're going to look where he's pointing.

I invite you to turn in your Bibles to the Gospel of Mark.

We're going to read Mark 1:1-11.

As I read, pay attention to what this says about Jesus.

Hear now the Word of the Lord.

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.’”

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.”

⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

Unlike the other Gospel writers,

Mark does not give us the story leading up to the birth of Jesus.

We don’t hear anything of Mary and Joseph;

No magi from the east;

Mary and Elizabeth don’t get together as mother’s-to-be and feel babies jumping in the womb;

And we don’t hear anything about what Jesus was doing before he was born like we read in John.

We don’t read *any* mention of Jesus as a baby...

Mark just dives right in...

No genealogies...

No manger scene...

His opening is like a slap to the face or a punch to the gut.

It grabs our attention!

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

Maybe it doesn't hit us with as much force almost 2,000 years later.

We tend to be okay missing the opening of things...

Who cares if we miss the opening credits...

They'll fill us in later.

No big deal if we read quickly past the opening words of Mark...

He's just setting up the story of Jesus.

But Mark's first verse is loaded!

And the people of 70AD would have noticed Mark's opening.

It is thought that Mark wrote his gospel in Rome somewhere around the time of 70AD.

This was a crucial time for the Christians and Jews.

It is a time of crisis in the church.

Nero was Emperor of Rome until 68AD.

Under Nero the Christians in Rome were persecuted.

Tacitus, a Roman historian from the first century says,

“Before killing the Christians, Nero used them to amuse the people. Some were dressed in furs, to be killed by dogs. Others were crucified. Still others were set on fire early in the night, so that they might illumine it...” (quoted in *The Story of Christianity*, Gonzalez, 45)

So obviously Christians in Rome weren't feeling all too safe under Nero.

Roman emperors were also known for their propaganda...

There were certain claims made of the emperors that elevated their status...

Claims that elevated them to divine.

One such emperor was Vespasian.

Vespasian came right after Nero in 69AD.

He claimed that the Jewish Scriptures really pointed to him...

That he was the world ruler foretold in the prophecies.

There were stories of divine signs that confirmed his rule...

A vision where a bull comes charging into his living room and bows down before him.

Or the vision of a dog bringing him a human hand, which is a sign of power.

Prophets said that Vespasian would be successful in whatever he put his hand to.

And didn't he have the reputation to prove it?

Vespasian and his son Titus were responsible for bringing an end to the Jewish revolt around this time.

There was an uprising in Judea...

God's people were sick of Roman rule so they rebelled.

After years of fighting the uprising was finally put down.

In 70AD the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed...

God's house...

Brought to ruins.

Emperors had the power.

Theirs was the victory.

And how were God's people to receive this news in Rome?

The symbol of God's presence among his people...

Destroyed!?

And there's this man claiming to be divinely chosen.

What were Christians in Rome to think?

It was a time of crisis in the church.

And can't we relate?

We may not be thrown to the dogs or to the lions...

There aren't too many sane people claiming to be divinely appointed to power...

But we see similar circumstances of crisis.

We see and hear God's name trampled all over the place.

We see God's creation being destroyed by our greed...

And by the way we strip the earth of its resources for our pleasures.

We see people created in God's image living in extreme poverty.

People persecuted for their ethnicity...

For their beliefs...

Gunmen who enter churches and start shooting...

Gunmen firing at crowds of people...

And our faith is shaken.

We question if God is really in control of things.

He has made a lot of promises concerning peace, but it doesn't seem like they're going to be fulfilled anytime soon...

Peace in this world...

And peace in our lives.

It's a lot easier to give our devotion to the powers of the day...

To powers that we know are there...

And will get things done in our time.

Money and control and security...

We give our devotion to the powers of the day...

They bring us peace and assurance.

Sure it may be temporary and fleeting, but it's better than the alternative.

Our faith is shaken...

Our life is in crisis...

And we wonder if God is in power...

Who is reigning?

To this Mark says:

The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Mark's 1st century audience would read this differently than we read it.

Listen to the Priene Calendar Inscription that was written about the Great Augustus Caesar...

These are the types of things they probably have in their mind living in 1st century Rome.

This inscription gives the reason for shaping the calendar around Augustus Caesar's life:

Reason 1: Providence...has set in most perfect order by giving us
Augustus...**sending him as a savior, both for us and for our descendants, that
he might end war and arrange all things...**

Reason 2: **Since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the
good news for the world that came by reason of him.**

Mark uses some of these same words in the opening verse.

Our Christian word for "gospel" or "good news" comes from the same word used here for the emperor.

This was a word already in common usage.

Remember that the emperor was thought of as being divine.

So any news from the emperor was "good news"...

It was news from the gods...

news of his birth;
news of his coming of age;
news of his taking power;
news of his victory in battles;

This was all good news...

The gods were speaking through this one man...

This divine ruler.

So when Mark's readers come to the opening line they're probably expecting it to say:

The beginning of the good news of Nero;
The good news of Vespasian, or any other emperor...
Son of god.

What Mark does is take language used for Caesar...

And he attributes it to Jesus.

Jesus is the divine ruler.

Jesus is this figure of supreme authority.

He is the messiah.

And Mark draws out the authority of Jesus not only in our passage but throughout his whole book:

He's the one who drives out evil spirits;
 He's the one who heals the leper, and the paralytic;
 He's the one the people follow;
 The one who calms the storm;
 The one who raises the dead...
 And feeds the hungry.

And back to our passage...

Yes this Old Testament prophecy is concerning the forerunner to Jesus...

John is the messenger who comes as God's prophet...

He is Elijah of the New Testament...

The man sent from God...

But what does John say?

"There's one coming after me!"

"One more powerful than me!"

"Compared to this guy, I'm not even worthy to be a servant."

"I may be sent from God, but I'm not worthy to untie this guy's sandals."

"I'm just here to prepare you for his coming."

And immediately after this we're given this beautiful picture of Jesus' baptism.

Jesus comes up from the waters of the Jordan and sees the sky open up.

No one else in the scene can see it...

We're told that Jesus sees it...

But as outside readers we're given the inside scoop.

Jesus sees the Spirit descend on him and hears these words:

"You are my Son, whom I love."

What child is this, we ask?

Who's laid to rest on Mary's lap?

For who are we preparing in this Advent season?

This, this is Christ the King.

This, is Jesus, the Messiah.

The Son of God.

The one with unprecedented authority and power.

The one sent from God.

God gives us Christ as the everlasting king.

This is the one sent into the history of humanity.

Jesus, born of a woman.

Jesus, born of the Spirit of God...

Stepping into our situation.

And coming to make all things right.

In our candle liturgy earlier Hank read that "peace is elusive."

We live in this tension...

Where peace *is* elusive.

We celebrate in anticipation the birth of Christ at Christmas...

Christ has brought peace to us all...

By his blood and sacrifice we are made right with God.

We do have peace that surpasses all understanding...

And yet we live in a world where peace is still elusive.

We cannot expect to be free from fear, violence, pain and shame on this side of Christ's second coming.

We still feel the unrest as we wrestle with sin.

We still hurt from broken relationships...

And betrayed trust.

We hurt with others who are struggling to find their way...

We struggle with those for whom peace is also elusive.

And yet we are assured that Jesus Christ is the Lord.

Jesus Christ is the Messiah and King.

There is no one with more power and authority...

And this is the one who loves us...

The one who cares for his people.

We may be tempted to feel like God has lost power and control...

We may be tempted to devote ourselves to these other forms of power and authority...

But we know that the reign of Christ is eternal.

We know that Christ reigns now...

And so we wait...

This Advent season we wait with confidence and ready ourselves for His coming.

And we prepare ourselves for the glorious Advent of our long-awaited King.

Pray with me.