

... but who does God say that I am?

Mark 1:1-11

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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 before thy face, who shall prepare thy way; 3 the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight -- " 4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey. 7 And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." 9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; 11 and a voice came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased."

What is the sound that people would have heard in their minds as the title of Mark's Gospel was read? That's right [a trumpet sound](#).

Because "Gospel" was a word that was familiar to anyone in Jesus' day. When people heard the Roman trumpet blast they knew that people were being called out to assemble and hear "good news". The Roman soldier charged with making the announcement had ridden up to the city and gates and he would proclaim: I announce you good news.... Gospel ... Rome has been victorious, or an heir has been born to Caesar.

The people of Israel also knew this word, Gospel, from their Scriptures. The prophet Isaiah especially uses it to talk about the proclamation not of the victory of Caesar but about the victory of God! 'Get up to a high mountain, herald, and proclaim good news -- the Gospel -- our God has been victorious in battle and our God reigns.'

And that's where the book that you have in your hands starts: Here is where you start reading the proclamation of good news of the victory of our God at the hands of Jesus, whose Hebrew name is Joshua, the Lord's anointed. Yes, just as there was a man named Joshua who, after Moses had led the people in the wilderness for 40 years, led the people into the promised land with great victories over the peoples of that land, so, too, here now comes a latter-day Joshua, the Lord's anointed. Your heart is stirred, and you are ready to hear what this new Joshua will do. You can almost hear the trumpet blast in your mind as you get ready for the proclamation of victory!

And then the writer turns not to this man Joshua, whom you and I know by his Greek name, Jesus, or to John the Baptist but to Isaiah, the prophet of good news. Because Isaiah knew something of good news in his own day, a day that came at the end of a century and a half of civil war that pitted the northern Israelites against their southern brothers in Judah. Isaiah had seen with his own eyes the great defeat of Israel at the hands of the powerful Assyrian empire, and how they had been carried off captive to the distant lands of Assyria. He had seen how it had happened, as Israel, time and again denied the Lord who alone could give them victory. But, he had also seen how God gave victory to Judah under king Hezekiah, when Hezekiah bowed before the Lord and walked humbly with him. Isaiah witnessed the power of the Lord to send his holy angel and defeat 185,000 powerful Assyrian soldiers who had marched against Judah but who were stopped and defeated even before they could reach Judah.

And so, now, in this book that you have in your hands, the author begins this new proclamation of the good news of God's victory by recalling once again the words of Isaiah: 'Look, listen... Behold, I am sending my messenger before you. He is going to prepare your way. That is his voice that is crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, the one true God, so that all roads will lead straight to him?'

As I left you pondering last week: Do you think, just possibly, that the author of this Gospel does this because he knows that the people of Israel are again going to see the hand of God move in great power and victory against their enemies, the enemies of God, so that once again we can trumpet the victory of God to proclaim to all the world: our God rules? Of course they are!

Something is once again stirring out there in the wilderness, that place where the people had followed Moses for some 40 years. Something is stirring and a voice is rising.... prepare ye the way of the Lord, prepare for the victory of our God!

And now, here, this week, we meet the man behind that voice. John the Baptist. There he is. He certainly is a prophet, because he's clothed in the way that Zechariah the prophet had identified prophets, dressed in fur (Zech 13:4). He has no fixed address, and is a true wanderer, eating simply what he can find, locusts and tree sap that he scrapes from desert trees. He's like all the prophets, starting from the days of Moses, and here he is in the desert gathering the people of Israel around him.

But, he's doing something different from what Moses did. Because where Moses saved the people from Egypt without getting them wet -- as they walked through the dry land of the Red Sea -- here John is summoning people out into the desert of Judah where, with the minimal water that one can find there, he is drowning people. That's what the word "baptize" means. The word "baptize" a Greek word that we have borrowed in English. The question that you need to ask yourself is: what did it mean to a Greek speaker when he heard it? When a 1st century person heard that Greek word "baptize" here's what he or she heard: a ship is at sea and a sailor loses his footing, falls off the ship, and plunges into the water, never to be seen again. What happened to that sailor? ... He was "drowned", right? Well, the word that was used to describe what happened to the man is the word that we have here: drowned. John was calling people into the desert to be drowned -- ironic, isn't it? A place where there is barely any water. And here you must come to drown as the Jordan river heads downstream into the Dead Sea!

That is, here you must come to die. And people do, from all around Judah and its capital Jerusalem. All these faithful southerners who have seen the Lord's victory come out to John to die. Why? To get ready to be raised to a new life, because a new day is coming. What they are living in Jerusalem is not the life that God had promised them in the new land. But John is promising: die here and get ready for a new day coming. Because the one through whom that new day is coming is coming to you here! A new Joshua, who is going to take you into the promised land. John is very clear that that new Joshua is not going to be another prophet: "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie." So the people come to John in the desert knowing that they are offering themselves in preparation for God's great victory over those who now control their land. They do so by knowing that they are ready to give up everything in this great battle that lies before them, even give up their lives, to become martyrs in the great victory of God. John is getting them ready to die by asking them to come out to him in the desert and symbolically show their readiness to die by drowning in water, confessing their sins. That new Joshua who is coming, he's going to take them into the heat of battle where they will drown in the awesome power of God's spirit: I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." And Matthew and Luke add: "and with fire".

Oh yes, it's obvious that God is stirring in this land, in the same way that he was in the day of Isaiah and Hezekiah. And it's obvious to these people of Judah who listen to John that just as God was victorious over the Assyrians -- and that was the good news that Isaiah proclaimed -- so now God will be victorious over the enemies of God who occupy the land and he will do so with a mighty display of fire and destruction.

And who is the enemy? Well, it's obvious, isn't it? We all know who the enemy is, they would have said: the Romans. In the opening years of the 1st century, any true Jew would have known who the enemy was.

It would have been as clear to them then as it would be to any true, ardent adherent of Islam today who longs for a day when there is a unified caliphate of Allah across the whole world as there once was. The enemy is obviously the forces of occupation that are keeping that caliphate from becoming reality: especially, America and its allies, including Canada, Britain, Germany, and of course now we know so well: France. And one day, ardent Islamists say, we will hear the trumpet call from the stallion of Muhammad, proclaiming the good news of Allah's victory. These were exactly the words used after this week's attacks in Paris by one of the top officials of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, Harith al-Nadhari, who promised France that if they refused to stop their aggression against Islam, then he said, you will soon hear our "glad tidings" (*besor, akhbar besor*), the Arabic word for Gospel, good news, the great good news of the proclamation of victory, the victory of the forces of Islam.

I'm not sure what I think about being an enemy. Oh, I'm sure that Israelis do, and Jews living around the world do. I'm sure that Christians living in northern Nigeria do. But, as a Christian living here, I actually think that I know more about what I'm supposed to do toward my enemies: I'm told to love my enemies. But, what about being an enemy? About being so hated by

some one who feels that you're keeping him from experiencing the fullness of the Kingdom of God, so hated that he is willing to do anything against even a person like me, or like you. What's that like? Do you know?

I had a taste of it once recently walking through my neighbourhood. I'm told by people who know something about this that my wife and I, and some of you here, live in the second most densely populated Muslim section of Ottawa. Now, most Muslim people living around us seem to me to be quite pleasant, and in my neighbourhood I'll often share a quick hello or smile with them.

But, one day, walking through the neighbourhood, I came on a group of young men, talking in a very animated way in Arabic. I know enough Arabic to know that it was Arabic and could pick up a few words here and there. But as I drew closer, they looked over at me and suddenly got very quiet in their talk. And as I passed near them, one of them, perhaps coincidentally perhaps not, turned toward me and spat right in front of where I was walking. Then, he looked at me with a sneer.

Wow. well, of course I wasn't phased in the least. ... Come on, of course, I was. What were they talking about? I can only suppose. What did the one man mean by his action? I can only suppose. But I would have to be naive beyond belief not to know from the action and the sneer that I was not welcome, and that perhaps I was even an enemy. I probably walked on a bit faster after that.

What do forces of occupation feel around such people? Probably something very similar to what I felt with the added threat that there could be bombs or snipers ready to act on the enmity that is directed against them.

Vast numbers of Jews of the first century were like those young men that I passed, burning with a desire to see a restored and unified kingdom of David and Solomon, a Temple purified of any foreign pollution, and above all the defeat of great and powerful Rome. To them the enemy was clear: it was Rome. The Jews knew it, and the Romans knew it. That's one of the reasons why Romans kept as much to themselves as they did, usually in their garrisoned cities, venturing out only when it was safe to do so, or in the company of faithful Jews who would cover for them.

Not surprisingly, the day of Jesus saw a number of leaders arise who pretended to be the Messiah, ready to lead Israel into battle against Rome and Rome's Israelite allies, even as David had led Israel against the Philistines. And not surprisingly, the people who went out into the wilderness expressing their willingness before John to lay down their lives to achieve victory, were stirred in their hearts. They were ready, and they could taste victory! Probably the first young men that Jesus gathered to himself had the same vision when they heard Jesus.

And then one day, out there in that desert, the Messiah, the anointed one of God, did appear. John saw Jesus, the new Joshua. John knew that the time had come. Jesus came down into the water and was drowned by John in the water that was there, expressing his own willingness to die for the Kingdom. Little did anyone know at that point how true that would be!

And then, as if to confirm the people's expectations, when Jesus came out of the water's of death, something happened. When Jesus came up out of the water, John looked up and the skies opened up and John and everyone there saw the Spirit of God descending on to Jesus and resting on him as a dove rests on statue or a rock. And then John, and assuredly everyone else who was there that day, heard a voice from out of the sky: "You are my beloved Son, and I am very pleased with you."

These weren't just any words. These were words that John knew. They were echoes from that same prophet Isaiah: "my son, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him, [and] he will bring forth justice to the nations. ... 4 He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law. 5 Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out ... 8 I am the LORD, that is my name ... 13 The LORD goes forth like a mighty man, like a man of war he stirs up his fury; he cries out, he shouts aloud, he shows himself mighty against his foes. ... 17 They shall be turned back and utterly put to shame, who trust in graven images, who say to molten images, "You are our gods." (Isaiah 42)

These words were similar to the words that king David had heard spoken of him, words that he recorded in Psalm 2: "7 I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my son, today I have begotten you. 8 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. 9 You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.""

Well, there we go. This confirms it, doesn't it? God is telling us who this new Joshua is: he's God's son, even as David heard himself called God's son, someone who is set to break the power of the nations with a rod of iron and to restore Israel.

And so the stage is set, isn't it? What comes next? The people knew what was coming next and they responded as one: 'We ride on Jerusalem in the morning... to the defeat of Rome and her allies... and to declare the kingdom of God has come in power and our God reigns!' Probably a cheer went up from the faithful gathered there in the desert: God is great! Our God is great!!

And so because the people expected their messiah to do this, that's exactly what happened, right? The next day Jesus would ride up to the gates of Jerusalem, followed by the faithful band that has gathered in the wilderness. He would blow the trumpet and that gates of the city of Jerusalem fall before him. Then he would enter the city and slaughter the Roman troops gathered there, along with the puppet Jewish administration in the city. And the people would cheer again proclaiming: God is great! Long live King Joshua, the son of David.

No, nothing of that happened. Not the next day. Not ever. Because God's plans are not man's plans ... and who Jesus is was not who the people wanted him to be nor even who they thought God was telling them that he was. And thanks be to God that he was not! For if he had been Christians would be proclaiming the same gospel of spilling blood that has filled the ears of so many people living in the Middle East, and Africa, and Asia for centuries, and still does.

But there is an enemy out there. But, it's not who the people thought it was. It may not even be who you think it is. But, next week, we'll begin to see who the enemy really is and what the proclamation of victory that you hold in your hands really means, the greatest victory ever.