**December 4th, 2023- Bible Study**

**Scripture: Mark 1:1-8**

**1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.**

Mark is a concise, punchy writer. He moves quickly, and writes in a rougher way than some of the other scripture writers.

Like Genesis, and the Gospel of John, Mark begins with a “beginning”, but this beginning isn’t “the” beginning of the world, it is the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The word “gospel” (euangeliou) literally means to bring a “good proclamation”, and we often sum it up in the term “good news”. And this isn’t just any good news; it is Jesus Christ’s good news, and Mark is here to proclaim it.

There are strong echoes here of a text found about the Roman emperor Octavian which says: “the birthday of the god was for the world *the beginning of joyful tidings* which have been proclaimed on his account.” Mark is clear that Jesus stands in opposition to the kings of this world, and that this news is a big deal. He is also telling us who Jesus is.

Although he doesn’t say it explicitly here, Mark is saying that Jesus, too, is a king. And his coming isn’t just looking back at a birth in history, but looking forward to what he is still doing. This kind of good news wasn’t an everyday occurrence, it was reserved for world-altering events that would introduce a radically different way of understanding and seeing the world.

The title “Christ” is also important. Christ isn’t Jesus’ last name; Mark is alerting his readers that this Jesus is the chosen one that God has been promising through the prophets. The anointed one that generation after generation has waited for is here. God’s son has come to earth.

That title “the Son of God” is also very important. Although Jesus does speak about God choosing and adopting his people as his children, there is a special way in which Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is a unique son of God, no other is like him, because Jesus *is* God. This is made clear in John’s Gospel where he speaks of Jesus as the “Word” of God, saying, “In the beginning, was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word, *was* God.” Jesus is God’s son, and he is God.

**2As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:**

**“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you;
he will prepare your way.
3A voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight!”**

Mark makes it very clear that he is connecting Jesus directly to the Old Testament prophesies that spoke of the one who was going to come and bring comfort to God’s people. They had endured many hard years because of their unfaithfulness to God, but now God was coming to bring forgiveness and freedom.

Here again, we see Jesus being called the “Lord”, which is most commonly how the scriptures speak about God, but also plays to the theme of readying for a king. In preparation for a king’s arrival, tremendous work would be one to raise valleys and level hills to make a straight and flat path for the king to travel in on.

Mark is introducing John here as the divinely chosen messenger who is getting people ready for Jesus. He is taking this prophesy from seven hundred years prior, and telling the people that the time of waiting is over: the messenger is preparing the way for the king who is to come.

**4John came baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.**

The wilderness is a powerful space in the scriptures. It is where Jesus will later go and be tempted, it is where the Israelites spent forty years wandering, and it is where God chooses to have his messenger share the news that the Lord is coming.

One might expect important news to be shared in a central place. Perhaps the temple, or the center of the city. But God chooses to send John to a place that people will have to seek him out to hear the message, and seek him they do.

Many people come and hear the message that John is proclaiming about a washing of their sins. This washing is a symbol of their turning away from sin, and being made clean by God, and was a common practice of Jewish people in that time.

God gathers his people on the Jordan river, the same river that they crossed to leave the wilderness all those years ago, and once more, he is giving them the promise of something new.

**6John wore a camel-hair garment with a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey.7He proclaimed, “One who is more powerful than I am is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. 8I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”**

John is not a gentle figure. He is a rough and tumble, cut-straight-to-the-point kind of guy. The kind of man you can trust to tell the truth, but you may not like what you hear. He lives off of the land, and appears to have placed himself completely in God’s care. His clothing, food, and living are all as humble as can be. He knows that he isn’t the main attraction, he is a signpost to what God is doing.

Jesus himself will later say that of all those born of a woman, none is greater than John the Baptist, but John realises his place. He recognises that he is a messenger sent to let people know that there is someone else coming. Someone so wonderfully powerful that John doesn’t even consider himself to be worth of performing the humblest acts of service to him. John knew that his baptizing was necessary, but it was nothing compared to what Jesus was going to do. Jesus would wash not just with water, but with the power of the Holy Spirit.

John sees what we struggle to see. We so often consider that we do God a favor by serving him, and think that by our acts of service we can earn his favour, or that he would owe us. But John shakes us out of our pride and self-admiration and re-orients us to the one who is so much greater than we are.

Jesus humbled himself as well, but that doesn’t mean that we should abuse his humility. Although Jesus made himself lowly for us, he is still the God whose Word created the universe with less effort than it takes for us to breathe. Our worthiness comes from the gracious gift of God, not of our own goodness or merit. John’s words shock us from our pride, and give us the gift of seeing Jesus for who he truly is: the Christ, the Son of God, our Lord.