

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: BREATHLESS**

(studies in the Gospel of Mark)

#### **Meet Jesus**

(Intro; Mark 1:1-13)

Study #1

#### **Introduction: Breathless...**

Over the course of the next several months I am eagerly anticipating some good times in the woods.

First comes a trip to Colorado with Kathy in June, one that will include some great hikes into wild places. Then, in July I'm going with some of Northwest's young adult men to the San Juan Mountains of southwest Colorado for a few days of backpacking. In August, I'll go with my sons for a week-long trek through Wyoming's Wind River Range. And this fall, Erin and I will take another great trip together to some beautiful Texas wild place.

The prospect of these ventures leaves me breathless. I'll soon be poring over maps, planning routes, and setting up itineraries.

Once on the trail, I predict that I'll be having the time of my life. I find few things as satisfying as trekking into the mountains for a few days or a few hours with great companions.

After I return from these various outings I'll regale you - and anyone else with whom I come in contact - with stories of wildlife encounters, gorgeous scenery, adventures with weather, and more.

The thought of backpacking to wild places leaves me breathless with anticipation, breathless in the moment, and breathless to share afterwards.

It is with similar thoughts in mind that I have titled our new series of studies in the Gospel of Mark, "*Breathless.*"

As we make our way through Mark's Gospel, we are breathless in anticipation to learn about history's most interesting Person; we'll breathlessly watch the breath-taking scope and pace of His life and ministry; and we'll breathlessly follow Him in the details of our lives.

Before we jump feet-first into chapter 1, verse 1, though, let's think together about Gospel literature in general and Mark in particular.

*Mark, among the four "Gospels"*

#### **A new type of literature**

At the time they were written, the type of literature we find in the four Gospels was not much known in the ancient world.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are not exactly biography. And, while they do record the words and deeds of Jesus, they are not quite strict history, either. I think of the Gospels as really well-crafted proclamations of God's truth as revealed in Jesus.

And each of the four Gospels has its own character and distinct "feel."

#### **The four Gospels**

Of the four, John is in a class by itself. John records stories that the other three don't, is arranged differently (around seven miraculous "signs") and excludes a few things that the others include (like parables!).

The other three are called the "synoptic" Gospels, meaning that they see the life of Jesus from a similar vantage point. Despite their differences, when we compare them to John, Matthew, Mark, and Luke look like close relatives.

But Matthew, Mark, and Luke are all different from one another, too. And over the next bunch of Sundays, Mark's Gospel will be our special focus.

### *Considering Mark*

#### Mark was written, accepted early by the church

Since none of the Gospels are dated - none of them are even given much of a general time stamp! - we don't know which of the four came first.

We assume that John was last, written by the Apostle John late in his very long life, near the end of the first Christian century.

But we don't know when Matthew, Mark, or Luke were written.

The best guesses have them all written within twenty to thirty years of Jesus' death. This makes sense, as they were written by eyewitnesses of Jesus or were compiled from eyewitness accounts.

For nearly the first 1800 years of Christianity it was believed that Matthew was written first, and that Mark summarized the longer Gospel of Matthew.

Since the late 1800's, though, it has become popular to believe that Matthew and Luke expanded Mark's condensed accounts, and that Mark was the first account written.

My own view is that all of the Gospel writers wrote from both personal experience (in Mark's case, the experience of Peter) and by relying on a shared body of written and oral tradition circulating among the churches.

The four Gospels and their different telling of the life and times of Jesus came about as a result of the Holy Spirit's work of inspiration in the lives of the four authors.

We do know that Mark was accepted very early by the church as genuine, and most scholars now believe that Mark wrote his Gospel around AD 60-70.<sup>1</sup>

We also know something of the author's life from elsewhere in the New Testament. He is usually referred to as "John Mark."<sup>2</sup>

#### John Mark and his story

##### FROM ACTS

John Mark was a Jewish Christian, whose mother, Mary, owned a home in Jerusalem where the core of the first Christian community met.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps because of his mother's influential position in the church and perhaps in part, too, because he was related to Barnabas, Barnabas and Saul/Paul took John Mark on the church's first ever missionary journey (Acts 13-14).

However, John Mark, a younger man, deserted them as soon as they reached the Asia Minor mainland and returned to Palestine, prompting Paul to refuse to allow John Mark to join them on the Second Missionary Journey.

We also know that following his infamous collapse on that first journey, John Mark became a courageous disciple and was very helpful to Paul in his later life and ministry.<sup>4</sup>

##### FROM THE GOSPELS

We believe that we meet Mark in the Gospels only once, and that is in an odd way near the end of the book he wrote.

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<sup>1</sup> AD 140, Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis.

<sup>2</sup> Fun fact: Mark was often called "stump-fingered" because he had rather small fingers in comparison with the stature of the rest of his body.

<sup>3</sup> It was to this house that Peter came after his miraculous release from prison (Acts 12:12).

<sup>4</sup> See Colossians 4:10; Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4.

In Mark 14, we read of the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. After telling us that the disciples *[50] all left Him and fled* Mark goes on to say that *[51] a young man was following Him, wearing nothing but a linen sheet over his naked body; and they (the soldiers) seized him. [52] But he pulled free of the linen sheet and escaped naked.*

Many (including me) believe that the young man in that story was Mark, and that he inserted this detail into the narrative to let us know that he was an eye-witness to Jesus' life.

Mainly, though, we believe that Mark knew as much as he did about the life of Jesus because he was a close companion of the Apostle Peter.<sup>5</sup>

#### Distinctives of his book

Mark's Gospel is not refined. In fact, it has been called "barbarous" because he uses simple sentence construction and direct speech. But this style results in a very readable book that keeps us engaged. There is a constant flow of action in this Gospel.

It is easy for us to visualize what is happening in the narrative because of Mark's colorful speech.

Some thirty seven times we read the word "*immediately*", a word that contributes to the excitement and movement in the book.

And Mark keeps our interest, too, by including details that the other Gospels omit (he tells us of the presence of a ship's pillow, the name of the blind man Jesus healed: Bartimaeus, and of James and John's nicknaming).

He, more than the others, lets us know about people's emotional responses when they are caught up in the miracles and the stories of Jesus. We hear about people afraid, amazed, stunned, angry, exasperated, indignant and filled with sorrow. He writes realistically - and we appreciate that.

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<sup>5</sup> From an extended quote by the church father, Papias, second century AD. Cited by France, others. There is a 2,000 year old tradition attributing this book's authorship to John Mark.

There is also a unique Roman flair to Mark's book. He, more than the other Gospels, includes Roman/Latin words (legion, centurion, speculator, flagellare, denarius, quadrans) and deals with time and chronology in a Roman, rather than in a Jewish way.<sup>6</sup>

But the theme of Mark's Gospel - from start to finish - is Jesus. We see breath-taking action from Jesus. We stand breathlessly in awe of Jesus. And as we learn more and more about Him, we leave this place to breathlessly follow where He leads us.

The book is breathless from the beginning. In the first verse, there is no verb. Mark's words hit the page with a blunt abruptness.

#### A Breathless Start! (v. 1)

*[1] The beginning<sup>7</sup> of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.<sup>8</sup>*

**Go!**

Here (and elsewhere) Mark is about as subtle as a brick. He doesn't "ease into" his theme. There is no prelude.

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<sup>6</sup> We believe that Mark wrote when Nero was emperor, and that he probably wrote from Rome. During Nero's reign, a great fire spread through Rome, doing terrible damage (some suspected that Nero was responsible for it). Nero had to find a scapegoat, and accused believers in Jesus, calling them "those notoriously depraved Christians." They were tortured and killed in gruesome ways. It is possible that one of Mark's overriding purposes was to encourage faith in an historical context of suffering and martyrdom. When Mark was read to a Christian congregation in Rome, there could be no missing the parallels between their own experience and that of Jesus. He was with wild beasts. He was sent into the wilderness. He was betrayed, as many of them were being betrayed.

<sup>7</sup> Some have seen in "*The beginning*" a veiled reference to the beginning of all things (as John 1:1 is of Genesis 1:2). I think rather that Mark is pointing us to a new beginning of a chapter in God's unfolding drama of redemption seen in the story of Jesus.

<sup>8</sup> Son of God and Christ could be virtual synonyms, but Son of God here probably points to a more developed understanding of Jesus' divine sonship, which the first century church fully grasped.

When you are in the starting blocks, about to run a footrace, you expect the official to bark out, “*On your mark, get set, GO!*” Mark just says, “*Go!*” He’s off to the races from the first word. There is no hesitation and no suspense and nothing to be exceptionally curious about. Mark is unapologetically writing about Jesus. And he calls his writing “gospel.”

## Gospel

“Gospel” was a word common to both Jewish and Roman cultures. The Romans associated “gospel” with the cult of Emperor worship and called his birthday a “gospel” event. A gospel day was a day of great joy.

The Jews saw “gospel” as the announcement of God’s salvation. Gospel heralded something momentous in human history.

Both ideas are present when Mark (or Christians today) uses the term. The Christian Gospel is astounding good news announcing that, in Jesus, everything has changed between us and God.

## Jesus Christ, the Son of God

Mark mentions Jesus in this first verse. And, since Jesus was a very common Jewish name in the first century, he further identifies Jesus as “Christ.”

Not that “Christ” was a last name, like Smith is mine. It was a title, but one that this Jesus claimed for Himself and that others claimed for Him.

Christ is the Greek term describing the Hebrew, “Messiah.”<sup>9</sup> Messiah was the King of Israel that every Jew had been looking forward to for hundreds of years. Messiah had been predicted by Jewish prophets for centuries.

If you said “*Messiah*” to the Jews of the first century, they would think of a king who would reign with justice, a king who would put down enemies (think ROME), a king who would bring peace, a king who was filled with the Spirit of God, and a king who would lead in the ways of God.

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<sup>9</sup> Literally, “the anointed one”

Talk of the coming of the Messiah whetted the appetites of the Jews for the restoration of Israel to the grandeur of the good old days of David and Solomon - and even better days than those.

It is interesting that in the years leading up to the birth of Jesus, Jewish hopes for the coming of the Messiah were running at a fever pitch. Whole communities moved to the deserts (like the Qumran sect, the Essenes, and those who gathered at Masada) to await Messiah’s arrival.

Mark claims, right off the bat, that his Jesus is the long-awaited, exalted Messiah AND that He is the Son of God. He wants us to know from the get-go that Jesus is much more than a man.<sup>10</sup>

With that for a preamble, Mark has whetted our appetites, too. We want to meet the star of the show. So, he introduces us to the man who will introduce us to Jesus.

The role of this “introducer” had been made known centuries earlier by the prophets.

## Before Jesus, John (vv. 2-8)

### Isaiah’s Prophecy (vv. 2-3)

*[2] As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:  
 “BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU,  
 WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY;  
 [3] THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS,  
 ‘MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD,  
 MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.’”*<sup>11</sup>

The Jews clearly understood from passages like this one, that before the arrival of the Messiah, a forerunner would appear on the scene, heralding His coming.

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<sup>10</sup> It is true that there is some question as to whether “*son of God*” is in Mark’s original text. Most scholars, though, believe that the words are genuine, and are not a later gloss.

<sup>11</sup> This is not an exact quote, but rather a conflation of Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 4:5.

This forerunner would not only announce the coming of the Messiah. He would prepare the hearts of the people to receive the King.

And Mark tells us the name of the forerunner: John.

### **John the Baptist's Way of Life (vv. 4a, 6)**

*A man of the wilderness (v. 4a)*

***[4] John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness...***

#### John's birth

We know the story of John's birth from the Gospel of Luke. He was born to Zacharias and his wife, Elizabeth, in their old age. They lived in the Hill Country of Judea. Zacharias was a priest. They loved the Lord.

That story is completely absent from Mark's Gospel.

Here, John is a thirty year old man, all grown up, living in the wilderness. He appears, seemingly, out of nowhere.

#### The wilderness

John had stationed himself near the Jordan River, in a largely uninhabited region. Picture wilderness.

Now, I have never been to the Holy Land, but I have always pictured this region as looking a lot like the Texas Hill Country. That may be a bit too-Texan of me, but from what people have told me (even non-Texans), it's pretty true. Rough terrain. Little water. Scrub trees. Not mountainous, exactly, but pretty hilly.

John lived in this wilderness terrain and looked the part of a wilderness man.

*Elijah-like (v. 6)*

***[6] John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey.***

He dressed like a wilderness nomad. More accurately, he dressed and appeared similar to what we know of the prophet Elijah.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, John is presented as an Elijah-like figure. And that is fitting, because the prophet Malachi predicted that the forerunner of the Messiah would be Elijah.

And what was John doing to prepare for the Messiah's arrival? He was baptizing.

### **John the Baptist's Ministry (vv. 4b-8)**

*Baptizing (vv. 4b-5)*

#### Baptism for the Jews

In most religions, washing with water carries some symbolic meaning. Washing the outside of the body nicely pictures an interior cleansing.

In Judaism, general washings were required for certain ritual acts. And baptism was required of Gentiles who wanted to become Jews. Immersion in the water represented washing away the old pagan ways.

#### John's baptism

***[4b]...John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.***

But John wasn't baptizing Gentiles. He was calling Jews to be baptized - and for the same reason that Gentiles would be baptized.

His baptism invited his fellow Jews to turn to God, renounce sinful ways, and return to life the way God had always intended it to be.

And people were streaming to the Jordan River to be baptized.

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<sup>12</sup> See 2 Kings 1:8.

### Response to John's baptism

*[5] And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.*

So, John has stationed himself at a certain place at the Jordan River, likely closer to the southern end, in the region of Judea. And people were flocking to him. There is a great popular response.<sup>13</sup>

The people sense an urgency to respond to John's call to baptism. They know that he is announcing the coming of the Messiah. God is about to move powerfully. They want to be ready!

And John preaches as he baptizes.

*Preaching (vv. 7-8)*

#### John is eager for the Messiah

*[7] And he was preaching, and saying, "After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals.*

John was a prophet, predicting the soon-to-come arrival of the Messiah. And that is significant because there had not been a prophet in Israel for over three hundred years.

The Messiah is an exalted figure. Way more important than a very important person like a prophet.<sup>14</sup>

And, while he is baptizing in the Jordan River, John tells us that the Messiah Himself is a baptizer!

<sup>13</sup> This is ironic because the response of the Judeans to God's message through Jesus was mostly negative.

<sup>14</sup> John tells us that he - a prophet of God! - would not be worthy to untie the thong of Messiah's sandal, and that was a task that the mightiest noble was not allowed to ask his lowliest to slave to perform.

### The Messiah's baptism

*[8] "I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

John doesn't give us a lot of content to associate with the Messiah's Spirit baptism. But the words evoke images of passion and fire and power!

John's message is all about this one single theme. He is proclaiming the coming of a Person who is great and glorious, the long-promised Messiah.

And with that comment from John, we meet Jesus.

### Jesus in the Wilderness (vv. 9-13)

#### Baptized in the Wilderness (vv. 9-11)

*Coming to be baptized by John (v. 9)*

*[9] In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.*

#### Jesus, from Galilee

THAT is Mark's introduction of Jesus.

In **Matthew** we get stories of magi from the east, a guiding star, and a miracle conception. **Luke** tells us about John's birth, gives us Mary's song, angels singing in the heavens, and shepherds at the stables in Bethlehem. **John** tells us, "*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us...*" and identifies Jesus as the eternal, divine, creative Word.

**Mark** shows this guy named Jesus strolling down from the northern region of Galilee to the Jordan River valley so that He can be baptized by John.

OK. Jesus' walk on to the stage of Mark's Gospel is pretty stark and unadorned.

But how many of you have ever wondered why Jesus - the sinless Messiah/Son of God - came to John for baptism, when John's baptism was one of repentance for the forgiveness of sins??

### Jesus, baptized (!)

Well, look at the people coming to John for baptism in verse five. They are all coming from the south. Crowds are making their way to John.

It is a picture of the nation of Israel doing business with God. They are repenting - and it is a beautiful picture.

Who comes to John in verse nine? One Man. Jesus. Alone.

So, crowds traveling north, en masse, come to John. Jesus traveling south, by Himself, also comes to John.<sup>15</sup>

It is not hard to see that the One, Jesus, takes the place of the many. It's not a stretch to say that Jesus' baptism is a representative baptism. He had no need to repent and had committed no sins requiring forgiveness.

But He doesn't separate Himself from the people He has come to save. He submits to John's baptism to say, in effect, *"I am one with you. You are My people."*

And so Jesus, the One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit, receives baptism from the Baptist. And to show that Jesus was distinct from all others who came to John for baptism, Mark records a few things that happened as He came up out of the water.

Here we have our first "immediately" in Mark.

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<sup>15</sup> Note 1:5 and 1:9. Both sentences are built in exactly the same way, so that the verses correspond, but they exhibit a deep contrast in two respects: (1). In verse 5, Judea and Jerusalem are in view; In verse 9 Nazareth of Galilee is in view, an unpromising region associated with disinterest in the Law of God; (2). In verse 5 all of the people come to be baptized by John; in verse 9 one single representative is introduced, the only Galilean mentioned by Mark who heeded John's call to the wilderness.

### *Signs (vv. 10-11)*

***[10] Immediately coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens opening, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon Him; [11] and a voice came out of the heavens: "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased."***

At no one else's baptism did the heavens open. No one else received the Spirit like a descending dove. No one else got a voice message from God.

These signs at the baptism didn't make Jesus anything other than what He already was. They show Him to be who He truly had always been.

Mark's second "immediately" comes immediately after the first.

### **Tempted in the Wilderness (vv. 12-13)**

***[12] Immediately the Spirit impelled Him to go out into the wilderness. [13] And He was in the wilderness forty days being tempted by Satan; and He was with the wild beasts, and the angels were ministering to Him.***

### *Jesus' experience in the wilderness*

Jesus was already in the wilderness, of course. The part of the Jordan River where He was baptized by John was in the wilderness (v. 4). But now He withdraws away from John and his crowd deeper into the wilderness.

He stays out there forty days, a time stamp that brings to our minds other defining forty day periods in biblical history.<sup>16</sup> While in the wilderness He was tempted by Satan, was with wild beasts, and was ministered to by the angels.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> There were forty days of rain during Noah's flood, forty days on Mount Sinai for Moses getting the Law, and forty years of wilderness wandering for the people of God in Moses' day, among others.

<sup>17</sup> See 1 Kings 19:5-7 for an angel who supplies nourishment for Elijah in the barren wilderness.

We will see Mark's brevity over and over again, but we see it here in spades.

Mark does not report the specific temptations, Jesus' scriptural answers, His victory over the devil, or the end of the temptations. Mark doesn't mention fasting. Mark doesn't mention that the devil left Him after the temptations were passed.

Mark doesn't mention any of that stuff. What he does mention is the involvement of the Spirit of God in Jesus' departure from the Jordan to wilder places.

#### *The Spirit's involvement in Jesus' temptations*

Mark could not be clearer. Jesus was thrust out into the wilderness by the Spirit of God.

The word used to describe this action by the Spirit is very often associated with violence. It is the word that is frequently used to describe the casting out of a demon.

It would not be wrong to say that the Spirit of God cast Jesus out into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan while surrounded by wild animals!

To which we might say, *"What an interesting way to treat the Messiah, the Son of God."*

#### **Conclusion:**

The way we treat royalty was on brilliant display a couple of weeks ago when William married Katherine in Westminster Abbey. We treat royalty with respect. We handle royalty with kid gloves. We "prepare the way for them" - and the way for the royal couple was meticulously prepared. It wouldn't be too much of a stretch to say that they were treated messianically.

Jesus, the true Messiah/Son of God, received no such treatment.

Of course, He had not come to earth to be treated like the royalty He was.

He came to fulfill a devastatingly painful mission that would cost Him everything. And as we move through Mark's Gospel we will watch as people ignore, mistreat, disbelieve, mock, and humiliate Him.

But "immediately" after His Father affirmed His divine Sonship, He received His first lesson in humility and suffering, courtesy of the Spirit of God, the third member of the eternal Trinity, who cast Him into a pitched battle of temptation with Satan.

This is the start of Jesus' descent into greatness. Jesus will never cease to explode our categories about what the Messiah/Son of God will do.

What a Servant! What a Savior!