

Jesus Is Baptized

In Mark's version of the Jesus story, you won't find the genealogy of Jesus, the exile to Egypt or the



Michael K. Olmsted

Temple visit when the boy Jesus impressed the scholars of the Law. The opening words of this shortest of the four gospels confront the flawed ideas of both the Jews and Romans of that day: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," heralded by the startling voice and appearance of John the baptizer (v. 1).

There is a powerful coupling here of the revered Old Testament prophet Isaiah and the arresting wilderness figure of John. Although the Jews observed a variety of "washings" in their ritual laws, they would find it very strange that any Jew – already God's chosen people – would need a rite of baptism. Gentile converts to Judaism? Yes. But not for a son of Israel!

Yet here is John calling God's people to "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (v. 4). Of course this is only the beginning of the challenges and promise that Jesus embodies as God's Messiah. The Romans commonly referred to each new emperor as "good news" for all people. The Jews were fixated on the idea that their Messiah would deliver them from the pagan Roman overlords. Mark announces the day has finally come, but the common expectations of all are about to be overwhelmed by God's grace and the possibility of a new kind of life that cannot be found in rituals, politics, organization or philosophical systems.

Mark declares this Jesus will confront everyone and offer hope to the entire world. John's bold call for repentance within Israel,

coupled with his appearance out of the Dead Sea wilderness and his strange diet and clothing reminded the people of Elijah, who was to usher in the kingdom of God (Malachi 4:5-6; Mark 9:11-13). It is also likely that many thought John would be that prophet. But John put that idea to rest when he declared, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thongs of his sandals" (v. 7). John's words are as extreme as Mark's are compressed, for only the lowliest household slave would use a person's sandal thongs. John goes ever farther as he declares what God's "promised one" will accomplish: "I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (v. 8).

There is a distinctive depth to what it means to be God's people in Mark's clear emphasis on the Holy Spirit. Spiritual life cannot be encapsulated in a religious system. Worship rituals, sacrifices and recited creeds cannot substitute for life-shaping faith in God. Three times Mark points to the work of the Holy Spirit:

- 1) Jesus will baptize you with the Holy Spirit (v. 8)
- 2) When Jesus was baptized by John the Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove (v. 10)
- 3) The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness (v. 12)

The New Testament testifies to the oneness of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We witness in Mark's carefully measured account that Jesus is the promised Messiah, empowered by the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, sent by God into the wilderness of this world to overthrow the power of evil.

Mark is saying that in Christ, God is keeping his promise to bring

us life in the realities of a broken and deceiving world. In order to be "one with us" Jesus had to be "one of us." The Spirit declares that Jesus is "my (God's) Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased" (v. 11). This was the turning point, the beginning of Jesus' public ministry that ends with the cross and resurrection. What a powerful truth for the beginning of a new year ... to know that God loves you so much that Christ would willingly walk into the dangers of this wilderness world on our behalf!

What do you hope most for in 2019? We joke about New Year's resolutions: lose weight, organize our schedule, advance at work, spend more time with family. But are there any spiritual priorities on your list? Will you befriend or help someone facing a life challenge, get active in a Bible study group, help someone who is struggling at work, mend a broken relationship, or show your faith by your actions? Our world is a dark wilderness of angry words, prejudice, selfishness and distrust. The Holy Spirit is your companion in that wilderness. Seek his help and guidance.

Your baptism is a reminder that God loves you and offers you a new beginning. No one is perfect, but God's love is perfect. Start each day of this year asking God's Spirit to reshape you within and show the grace of God to the world through your attitude and lifestyle. Because we are human, we want to see and touch reality, but we need to remember God cannot be reduced to our expectations and feelings. Return to that picture of Jesus standing in the Jordan River while the Spirit of God descends and sends Jesus into the wilderness. Every day you wake up in a wilderness, but remember – Jesus has gone before you!