Mark Lesson 1 (2022)

**A VOICE FROM HEAVEN**

Mark 1:1-13

Key Verse: 1:11

“And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’”

There are four Gospel narratives in the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called synoptic gospels because they contain many similar stories and sayings, which can be set side by side to provide a similar point, different from John’s account. Mark’s account is the first one written among them, and it’s the shortest. But it contains the most facts, including Jesus’ impressive healing ministries, miracles, compassion, confrontation with the Jewish religious leaders, death on the cross, resurrection, and the hope of his return.

By the end of the first century, Christianity was widespread and reached Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire. Most Bible scholars agree that Mark’s Gospel was written around 70 CE (Common Era), after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. The Roman army brutally attacked Jerusalem, killed those who didn’t surrender, including women and children, and the City and its Temple burnt down. Most people, including Christians, felt confused and thought that the world was ending. Mark’s Gospel was written to give the message of hope through Christ Jesus.

During the last two years, we have been through an unprecedented pandemic. Now, as most of us feel that we are getting out of the woods, we are taken aback by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It’s heart-wrenching to see how innocent people have to suffer in pain and sorrow because of this senseless war. Gas price is skyrocketing. It’s almost $ 5 per gallon of oil. Global warming seems to be a more urgent problem than we used to think it was. Facing the harsh reality of this world, we have many reasons to become anxious. Our future seems blurry. We truly need to hear the message of hope through the study of Mark’s Gospel.

Look at verse 1. “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.” This verse appears to be a title for the entire book of the gospel of Mark. “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.” “The beginning of the good news!” Wow! We are tired of hearing so much bad news through the media these days. But Mark’s Gospel is a book about the good news, the good news about Jesus the Messiah. The good news is that God had provided eternal salvation through the ministry of Jesus Christ. And the good news of Jesus Christ is not fake news but the truth.

Unlike Matthew and Luke’s accounts, Mark doesn’t share the story of the birth of Jesus the Messiah (Mt. 1:1-25; Luke 2:1-19). Instead, he starts by saying, “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.” When the Scripture refers to the phrase “the beginning,” it includes various meanings: First, it relates to eternity, like in John 1:1, which states, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Second, it relates to the beginning of the heavens and the earth, like Genesis 1:1, which states, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Third, it relates to the beginning of the good news, like in Mark 1:1, “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.” Mark used the word “the beginning” because when Jesus came to earth and began his ministry, God created something new and provided eternal salvation through his ministry.

Mark introduces Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God. The title ***Messiah*** in Greek is ***Christ***, which means ***“the anointed one.”*** By calling him the Messiah and the Son of God, Mark is declaring Jesus’ divinity. However, during his life and ministry on earth, Jesus never used the title “Messiah” or “the Son of God” for himself. He called himself “the son of man.” How he asked his followers by saying, “Who do you say I am?” When Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah!” he warned his disciples not to tell anyone about him. (Mk. 8:27-30) Why not? We call it a messianic secret. Why did Jesus leave his identity as a messianic secret? It’s because it’s each of us who should answer. **“Who do you say I am?’**

In verses 2-13, Mark records three events that prepared Jesus’ public ministry: *(1) the Ministry of John the Baptist (2-8), (2) the Baptism of Jesus (9-11), and (3) the Temptation of Jesus (12-13).*

***First, the Ministry of John the Baptist (2-8):***Look at verses 2-3. “As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way’ – ‘a voice of one calling in the wilderness, “Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.”’” By quoting the prophecy in the Old Testament (Mal. 3:1; Isa. 40:3), Mark points out that the ministry of John the Baptist fulfilled God’s plan of salvation. The phrase **“Prepare the way”** is repeated twice in these verses. It shows that the main focus of John’s ministry is to prepare people's hearts for the coming Messiah.

So how did John prepare people’s hearts? Look at verse 4. “And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Interestingly, John didn’t minister to the people in the Temple or synagogues. He ministered to them in the wilderness, which was dry and inhabited. It’s often the wilderness where God meets his people, not the Temple.

 So, what did John do in the wilderness? He preached the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Look at verse 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.”It seems that people’s response to John’s preaching was sensational. Even though verse 5 states that the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him, I don’t think every person in Judea and Jerusalem went out to John, but many did. The fact of the matter is that many of them felt that John the Baptism might be the Messiah. So they came to John and confessed their sins out of messianic expectations and fear. I am not sure if they continued in repentance.

The word *“repentance (****metanois****)”* means the change of one’s mind and behavior. It’s a change of one’s whole being, including mind, heart, will, action, and relationship. It’s becoming a new creation day by day. Repentance is not just a one-time thing but a lifelong process. However, it starts with the humble acknowledgment of our sins and confessing them. And that’s what people did when they came to John the Baptist.

In verses 6-8, Mark describes John’s lifestyle as a prophet and his message concerning Jesus the Messiah. Look at verse 6. “John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.” John’s clothing made of camel’s hair was a typical outfit for a holy man in those days. Along with wild honey, locusts were a healthy diet food item in the Near East, high in vitamins and protein. John’s appearance and diet indicate that he was away from a self-indulging lifestyle. He also remained unmarried to be fully dedicated to God’s calling.

We often pray that God may raise many house churches among us. It’s a beautiful prayer topic. But we also know that it’s hard for those who are married and have kids to dedicate themselves to the work of the Lord fully. So if any of you want to serve God fully and are not married yet, don’t feel bad. Marriage is not a Christian mandate. John the Baptist, Jesus, Apostle Paul, Mother Sarah Barry, and many others remained single, and they served the Lord wholeheartedly. Don’t get me wrong. Marriage is a blessing too.

Look at verse 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.” In this verse, John describes the greatness of the Messiah who comes after him. John’s ministry was very successful, and Jesus’ ministry didn’t even start yet. After all, humanly speaking, Jesus was six months younger than him. Yet, John didn’t fall into the illusion that he was superior to Jesus. Instead, he remained humble, acknowledging that Jesus was superior to him because of his divinity.

Another contrast is the baptisms of the two. Look at verse 8. “I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” Mark didn’t explain what the baptism of the Holy Spirit is. Yet it indicates that Jesus’ baptism with the Holy Spirit foreshadows his superior ministry than John’s ministry. John’s water baptism was the baptism of repentance, which is our preparation for the baptism of the Holy Spirit. We are born a new day-by-day through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in us. Without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, our lives would remain dry and empty. But the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ Jesus, dwells in those who repent and trust in him. What great blessings we have through the Holy Spirit.

***Second, the Baptism of Jesus (9-11):*** Look at verse 9. “At that time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.” Jesus didn’t come to John from Judea or Jerusalem, but from Nazareth in Galilee, where he grew up and lived. He underwent John’s baptism not to receive the forgiveness of sins but to recognize John as the forerunner of the Messiah and identify himself with the fallen humankind he came to save.

 In verses 10-11, we also see that God the Father anointed Jesus as the Messiah at the time of his baptism. Look at verses 10-11. “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. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased.’” Here, we see that God the Father endorses his son Jesus as the Messiah/Christ, the Lord’s anointed before launching his ministry.

Two things we notice in the anointing of Jesus as the Messiah: 1) the Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove, and 2) a voice from heaven. According to the Book of Acts, when the Holy Spirit came from heaven upon believers on the day of Pentecost, it wasn’t like a dove. A sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them (Acts 2:1-3) (pic#1). The exhibition of the Holy Spirit appears to be hot, loud, and powerful. But the same Holy Spirit that came upon Jesus is quiet and gentle, like a dove (pic#2). We learn that the Holy Spirit seems to demonstrate his presence in different ways, depending on his will and circumstances.

Jesus also heard a voice from heaven, saying, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” Probably, Jesus and possibly John the Baptist were the only ones who noticed the coming of the Holy Spirit and heard the voice from heaven. Jesus’ baptism and what happened to him during his baptism didn’t change his divine status. In other words, Jesus didn’t become the Son of God at his baptism. Instead, his baptism showed the acceptance of his calling as the Messiah of the world, and God showed his full endorsement of him through the Spirit’s descending like a dove and a voice from heaven, “This is my Son, whom I love: with you, I am well pleased.”

Have you heard the voice of God? How can you be sure that what you hear from heaven is accurate and not an illusion? Well, your fruit will prove it. If what Jesus heard from heaven was an illusion, he would be nothing but a self-appointed messiah and a false prophet.

 ***Third, the temptation of Jesus (12-13):*** In verses 12 and13, Mark describes the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Look at verses 12 and 13. “At once, the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.” Satan, the Evil Spirit, tempted Jesus in the wilderness for forty days. Mark’s account of Jesus’ temptation is brief, compared to Matthew and Luke’s accounts. (Mt. 4:1-11; Lk. 4:1-13)

Interestingly enough, Mark didn’t say how Jesus defeated the devil’s temptation in the wilderness. He simply described that he was led by the Holy Spirit and tempted by the devil. How would you feel if you had to be alone for forty days? Very lonely. To some people, loneliness can be highly torturous. Thankfully, Mark says that Jesus was not alone. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him (13b). We must not forget that we should not panic in times of temptation because we are not alone. We have the Lord who can help us in our time of need. The fact that Jesus was tempted in the wilderness shows his solidarity with us, the fallen humankind. It reminds us of Hebrews 4:15, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

Let me close today’s sermon. These days, we are bombarded and troubled with bad news so much. Much of the bad news we hear today is not necessarily based on facts but lies, speculations, and misinformation. The worst thing is that people tend to believe in lies rather than the truth. Why? There may be many reasons. But one thing in common is fear, unknown fear, or a sense of insecurity. We are vulnerable to the devil’s temptation and lies when we are fearful. How often people are driven by unknown fear and become susceptible to temptations. The good news is that Jesus came to destroy the work of the devil in us. He wants to free us from fear and give us freedom and peace from heaven.

Before knowing Jesus’ love for me, I was always afraid. After experiencing some failures, I felt miserable. Worst of all, I began to believe that my life was meant to be sad and could not break the chain of fear and fatalism. By God’s mercy, I was invited to Bible study. One day, as I was reading Genesis 1:31b, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good,” I couldn’t believe what I had heard. *“Is it true that God was pleased when he created me?”* Then I also read Genesis 12:2 *“I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.”* I felt God speaking to me personally. When I heard God’s words personally, I gained confidence, and fear and fatalism began to disappear.

Fear comes from the evil spirit, not God (2 Tim 1:7). Jesus’s life as the Messiah began when the Holy Spirit descended on him and heard the voice from heaven. Despite all the troubles in the world today, the Spirit of God dwells in his children and speaks to them personally. We have many weaknesses and faults. But the good news is that God demonstrated his unconditional love for us and gave us the grace of forgiveness of sins. God is also saying to each of us today. “You are my child whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”