



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
SPARTANBURG

RE-FORMED BY GOD

Mark 1:1-8

June 21, 2020

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With no sentimental birth narrative, Mark leaps straight to the task of demonstrating that Jesus is, in fact, the Messiah, using the brusque and wild Baptizer named John. John appears even before Jesus does. He declares that he has come to prepare the way, not simply to announce the arrival, but *to get people ready...ready for the coming redemption of the people of God.*

Contrary to Mark's claim, verse two is not entirely a quote from the Old Testament Prophet, Isaiah, instead it is a fusion of a verse from Isaiah along with pieces from Malachi and Exodus. Quoting from Malachi is significant because he was thought to be the last prophet, the last one to hear the voice of God and therefore to speak with divine authority. It means John begins where Malachi left off. The Exodus portion of this quote indicates that powerful actions of God, Exodus-level events, will soon be seen again.

Further proof comes from the clothes that John wears. Which famous American figure had a gaunt bearing, a stove pipe hat, and a full beard lacking a mustache? This description instantly calls to mind Abraham Lincoln. Describing John wearing a camel's hair coat with a leather belt would have instantly brought to mind Elijah, who was described in 2 Kings 1:8 as: "A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist."

As you recall, Elijah is the foretold forerunner to the Messiah and he famously held the kings both foreign and domestic accountable to God. This is what Old Testament prophet Malachi said about the return of Elijah, "Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes." (Malachi 4:5) This great and terrible day... great *and* terrible... would be great news for the people of God and terrible news for the enemies of the Lord.

But John would not simply be another prophet calling people to rend their garments and wear sack cloth and ashes.

The Greek word *kataskeuasei*, we translate as "way", indicates no mere re-paving of a well-worn path but constructing an entirely new approach. It would take something entirely new to achieve the Lord's desires. The price required could not be paid, bit-by-bit, sin-by-sin as the old system required in its repeated ritual sacrifices.

I remember many times not having the courage to pay full price, especially when it comes to the household.

When Wendy and I lived in Arkansas, the rubber gasket for the water tank for the commode was leaking. I assured Wendy there was no need for a plumber. I could fix this for about \$2.50! I proceeded to get the part, removed the old one, and re-connect the tank to the base.

I beamed with my success as a I turned the screw one final time to ensure no further leaks would occur. "Snap!" Suddenly water began to gush all over the floor! It was a horrible mess. My lack of expertise led me to over-tighten the screw and break the entire tank. Now I would not only need to call a plumber but pay to replace the whole thing! It cost me triple!

No longer would God rely on the former path of ritual sacrifice to restore the people of God. No step-by-step timid approach merely tweaking the path. No, John was calling for something entirely new, "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

Examining the precise meaning and construction of this phrase is critical to understanding the nature of Jesus' ministry, our role of faith, and the path of redemption forged by our Lord.

Without careful thought, our initial interpretation might lead us to think that this verse calls us to feel sorry for our sins, which leads us to then be baptized and receive forgiveness of sins. But this would turn baptism into another form of ritual sacrifice. The Temple animal sacrifices were an external ritual performed by the priest on behalf of the supplicant so they might be cleansed of their sins. Baptism would amount to swapping out animal's blood for water.

This was the approach taken by the translators of the New English Bible, which reads, "A baptism in token of repentance." This would treat baptism as something people get to signify that they are sorry for their sins, in order to receive God's forgiveness.

Now follow me here. Because this is absolutely critical.

Mark indicates no such thing. This is meant to be something entirely accomplished by the power of God, not our own meager faith or will. The first clue is found in the word for repentance. Mark could have used the word *metamelomai* which means "painful sorrow, remorseful regret", but instead he chose *metanoia* which means "change or transformation". There is nothing in the word itself that indicates feeling sorry, remorse, or regret. It does not come through a willful intent to be better or to think more openly or clearly. It does not refer to changing our mind, like we might when we switch from regular to decaf. In that case, we decide to change our life by changing our behavior. But inevitably we fail and sneak that cup of regular, and guilt just grows. God know this.

Guilt in the face of racism does not help anyone. Guilt is part of the old life. Approaching the Coronavirus pandemic and how we should shape our lives, in light of its presence, must not be based on life before or on former ways of doing things. If we simply try to recreate our old life only with the presence of the virus taken into account, we will either drive ourselves crazy trying to adapt a square peg into a round hole or become so frustrated with

it all that we completely give up and abandon all precautions.

Guilt is not helpful; it is debilitating. It is whole change, reconstruction of our mind, recreation of our thought process that is the new life that God promises. John is speaking about something that will go beyond feelings of guilt. Both problems, COVID and racism, require a new mind, a new heart, and a new soul.

That is the promise of baptism and of deep, really deep, faith in Christ.

John Calvin writes, "Repentance is not placed first as if it were to begin the ground of forgiveness of sins or as if it induced God to begin to be gracious to us." This would turn humanity into beggars, hoping for mere crumbs to fall from the Lord's table – a pathetic and inhuman sight. And we know it every time we see it on the streets, that is why we turn away.

"It is far easier to see brave men die than to hear a coward beg for life."

— Jack London, *The Iron Heel*

But God would never be so cruel.

Mark writes "a baptism of repentance". This means it is the baptism, not our own will, that creates the change through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is not something we get as a sign that we have made a sound spiritual decision to follow Jesus. It is something Jesus does to us when we offer ourselves to him. Jesus will be the one to change us. Not ourselves.

And this change emerges not from the center of society, not from Jerusalem, but from the margins. John comes out of the wilderness. The wilderness was a stark place in which Israel could not rely on their own strength. God literally brought forth water from a rock. The wilderness is a time to discover that we do not live by the waters of our own efforts but the streams of living water and the Exodus redemption that delivers us from life to death.

We need to look to the Lord for this deliverance. To deliver us and change our minds, that is to re-create them, so that we can see and embrace the path to our deliverance as a society.

In some ways, we find ourselves like the Jews of Jesus' time. We yearn for leaders to rise up to forge a path of hope and victory. We yearn for people like Martin Luther King Jr to be a voice that is deeply rooted in faith, hope, and love for all people, while speaking boldly to contingent needs. But, we need more than one leader to emerge, for we are fighting challenges on several fronts. We need visionary leaders like Jonas Salk.

Many of you remember the clarity, courage, and liberating work of Jonas Salk. He liberated millions from the scourge of Polio. Unlike his contemporaries, he believed that "vaccines composed of 'killed' polio virus could safely immunize without risk of infection". He boldly immunized himself, his wife, and his children demonstrating the courage of his convictions.

In the two years before the vaccine was widely available, the average number of polio cases in the U.S. was more than 45,000. By 1962, that number had dropped to 910. Hailed as a miracle worker, (and this is the incredible part that would never happen today) Salk never patented the vaccine or earned any money from his discovery, preferring it be distributed as widely as possible.

(www.salk.edu/about/history-of-salk/jonas-salk).

Salk created a bold new approach to the challenges of his time and John had the same task. The call for us now is to seek the Lord and to pray that our heart, minds, and souls be reshaped through the power of the Holy Spirit – into something entirely new, not a retread of days past, but something worthy to be seen as a return to the days of the prophets and most of all our Lord, when many signs and wonders were performed through his chosen leaders. Only this time, God will need all of us to bring about the change, but we first must be changed to be the hope that is needed. Salk's

philosophy is captured in his famous quote: "*Hope lies in dreams, in imagination and in the courage of those who dare to make dreams into reality.*" May God grant us the courage to receive the Holy Spirit fire, that our *metanoia* might be transformation not only for ourselves but the world. Amen.