



MARK 1

*Jeff Peabody
New Day Church
Federal Way, WA
January 7, 2007*

Earl Boykins of the Denver Nuggets isn't very tall. He gives me hope for my basketball career. At just 5'5", he is the shortest player ever in the history of the NBA. Earl is not only playing professional ball, he's playing it well. He consistently comes through in the clutch for his team, scoring in the last seconds of a game. This season he's averaging 14 pts. per game, which is more than a lot of taller players.

His teammate Kenyon Martin said to reporters, "I'm surprised every time he steps out on the court. A guy that size. The things he can do. He's got the heart of a lion. It just shows that when your heart's that big and you care that much about playing the game, good things will happen to you."

Earl credits his success to two things: First is playing smart. "Knowledge is king," he says. Second is his passion for basketball. All he ever does for his workouts is play ball. He's focused on what he loves.

We're kicking off the new year with a new series out of the book of Mark. Mark is one of the four books of the New Testament that tells us the life story of Jesus. And he's the shortest member of the team.

Scholars have sometimes not paid much attention to Mark, because a lot of the stories he tells can be found in Matthew or Luke. He's not as poetic as John. He doesn't include the Old Testament references like Matthew or some of the background material Luke has to offer. At first glance, Mark is just the little guy in the bunch. Not only is the book short: We actually have a bit of trivia on Mark that says they called him "stubby fingers" because his fingers were short in proportion to his body! So even the author wasn't physically all that impressive.

But he's good at what he does, for the same two reasons as Earl. He knows his stuff, and he's passionate about Jesus. All he focuses on in this little book is Christ. And that's what makes Mark worth reading.

Mark's writing style is high velocity and action packed. He moves quickly from one story to the next. One writer described reading Mark as trying to drink from a fire hose. That's a perfect description, and I hope as we work our way through some of these passages that you will catch the flavor of Mark's unique style.

To understand how and why Mark was writing, I'd like to take us back to first century Rome. It's roughly 30 years after Jesus rose from the dead and returned to heaven. The 12 disciples, or apostles, were busy preaching everywhere they went about Jesus. They started out right in Jerusalem, but as the book of Acts tells us, they began to travel to other places, taking the good news of Jesus with them wherever they went. That included Rome, Italy. The books of the New Testament didn't exist in neat little scrolls at this time – they existed in human beings. Peter and the rest were living Bibles. Their minds contained the data. They knew all of Jesus' stories because they were there. They saw it all firsthand. Their eye-witness testimony was critical.

Did you see where last month Iran hosted a conference about the Holocaust? They brought together a group of people who want to say it never happened. A Hezbollah leader there said to the group, "All the studies and research carried out so far have proven that there is no reason to believe that the Holocaust ever occurred and that it is only a tale."

The conference was full of people who were against Israel, including former KKK leader David Duke. What's telling is who they did NOT invite. Nobody who actually spent time in a concentration camp was brought in to speak. No Holocaust survivors were brought forward to testify to what they had lived through. A speech by even one of them would have silenced the group, because there is power in the words of an eyewitness. I wish that could have happened.

That's what the early church relied on – the power of apostles who had walked with Jesus and seen his miracles firsthand. And the expectation was that since they had seen Jesus leave for heaven, they would still be alive by the time he returned. They weren't thinking that we would be sitting here 2,000 years later discussing them. They honestly thought they were living in the end times. So they preached at a furious pace, but they didn't sit down to write their memoirs.

But now that time has passed and the apostles are aging, the reality hits home that it won't be long before the eyewitnesses aren't around anymore. Who would keep their story straight? It had to be preserved accurately so that people didn't twist their words or forget what Jesus had said and done.

Then you add to that this external pressure: On July 19, 64 A.D., a disastrous fire broke out in Rome. Not all that uncommon in a city of 2 million during a hot summer. But this one wouldn't stop. Two thirds of the city was destroyed. People suspected Nero of starting it, so he found someone to blame: The Christians. Nero began persecuting Christians in horrible ways during this time – using them as human torches for his parties and feeding them to the lions. It was barbaric and severe.

Tradition holds that the apostle Peter was one of the people crucified by Nero during this persecution. We're talking Peter who had been so close to Jesus and who was one of the most influential leaders of the church. His testimony was bold and it was vital to preserve it.

A historian from about the year 130 A.D. tells us that it was Mark who sat down and recorded Peter's version of events. This makes sense, because we know from the Bible that Mark traveled with Peter. He had heard his stories over and over again, and we're told by the historian that he served as Peter's interpreter. Mark knew this material.

We don't know whether he began compiling his notes while Peter was still alive and able to dictate his ideas to him or whether Mark wrote it shortly after Peter died. In either case, there was an urgency to preserve this testimony and share it as an encouragement with the Roman Christians who were suffering such terrible persecution.

That's a lot of background. But I hope it helps establish the fact that this book has an intensity and passion behind it that can still serve as an encouragement today, for whatever we may be going through.

Let's jump in and take a look at the first few verses:

Mark 1:1-15

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

This is Mark's purpose statement. Right up front, he tells us where the book is going to go, and it's an opening packed with meaning.

I love it that he calls this "the beginning of the gospel." That may have originally been his heading for this section, but to me it serves as a reminder that the gospel didn't end at the last paragraph of Mark's book. That was only the beginning. The gospel lives on and is expanding. Paul wrote to the Colossians and said:

Colossians 1:6-7

All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth.

It isn't that the message is shifting and changing. But the story grows as more and more people become part of it. You and I extend the gospel further as we are impacted by it and carry it with us to more people. Mark's words were just the beginning, telling us how things started.

He clarifies things further by stating that this is THE gospel of Jesus Christ. We sometimes mistakenly refer to "the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John." But the early church leaders were careful in naming the books to refer to them as "the gospel according to Matthew", "the gospel according to Mark," etc. In other words, there is only one gospel, told from four different vantage points. There is only one source of the good news, and that's Jesus himself.

One last comment on this verse is about Mark's use of the word gospel. During the Christmas season, we pointed out that the literal translation of the word gospel is good

news. So what is the content of that good news? Some people would say it was the teaching Jesus brought, his message of hope to the world. But one thing that hits you as you read through Mark is how little of Jesus' actual teaching it contains. We don't get many of his lessons spelled out for us. Mark presents Jesus as a man of action rather than a man of words.

Jesus himself is the content of Mark's gospel. His existence and the things he did more than the things he said. "Jesus Christ the Son of God" as Mark puts it is the core of the good news. You can't reduce him to the things that he taught and say that was his essence. You'll hear people talk about the Lord as someone who gave us a philosophy to live by, that he was a great moral thinker or teacher. Those may be true, but they're not gospel.

Plenty of people have tried to incorporate Jesus' wisdom into their lives without believing he was the Son of God. Plenty of people have tried to live by Christian values without accepting Jesus as the Christ. But the gospel is more than words and ideas. The gospel plays out on the cross – not in a code of ethics. The gospel is built on an empty tomb – not a rule book. Mark focuses his attention on the person of Jesus himself as our good news.

So where does Mark choose to start as his beginning of this gospel? Let's take a look at the next verses:

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 desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

Where does the gospel begin? For Mark, the starting point is a wilderness. Out in the desert – wide open spaces. Before Christ appears on the scene, God is doing something in this lonely, isolated spot to pave the way. "I will send my messenger ahead of you," God says, and it happens out in the wild.

That's our experience, too, isn't it? We may be going through a patch of desert in our lives where God seems very far off. We don't see Jesus anywhere we look. But God is in that wilderness, paving the way for Jesus.

I heard a speaker once who talked about a time in his life when he couldn't see what God was doing. He was wanting God to use him, but he found himself working for a tree topping service. There's nothing wrong with tree topping, but it seemed so far off track from what he felt God was calling him to do. He couldn't see any connection at all, and it was hard work to boot. He said when they would get done with a job, the ground would just be covered with leaves. He'd already be tired and know that he still had so far to go. And it was this overwhelming task that made him want to cry it was so big. He didn't know where to start. And he would wonder why he was there at all. The only way

he got through it was to stand in one place with a rake, and make one little clear circle at a time where he was at. That was the only way he could get through it. And the whole time it felt so completely meaningless.

Years later, he finally reached his dream and became an inner city pastor in New York, only to find himself overwhelmed by the needs around him. The job was so big he didn't know where to start and he'd feel like crying. And God brought back to him those days he spent raking leaves, and said, "The task is big, but I'm bigger. This is what I want you to do. Stand in one spot with a rake, and clear a circle right where you're at. Meet the needs of those right around you." God took a time that had felt like a wilderness to him and turned it into this powerful metaphor for later ministry. The discipline and endurance he had gained topping trees served him well all those years later.

You may have no idea what God is up to in your life. But nothing is wasted in God's economy, and he is right now preparing you for the future. The desert you're experiencing is not the end – it's the beginning.

So what is involved in God's preparing us for Jesus? Through John's ministry, we can identify at least four specific ways. The first is

Owning my need

Look at Mark's description of what John did as the fore-runner to Jesus:

And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

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.

President Ford was laid to rest this past week at the age of 93. Probably the single act he was most famous for was pardoning President Nixon for his Watergate crimes. Ford always felt he did the right thing. He said in his autobiography, "We are not a vengeful people; forgiveness is one of the roots of the American tradition."

What made that pardon so controversial was the fact that President Nixon refused to ever fully acknowledge his own guilt. He danced around it. Nixon could never quite bring himself to own his need for forgiveness. Even though he had been legally pardoned, he lived the rest of his life under a cloud because he never came clean and admitted that he even needed a pardon.

God has pardoned us like President Ford pardoned Nixon – BEFORE we confessed. Romans says, "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Hear this: our forgiveness doesn't hinge on us owning our sin. But our ability to receive and experience that forgiveness does. We cannot embrace that forgiveness without admitting we need it.

That was a major theme in the sermons of John the Baptist. We spent some time talking about John's birth a few weeks ago, and now here he is, all grown up. He was a phenomenon. In an age when there were no cars to get around, no TV ads or billboards to promote an event, John was attracting huge crowds out to the desert. Scholars estimate that he baptized upwards of 300,000 people. That's an amazing number, even by today's standards. He was a celebrity of the highest order.

He was eccentric looking too, as Mark points out:

John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

That was exactly the kind of clothing the Old Testament prophets had worn. There hadn't been a prophet in Israel in a long time, and there was a long standing belief that the prophet Elijah would come back right before God himself came to Israel. So when the rumors started flying that John was Elijah or maybe even the Messiah, you can understand why people were so mesmerized by him. Even Jesus commented on what an important person John was in history.

Matthew 11:11, 14

I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist...And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come.

In other words, John was a powerful, influential, famous historical figure who commanded attention and respect. All these people are hanging on his words and making life changes because of him. You can't emphasize enough how big his and impactful ministry was. That's why it is so remarkable to read Mark's next words about him.

And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

John gives us a living demonstration of the next way of preparing for Jesus, which happens through

Checking my ego

Here's John, an important person in his own right, telling the world he wasn't fit to untie the shoes of Jesus. That was a job considered too low even for Hebrew slaves – only Gentile slaves were allowed to do it. And in comparison to Christ, John viewed himself with that kind of perspective. He had no illusions about his own status.

Ego is more than just pride. It's when I view myself, my agenda, my happiness or my comfort as being the most important issue. We get off center when we center on ourselves.

John consistently avoids that. When Jesus had begun having a public ministry, John's closest followers saw people flocking to Christ and began to feel a little defensive. They wanted to protect John from losing popularity. All fired up, they went to warn John, and here's what happened.

John 3:27-30

To this John replied, "A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.' The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less."

I love it that John isn't possessive about his ministry at all. He says he actually feels complete now that Jesus' ministry is taking off. That's an excellent gauge we can use for ourselves. Is there some area of my life that I am defensive and possessive about – it's my job, my responsibility, my talent, my role? If we are feeling threatened by the success of others, we may have lost perspective on our own importance and where we stand in comparison to Christ.

He must become greater, I must become less. In every area of our lives, that's the struggle, isn't it? To let Christ have greater control, and me less. To let Christ have greater priority, and me less. To let Christ have greater attention, and me less.

Our egos are challenged by John. He encourages us to say about Jesus, "He must become more – I must become less."

Part of John's ability to maintain a humble attitude shows up in our next way of preparing for Christ, which is

Knowing my role

Look again at John's message:

After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

John had an important job as the messenger in the wilderness. God called him to baptize all those people. But John recognizes the limits of his own abilities. He tells people, "It's just water." John knows he's not Jesus.

There have been plenty of people who have had a Messiah complex over the centuries, claiming they were Jesus. Most recently, a man named Grigory Grabovoy in Russia has said that he is Jesus reincarnated. He claimed that he could raise people from the dead

(for a large sum of money of course). So a journalist paid him to raise his deceased stepbrother. Grabovoy was happy to take the money and told the journalist his stepbrother was now living somewhere in the Southern hemisphere. The only problem was that there never was a stepbrother – the journalist had made it all up. Grabovoy is now in jail, although his followers have warned police that he can teleport so he may disappear from his cell at any time.

Funny and sad. But think of your own role in other people's lives – as a parent, a spouse, a teacher, a friend. How many times have you tried to step in and be the fixer? How many times have you tried to solve another person's problems and felt the burden of saving them out of their mess or convince them of their need to change? Are you tired and worn down to a nub from that effort?

Our old friend, Oswald Chambers, has a great quote about that. He said when we see ourselves in that role, "There is no freedom, no delight in life; nerves, mind and heart are so crushingly burdened that God's blessing cannot rest...But there is no responsibility on you for the work; the only responsibility you have is to keep in living, constant touch with God."

We have an important part to play in influencing other people, but we're not the Holy Spirit. I am not Jesus. I can't save anyone. It's God's job to bring conviction and change hearts. It's God's job to save the world, and when we cross that line and try to take on his role, we are taking ourselves too seriously.

John's real contribution wasn't a baptism that would change people. It was pointing people to Jesus and saying, "Look to the real Savior."

That's our role. We have opportunities every day to point people to Jesus, to show them where we can see his hand in their lives, to pray with them for his leading and intervention. We're never going to be the final solution to anyone's problems, but we can lead them toward the one who is.

Knowing my role helps prepare the way for Jesus. One final piece in that preparation is

Expanding my vision

Look again at John's statement:

I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

It's that second half that's so astounding. Baptizing with water wasn't a completely foreign concept to the Jewish community of John's day. There were different groups that practiced a kind of ritual cleansing. It was a symbolic act of people turning their lives around.

But John knew that was just the beginning and that Jesus was going to do something so much bigger and more powerful that it would amaze people. It's going to fulfill ancient prophecies of God coming to his people.

Joel 2:28-31

And that's just the beginning: After that —

I will pour out my Spirit on every kind of people:

Your sons will prophesy, also your daughters.

Your old men will dream, your young men will see visions.

I'll even pour out my Spirit on the servants, men and women both.

I'll set wonders in the sky above and signs on the earth below:

Blood and fire and billowing smoke, the sun turning black and the moon blood-red,

Before the Judgment Day of GOD, the Day tremendous and awesome.

This is so much more than people going out to the desert to hear a convicting sermon and shaping up their lives. This is about God pouring himself into their lives and doing something radical and new.

In his book, "The Westpoint Way of Leadership," Retired Colonel Larry Donnithorne says that when new cadets come to Westpoint, they come in as cocky 18 year olds who think pretty highly of themselves, because they all did well in high school. The first day they arrive, their superiors begin to pop their bubble. They strip them of all their outer individuality. They throw a whole list of disorienting tasks at them. Donnithorne says the goal is to get them to zero, which he defines as this: *Realizing all you don't know, and then opening yourself up to be remade into something more.*

That is what is happening as we prepare for Christ. We're realizing all we don't know and opening ourselves up to be remade into something much more. When we catch a vision of what it really is that God is doing, it exceeds all our expectations and all our small dreams for ourselves pale in comparison.

If anyone understands that concept, it would be Mark. Early in his life, Mark got to go on a mission trip with Paul and Barnabas. And it was a miserable failure. He washed out and went home. It was so bad that when the next trip came around and Mark wanted to go, Paul refused to let him, and it caused a big disagreement.

But God had more for Mark. He moved beyond his mistakes. He became like a son to Peter. Even Paul came around and would later write to Timothy,

Timothy 4:11

Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry.

Mark would never have imagined that a dropout like him would one day write a book that would become part of the Bible. God had a much bigger vision and was doing something far greater in Mark than he would have dared to hope for.

Maybe you can relate to Mark. Your failures are always in front of you. But God isn't through with you. He's doing a new thing – pouring out his Holy Spirit and inviting us to be part of what he's doing.

This morning is another chance for us to prepare to meet Jesus as we take communion. This time of stopping to remember that he gave up his life for us is a time we can use to look inside ourselves as well. What kind of preparation are you needing this morning?

Ask yourself:

Am I owning my need?

Where does Jesus need to be greater in my life? Where do I need to become less?

Who would I like to point to Jesus?

Am I willing to be remade?