

APPROVAL OF THE BELOVED

SERIES: JOURNEY OF THE BELOVED

Mark 1:1-15

First Message

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Happy St Patrick's Day. Though the day is named after a saint, there's nothing saintly or religious about the way most people observe the day. We observed the occasion by having corned beef, cabbage, and soda bread for dinner last night. For many it is a day for partying, or this year a whole weekend for partying. Yesterday, as usual, the Chicago River was turned green. St Patrick's Day Parades and Festivals are being held in many cities, including yesterday in New York and San Francisco, and today in Boston. The previous events on the party calendar were the Super Bowl, then Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Next up is Spring Break.

Many people around the world follow a very different calendar—a religious calendar. They observe this season in a quite different manner. For liturgical churches in the Western tradition, today is the Fifth Sunday of Lent. For some this is a season of restraint not partying. It is a time of sober reflection, of giving careful thought to life. Some exercise restraint by fasting, perhaps from chocolate or from social media. For Muslims today is the seventh day of Ramadan; they fast from food and water during the day, then eat a festive *iftar* meal each evening with family and friends. For Jews, Passover is still five weeks away. Whether Jew, Muslim, or Christian, the religious calendar gives a shape to the year.

What is your calendar? What shape does your year have? Perhaps it is centered around work, or school, or family. Perhaps it is sports: Spring Training and March Madness are next. Maybe it is travel. Is there a rhythm to your year? If so, what is its beat?

We are not a liturgical church. We don't follow an established liturgy, though our services do follow our own home-grown pattern, as do most non-liturgical churches. We do pay a little more attention to the church calendar than when PBCC started 39 years ago. We observe Advent with Advent candles and a four-week Advent preaching series. We have a Good Friday service, and Easter services. Next week on Palm Sunday we will wave little palm fronds. But that is about as far as we go.

For the next five Sundays we are going to pay a little more attention to the church calendar, and to the story of Jesus which is commemorated in that calendar. How would you tell the story of Jesus? How would you populate a timeline of Jesus's life? What events would you highlight?

One very common schema is the Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown; the birth, death, and current reign of Jesus. Books have been written and many sermon series preached under this three-part summary. But is this adequate, or is it too reductionistic? Does it leave too much out? It focuses on the cross in the middle, suggesting this is a Western cross-centered view. But where is the empty tomb? Eastern churches put the resurrection at the center, not the cross.

In the year 313 Constantine, who was on his way to consolidating sole rule of the Roman Empire, issued the Edict of Toleration. This declared Christianity to be a legal religion within the empire. The days of harsh persecution were over. Christians now had freedom to meet openly in public. Churches had the freedom to develop liturgy

for their services. Over time liturgy was shaped into an annual cycle, the Church liturgical year, or the Christian Year. Six months of this year is shaped around the life of Jesus.

Even as a non-liturgical church we are familiar with some of the major events in the Church Year: notably Christmas and Easter. But other events we tend to be unaware of such as Ascension Day or Pentecost. Yet in several European countries these two days are still public holidays.

The Orthodox church today still follows an ancient calendar of feasts or festivals. *Pascha* is the most important feast, commemorating the Resurrection or *Anastasis* of Jesus. This is supplemented by eight other festive days celebrating the story of Jesus: Annunciation, Nativity, Presentation in the Temple, Baptism, Transfiguration, Entry into Jerusalem, Ascension, and Pentecost. This gives a certain shape to the story of Jesus. In each of these nine events, something of great theological significance was happening. In an Orthodox church icons of these events are placed on the iconostasis at the front of the worship space, there for all to see and remember.

Over the next five weeks we will present our own reduced series on the life of Jesus. Each year at Advent we focus on the Nativity. When our Advent preaching series includes Luke's account, we also include the Annunciation to Mary and the Presentation in the Temple with Simeon and Anna. We will therefore omit those three events. We will also leave out the Transfiguration, and will include the Crucifixion. So we present the Life of Jesus in six parts.

I start today with the baptism of Jesus, normally celebrated on Epiphany, January 6. Next week, Palm Sunday, Brian will cover the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem. At our Good Friday service Shawn will give a short meditation on the Crucifixion. On Easter Sunday Eugene will preach on the Resurrection. On the two Sundays after Easter, Shawn on the Ascension, and Eugene on the gift of the Spirit will complete the series. Each week we will probe what was happening in these events.

We are calling this series *Journey of the Beloved*. In the first episode, the Baptism, God declares to newly-baptized Jesus, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). Jesus is the Beloved. In the final episode, the Spirit is sent to create the Beloved Community: men and women, young and old, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, all gathered together in Christ the Beloved as sons and daughters of God. Jesus is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters. Our hope and prayer is that this series will anchor us firmly into the story of Jesus. That we will see ourselves as the Beloved Community, created by the Journey of the Beloved.

Today, we start the series with the baptism of Jesus. I am also including his temptation which immediately follows. In keeping with our series title, *Journey of the Beloved*, I have called this message *Approval of the Beloved*.

Why was Jesus baptized, and why was he tempted? All four Gospels record the preparatory ministry of John the Baptizer, and his baptism of Jesus. The three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and

Luke) record the subsequent testing or temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. How do these two episodes fit into the broader story of Jesus? Why are they so important that they belong on the timeline?

I have selected the account in Mark's Gospel primarily because it covers the baptism and temptation in a short enough format to be our Scripture reading. But I will refer also to the accounts in the other Gospels.

Mark's Gospel begins,

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. (Mark 1:1 NIV)

Mark's narrative style is brisk. He makes frequent use of the word "immediately." It is fast-paced and is by far the shortest of the four Gospels. He skips over the birth of Jesus entirely. For him the beginning is the good news of Jesus. It is the gospel, the evangel. It is both the good news that Jesus proclaims, and it is Jesus himself, for his presence is the good news. Mark is itching to present this good news. Our reading ended with Jesus proclaiming the good news:

Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:14-15)

But before Jesus can proclaim this good news, something has to happen that even Mark, in his rush to get to the good news, cannot skip over. Jesus must be baptized and he must be tempted in the wilderness. Again, we ask why?

1. John the Baptist (1:2-8)

Mark begins with the preparatory ministry of John the Baptist. All four Gospels present John as the messenger whom God sent to prepare the way of the Lord, in fulfillment of Israel's Scriptures:

**"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.'" (Mark 1:2-3)**

This is a pastiche of three OT texts from Exodus, Malachi, and Isaiah (Exod 23:20; Mal 3:1; Isa 40:3). The Gospel writers see these texts as being fulfilled in John:

And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Mark 1:4)

Great crowds of Jews from Jerusalem and throughout Judea trekked down to the Jordan River, east of Jericho. There they were baptized by John on confession of their sins. This baptismal site had significance in Israel's history. Here the Israelites had camped on the east side of the river, on the plains of Moab. Here Moses recited to them the Book of Deuteronomy and urged them to be faithful and obedient to the Lord their God who had brought their parents out of Egypt and was now bringing them, the second generation, into the Land of Promise. Then the Lord parted the waters of the Jordan so that they could cross over into the Land. They passed through the waters—a baptism as it were. A generation earlier their parents had passed through the waters of the Red Sea on their exodus from Egypt. But they had not been obedient to God's word. They perished in the wilderness.

Here, too, Elijah had parted the waters with his mantle to cross over to the east side with Elisha. After Elijah was taken up to heaven in the whirlwind Elisha picked up his mantle. He, too, parted the

waters with the mantle, and crossed back to the west side. There he continued Elijah's ministry, challenging Israel and its kings to return to the Lord. Now John the Baptist had come as the Elijah promised in Malachi, coming before the Day of the Lord.

Baptism means plunging or dipping something in liquid. Immersion in water was an established practice at the time of Jesus. Religious Jews such as the Pharisees, or the Essenes living by the Dead Sea, regularly fully immersed themselves in a pool to regain ritual purity. But John's baptism was different in many ways. Rather than self-immersion, John immersed the people coming for baptism. He was the Baptizer. This baptism was a one-time action. It was for a different purpose. It was not to restore ritual purity, but was a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." People confessed their sins before John baptized them. Baptism made a people ready for the one who was to come. For John recognized that someone greater was coming:

"After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps 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." (Mark 1:7-8)

John had no delusions of grandeur. Though great crowds flocked to him, he knew he was not the main show. He was just the herald, preparing the way.

2. The Baptism of Jesus (1:9-11)

And then Jesus made the long trek from Nazareth of Galilee all the way down to the Jordan River. He, too, came to be baptized by John. This was not what John was expecting. How could he, the mere messenger, baptize the one whom he had told everyone was more powerful than himself? How could the lesser baptize the greater? Per Matthew's account:

John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. (Matt 3:14-15)

Jesus obviously did not need to confess his sins. He did not need baptism in preparation for the coming of the promised one. He *was* the promised one whose way was being prepared. So why was he baptized? Jesus said it was "to fulfill all righteousness." He will soon be declared to be the righteous servant. Here the righteous servant is presenting himself to be numbered among the transgressors. He will bear their iniquities and bring salvation. Jesus fully identified with Israel in its need and in its sin.

As Jesus came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open. Isaiah had cried out, "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down" (Isa 64:1). Now this longing was fulfilled. Now the heavens had been torn open. Up rose Jesus from the waters. Down descended the Spirit from the heavens, like a dove. The descending Spirit alighted on the ascending Jesus. God's presence was upon him. Then came the voice from heaven. We have here a trinitarian scene.

"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:11)

This statement evokes several OT texts. First, *You are my son* evokes Psalm 2, a messianic psalm about the Davidic king:

I will proclaim the LORD's decree:

He said to me, “You are my son;
today I have become your father.” (Ps 2:7)

The Davidic line of kings had died out, because the kings had been unfaithful. But Isaiah foretold that a shoot would come from Jesse’s stump. On him the seven-fold Spirit of the Lord would rest. Jesus was thus being anointed by the Spirit as this shoot, as the Messianic king.

Second, *You are my Son, whom I love* evokes God’s command to Abraham:

“Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac...” (Gen 22:2)

God spared Abraham’s son by providing a ram for a burnt offering. Now God has sent his Son, his one and only, his beloved, Jesus into the world. He will not spare even his own Son but gives him for us all.

Later, at the Transfiguration, these words would be repeated in the presence of Peter, James, and John:

“This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” (Mark 9:7)

Third, *With you I am well pleased* evokes the first of the four Servant Songs of Isaiah:

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will bring justice to the nations.” (Isa 42:1)

The descent of the Spirit upon Jesus designates and anoints him as the righteous Servant of the Lord.

Jesus is designated as Son and as Servant. A son delights to do his father’s will. A servant obediently follows his master’s commands and executes his purposes. Jesus is both Son and Servant. Son to represent his Father on earth. Servant to accomplish his master’s plan. In both roles Jesus is stepping into roles that Israel had failed to fulfill. Israel was God’s son whom he had brought out of Egypt. Israel was God’s servant to be the means of blessing to the nations. Jesus will now play both roles as son and servant. As the servant of the Lord his mission was to bring salvation not just to Israel but also to all the nations.

3. Temptation (1:12-13)

God has declared his approval of his beloved son. But Jesus is still not ready to begin ministry, to proclaim the good news. He must next be tried, tested, and approved.

At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. (Mark 1:12-13a)

Matthew and Luke both state that Jesus was led by the Spirit out into the wilderness. Mark’s language is a little stronger than “sent” (NIV). The Spirit *drove him out* into the wilderness. He was sent into battle. For forty days he fasted, eating nothing at all. Lent is forty days in commemoration of this, and is often a time of partial fasting.

The forty days evoke the forty years that Israel spent in the wilderness, being tested by God to see whether they would keep God’s commandments.

Both Matthew and Luke describe three specific temptations from Satan. They took place in three different locations: in the wilderness, in the temple, and on a high mountaintop.

Satan’s first temptation was in the wilderness. He appealed to Jesus’s deep hunger after forty days without food.

“If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”
(Matt 4:3)

“If you are the Son of God...” There is no question about it: Jesus is the Son of God! The voice from heaven has just declared, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” So we should understand *if* as *since*. Since he was the Son of God Jesus surely had the power to meet his own dire needs. He really could turn the stones into bread. But would the Father be well-pleased?

Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”
(Matt 4:4)

It is written: he quoted from the Scriptures, specifically from Deuteronomy (Deut 8:3). The context there is God’s provision of manna in the wilderness (Exod 16). God tested Israel with hunger to see if they would trust his promise—the promise to provide for them, and to bring them through the wilderness to the Promised Land. Then he provided them with manna to teach them that they could depend upon God, that he was trustworthy and reliable. But they failed to do so. Repeatedly they reduced life to physical bread and not to God’s word.

In the second temptation Satan took Jesus to pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem, high above the ground. He said,

“If you are the Son of God...throw yourself down. For it is written:...” (Matt 4:6)

Satan takes a page from Jesus’s playbook, quoting the Scriptures: *it is written*. He quotes Psalm 91:11-12. God would surely command his angels to catch Jesus if he threw himself off the temple pinnacle. The quotation was correct, but Satan’s use of it was not. It is quite possible to quote Scripture without being faithful to Scripture. Jesus responded,

“It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”
(Matt 4:7)

Satan was testing God by misusing God’s word. In Psalm 91, the verses he quoted are true for those who love the Lord and say, “The LORD is my refuge.”

It is also written. Again Jesus quoted Scripture, again from Deuteronomy (Deut 6:16). The context this time was the testing at Massah, a place name that means *Testing*. This time the test concerned water (Exod 17). But the Israelites turned the tables and tested God with their grumbling.

For the third temptation Satan took Jesus to a high peak, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world.

“All this I will give you...if you will bow down and worship me.”
(Matt 4:9)

Jesus replied:

“Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’” (Matt 4:10)

For the third time he quoted Scripture. For the third time he quoted from Deuteronomy (Deut 6:13). Israel had failed to worship the Lord their God, and to serve him alone. They had made a golden calf to which they bowed down and offered sacrifices (Exod 32).

It is written...It is written...It is written... Each time Jesus responded by quoting the Scriptures. Each time he quoted

Deuteronomy in which Moses repeats and summarizes God's commandments for the generation about to cross into the Land. Deuteronomy formed the standard by which Israel was to live in the Land, and its kings were to rule.

It is written. Jesus won the battle by relying on God's word. He considered it to be trustworthy and dependable, reflective of God's character. Satan left him, and angels came to minister to him.

Jesus was being tempted by Satan to be unfaithful to the Lord. But Jesus was also being tested as to whether he would prove faithful to the Lord and his word. Testing and tempting are opposite sides of the same coin. Satan was tempting Jesus, hoping that he would fail, so that he would be proven unfaithful. God was testing Jesus, with the intent that he pass, so that he would be proven faithful. It was God through his Spirit who initiated this encounter, not Satan.

In the temptation or testing, Jesus was facing an ordeal that others had faced before him. The first was Adam in the garden. The Lord God gave him a simple commandment to keep: to eat freely of any tree in the garden except one, on which he placed a strict prohibition. God has stacked the deck heavily in Adam's favor: there was a great abundance of trees yielding abundant fruit. But Eve was deceived by the crafty serpent who focused her attention on the one thing forbidden. She remembered some of what God had said, but was seduced to eat of the forbidden fruit. Adam then listened to her voice and forgot God's voice. In judgment God expelled them both from the garden.

Much later he called Abram to start a new line of humanity. In due course he brought his descendants out of Egypt. He brought them through the wilderness, a place of testing. Would they learn to depend upon God and his word? Repeatedly they failed. Repeatedly they grumbled. Repeatedly they doubted God's word and his reliability. Ultimately they rebelled and wanted to go back to Egypt. They too proved unfaithful.

In remaining faithful to God's word through three rounds of testing, Jesus proved himself to be faithful Israel. The faithful remnant of Israel was now encapsulated in him. In remaining faithful to God's word Jesus proved himself to be the faithful human being. Faithful humanity was now encapsulated in him. He was the second Adam. Luke has made this quite clear: between the baptism and the temptation of Jesus, Luke places the genealogy of Jesus. Matthew traces the genealogy of Jesus from Abraham through David down to Jesus. Luke goes in the opposite direction, from Jesus all the way back to "the son of Adam, the son of God" (3:38).

In his baptism, Jesus identified with Israel. He received God's seal of approval as his beloved Son in whom he was well-pleased. In

resisting the temptations and passing the tests, Jesus is tried, tested, and approved. With this approval given in the baptism and in the testing, Jesus is now ready for ministry.

He returned to Galilee,

proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:14b-15a)

Matthew summarizes the ministry of Jesus as

teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. (Matt 4:23)

Teaching, preaching, and healing. Jesus was able to heal the sick because Satan was defeated. The strong man had been bound. Per Luke, Satan had departed until an opportune time (Luke 4:13). Until then Jesus would proclaim the good news, and teach about the kingdom of God. He would set the captives free: he would release the ill from their sickness, he would heal the lepers, he would free the demon-possessed, he would still the storm.

In Hebrews we read that Jesus shared fully in our humanity. Since it is humans not angels that he helps, he had to be made like us, fully human in every way (2:14, 17). He identified fully with Israel in submitting to John's baptism. In addition, he "has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin" (4:15). He was obedient when the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness to face Satan's temptations. He remained obedient through all that he suffered: in his forty days of hunger and later in his Passion. He is therefore able to empathize with us in our weaknesses and our suffering.

Made like us in every way, fully human. And tempted like us in every way. Both of these statements about Jesus are connected to his current status and ongoing ministry as our great high priest.

Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted... 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. (Heb 2:18; 4:16)

Today if we hear his voice let us not harden our hearts, as did the Israelites in the wilderness. Instead, let us look to Jesus who has gone before us. He is the Beloved. He is tried, tested, and approved by God the Father. God and Christ Jesus are reliable, faithful, and true. Let us trust in them, and keep our gaze on Jesus.

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