



OUR FIRST GLIMPSE OF JESUS: A LION WITH WINGS

Catalog No. 1104
Mark 1:9-15
Third Message
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October 26th, 1997

A few weeks ago I celebrated my twenty-fifth class reunion at Stanford University. 1972 was an exciting time to be in school. There was war abroad, revolution at home, two Rose Bowls—and Watergate! What a turbulent time! As part of our reunion celebration we were asked to write a one-page outline, which would be compiled in a book, describing our lives since leaving Stanford. I was eager to learn where my hippie, war-protesting, revolutionary-minded classmates ended up. I wondered what were the things they would value after twenty-five years. I was intrigued to find that not one of them was still fighting for the political revolution they once so vehemently believed in.

Not wanting to lay all my cards on the table, here is what I wrote:

Stanford was in the midst of a revolt. But brooding over the visible chaos, which came like a whirlwind and vanished with the dawn, was an invisible revolution of a deeper kind that seized me and touched me unawares. It was at Stanford, especially during my overseas experience in Europe, that it burned its way into my heart and totally reordered my world. My eyes were opened to see that the greatest things in life are free. Since leaving Stanford, my greatest moments have come from the unexpected and the unplanned, from a sorrow that opens joy, a grief that gifted me life, and a service where I felt deeply drawn as if a privileged guest to perform on a stage much larger than myself. It only takes a few moments on that stage to take your breath away.

That first transcendent moment I was alluding to came on the island of Mykonos, in Greece. After sharing the gospel with a group of students in a disco one evening, I went out into the night air. I walked right up to the sea wall. A full moon reflected off the vibrant Aegean sea. And it happened. The love of Christ descended and filled the very air, so full, it thickened to congeal within my chest. Time stood still and a savory sweetness filled my soul. As I crawled into my sleeping bag underneath that darkened sky and gazing moon, I wondered, was there ever a night like this? From that day on I was a revolutionary. I could not settle for anything else.

In our text today from the gospel of Mark, the writer gives us our first glimpse of Jesus. As we will see, Mark wants to seize us unawares and capture us in awe, as I was captured in my experience in Greece. This encounter is designed by Mark to shape our lives forever, so

that we will settle for nothing less than being revolutionaries in the kingdom of God.

I. The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan (1:9-11)

And it came about in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And immediately coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens opening, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon Him; and a voice came out of the heavens: "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased" (NASB).

A. An Ordinary Jew

Mark's style is very direct. He is a bottom-line kind of guy who wastes no time getting to the point. Here he details no formalities, no preliminaries, no protocol, no birth narratives, no babe in Bethlehem, no detailed genealogies of Jesus. In his account, Jesus leaps on to the stage fully grown, like the lion, Aslan, in C.S. Lewis' *Narnia Chronicles*, "who suddenly appears from over the sea without warning... 'Aslan was among them though no one had seen him coming.'"¹

At first glance, Jesus appears to be an ordinary Jew. He is just one of the many people standing in line, waiting to be baptized by John for the forgiveness of sin. This fact was somewhat embarrassing to the early church and to the other gospel writers. Perhaps this was why Matthew added the dialogue between Jesus and John, to remove the tension (Matt 3:13-15). But Mark boldly places Jesus right there in line, with no apology. Jesus is awaiting the kingdom of God. Like the others, he is casting in his lot with John, believing that this was indeed the time. Unlike all the others, however, Jesus does not hail from Judea or Jerusalem. He comes from the north, from Galilee, the land of half-breeds, rebels and revolutionaries. His home town is the undistinguished village of Nazareth, which had "no proud history and is never mentioned in the O.T., Josephus, or the Talmud."² So obscure was Nazareth that some even held it in contempt (John 1:46).

B. Anointed by the Spirit

So here we have the report of this ordinary Jew from Galilee being baptized by John. But from this point on in the text everything changes, and we are privileged to view the baptism through the eyes of Jesus. Immediately as he ascends out of the water, the heavens are violently ripped apart, like a curtain. The promised Holy Spirit takes on the appearance of a dove, descending

from heaven through the torn veil, and landing upon him. Then a voice resonates out of heaven, uttering a mere ten words (in Greek), “You are my beloved Son, in you I am well-pleased.”

Suddenly, this baptism of an ordinary Jew is transformed into a holy anointing of cosmic proportions. Not often in Old Testament history is the veil of heaven rent and one is privileged to peer into the heavenlies to hear that wondrous voice, the “sound of many waters.” But here we are so privileged. The circumstance comes in answer to Isaiah’s prayer, “O, that Thou would rend the heavens and come down, That the mountains might quake at Thy presence” (Isa 64:1).

This is what happened on that day when Jesus came to be baptized. The heavens were rent, and God came down in his full presence to anoint Israel’s final King, the One who would take his rule to the ends of the earth. The anointing is not done in symbol with oil, but with the very reality of the Holy Spirit, who is given without measure, just as Isaiah had prophesied,

**Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse,
And a branch from his roots will bear fruit.
And the Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him** (Isa 11:1-2a).

The image of the dove harkens back to Gen 1:2, when the Spirit was brooding over the watery chaos like a bird (or a dove), awaiting the divine utterance of God’s word to begin the creation of the cosmos. Now it broods over the One who will have it in full measure and dispense it to all who believe, giving birth to the new creation (2 Cor 5:17). The dove could also be an allusion to the days of Noah. Remember the dove returned to the ark with an olive leaf, a sign to Noah that he was about to be rescued from the floodwaters unto a new beginning. So too, this long awaited Messiah will, by the Spirit, rescue us from the even deeper floodwaters of sin and death.

C. Coronated as Servant-King by His Father

After the descent of the Spirit, Jesus hears his Father’s voice saying, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased.” “Son.” How I love that title. It conjures up so many things within me. How we long to hear that word as sons. How we long to say it as fathers. Many men grow up never hearing that word of approval. They spend all their lives longing to hear it from the lips of their fathers. These mere three letters contain a sea of significance, enough to drench a longing son with affection: “Son, beloved son.” How astonishing, then, that when we come to Christ, the first thing we hear as we begin our journey is the Father’s word that he is pleased with us, that we are adopted as his sons (both males and females). I do not often recommend books from the pulpit, yet I want to commend a very good book that deals with this issue. It is *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, by Henri Nouwen.³

This voice from heaven holds great significance for Jesus. It drenches him in a sea of love before he even be-

gins to do anything; and it clarifies his identity and mission. The voice directly quotes two significant Hebrew texts, with a possible allusion to a third. The words “You are my son” come from Psalm 2:7, the psalm that was used as the coronation song for kings in Israel. At his coronation, Israel’s king was uniquely adopted by God into a father-son relationship (see 2 Sam 7:14). So the title “Son of God” became a synonym for the term *messiah*, God’s representative king. For hundreds of years, Israel’s throne has been empty, but now Jesus arrives and is crowned King Messiah by his Father at his baptism.

How will this King bring his rule over the whole earth? The second text has the words, “in whom I am well pleased.” This comes from Isaiah 42:1, the first of four songs about Israel’s Suffering Servant; a Servant who will not cry out nor raise his voice in the street; a Servant who will be a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; a Servant pierced through for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities (Isa 53:4-5). So we learn that this King must die! A further allusion to his death comes from the term “beloved,” a word taken from Gen 22:2, which evokes the painful memory of Abraham on the occasion when he was commanded by God, “Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you” (Gen 22:2).

Never before had these themes of Israel’s Messiah and Suffering Servant been put together like this. Straight away Mark is telling us Jesus is Messiah, that he is beloved as an only Son, but that the way of the Messiah is death.

Before we can even catch our breath to take in the implications of all of this, Mark thrusts us forward into another cosmic drama.

II. The Testing of Jesus in the Wilderness (1:12-13)

And immediately the Spirit impelled Him to go out into the wilderness. And He was in the wilderness forty days being tempted by Satan; and He was with the wild beasts, and the angels were ministering to Him.

A. Jesus Confronts the Real Enemy

Once Jesus has been anointed by the Spirit and coronated by the Father, the Spirit immediately thrusts him out into the wilderness where he will do battle with Satan. The term “thrust out” is a strong verb. It is used to describe Jesus casting out demons (Mark 1:34, 39). This is a very forceful compulsion of the Spirit upon Jesus which drives him out into that wilderness to do battle, just as Isaiah had prayed: “O, that Thou would rend the heavens and come down...To make Thy name known to Thine adversaries” (Isa 64:1-2).

Like King David of old, who immediately after his se-

cret anointing went out to do battle with Goliath, Jesus is driven into the wilderness for forty days to do battle with Israel's adversary. But notice he does not do battle with the Romans, as Israel would have wished. He deals with the greater adversary, Satan, that mocking, jeering, murdering being in whose grip lay not just Israel but the whole world. In his direct and brief style Mark does not let us in on the temptations of Jesus, only to say that it was a real conflict and the enemy was Satan.

Secondly, notice where the battle takes place: in the wilderness.

B. In the Wilderness.

This wilderness was reminiscent of where Israel spent forty years being tempted following the exodus, and the place where at one point the nation was overcome by serpents (Num 21:6). Jesus is the representative King of the new Israel but, unlike Israel, he will do battle and win. This was the victory that Jesus later describes as "binding the strong man" (Mark 3:27), so that in the rest of Mark's story he can proclaim, "Good news, the kingdom is upon you!" We don't need to go around binding Satan today. That has already been done. Our role is to proceed in the power of the One who has already done it.

The third thing Mark would have us notice, and this is unique to Mark, is that Jesus was with the wild beasts.

C. Among the "wild beasts"

Why would Mark make note of this? This is very significant. The mention of wild beasts evokes a popular text from the prophet Daniel, whose imagery regarding a mysterious "Son of Man" figure became a key designation for Messiah by first century Jews. In chapter 7 of his prophecy, Daniel describes one "like the son of man" who comes through the clouds to heaven to receive from the Ancient of Days dominion and authority over all nations (Dan 7:9-14). The scene just prior to the heavenly vision (7:1-8) relates the account of four wild beasts (a lion, a bear, a leopard, and a fourth described with dreadful devouring power) which threaten to devour Israel, until the Son of Man appears. Now here is a man, a new Adam, out in the terrifying wilderness, yet the wild beasts pose no threat to him. Mark says that Jesus is in his own lion's den but, like Daniel of old, he is protected by angels.

You may say that I am reaching, but to that I say, you are not like a first century Jew who immersed himself in these texts awaiting the Messiah. Your heart is not burning like his, having waited centuries for the Son of Man to appear. All it took was but a word placed in the right context to become a torch to light the fire of memory. Have you noticed how certain words evoke our emotions? If I were to say the words, "Four score," you would immediately know what I was referring to a civil war, to slavery, to a battle. What if I were to say, in 1965, "Berlin Wall"? Those words would evoke memo-

ries of war and holocaust. What if I were to say, "Berlin Wall, 1989"? Once as I was dropping off a certain professor at his home, when he told me where he lived, I said, "Oh yes, in the faculty ghetto." He said to me, "Don't use that word." He was a Jew, of course. For him, "ghetto" evoked images of millions of fellow Jews held captive before being exported to their deaths. So "wild beasts" evoked powerful imagery that ignited first century Jewish passions for freedom from oppression.

In summary, what have we learned about who Jesus is from his baptism and temptations? Jesus is an ordinary Jew, a man, and thus, one who identifies with us. He will go to any lengths to come to where we are and take on our sin. He is the Son of God, Israel's long-expected King, One fully endowed with the Spirit. But rather than destroying his enemies by force, he will be a Servant who will suffer and ultimately be crushed by them. In that way he will defeat the evil one whose grip holds not only Israel but the whole world. He will spare no effort or sacrifice until the task has been completed, and nothing can threaten his rule.

What impact should this first glimpse of Jesus in his baptism and temptation have on us?

III. Our First Glimpse of Jesus

A. Leads us to Worship

Notice that Jesus is passive in both scenes. He doesn't do any mighty acts; he doesn't even speak. Thus we discover what happens when the man, Jesus, is placed on the stage of Israel. The heavens are violently rent; the Spirit descends; heaven and earth embrace; and the Father speaks. Then the Spirit thrusts Jesus into the wilderness, where demons seize upon him, angels minister to him, and threatening beasts of the earth are muted in terror. Everywhere this man goes he becomes the focus of everything: of heaven, of earth, of all Scripture, of angels, of demons and beasts of the field. The whole universe orders itself around this one. This ought to stir us with holy awe. It certainly did Mark. When he tells his story of the good news of Jesus, he places him at the center of every scene, with the exception of two, the beheading of John the Baptist, which foreshadows the death of Jesus, and the escape of the young man from the garden, which foreshadows Jesus' escape from the tomb. Mark shapes his story around Jesus, because Jesus alone is worthy to be worshipped.

If this is what happens to the cosmos when Jesus steps out onto Israel's stage for the first time, what do you expect will happen to you when you invite him in to take up residence? Aslan is not a tame Lion. You can't treat him like some religious genie to serve you in your little holy agendas. No, he is going to draw you into a world much bigger than your own and relentlessly reshape your life around his person. So worship him that way, with him at the center, while all your enemies who used to threaten you are muted, like the beasts of

the field.

B. Gives us a map for our Journey

The powerful words of the Father, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased,” drive the rest of the story. They tell us where we are going and how we will get there. Have you ever hungered for a spiritual map that will show you where you are going? What God has said in heaven about who Jesus is will eventually be said on earth. That’s where the story is going. And it is this story which gives shape to our lives. We are invited into the account from the perspective of the disciples.

It takes some eight chapters, covering about two years, traveling at a feverish pace (Mark uses the word *immediately* some forty-two times) for Peter to make the confession, “You are the Christ, [the Son of the living God]” (8:29). Immediately following this, the disciples arrive at a high mountain, where Jesus is transfigured before them. Present once more is Elijah, together with Moses, and again that heavenly voice speaks, “This is My beloved Son, listen to Him” (9:7). So it takes two years for Peter to comprehend the divine mystery that Jesus is God’s Son. But that is only half the story. The disciples have no idea what Messiah means. It takes the second half of the journey to lead them into the second half of the story, that the Messiah is a Servant who will die. Then the rapid pace slows down; the bulk of the chapters cover the events of a mere week. The closer we get to the cross, the more time slows down, until we arrive at the climax. Then for a moment, everything stops. Time stands still. And Jesus cries out, “*Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachthani?*” (15:34). The crowd mistakenly thinks he is calling for Elijah, and that perhaps Elijah will come and take him down. But Jesus dies, giving up his spirit. And as his spirit returns to heaven, the curtain in the temple is violently rent from top to bottom.

Josephus describes the outer veil of the temple as it appeared since the time of Herod. The veil was a gigantic curtain, eighty feet in height. It was, according to the historian, “a Babylonian tapestry, with embroidery of

blue and fine linen, of scarlet also and purple, wrought with marvelous skill. Nor was this mixture of materials without its mystic meaning: it typified the universe... Portrayed on this tapestry was a panorama of the entire heavens...”—a huge starry sky!

Again we hear a voice crying out, “Son.” But this time the voice comes not from heaven but from earth, from a gentile, a Roman soldier, who cries, “Truly this man was the Son of God” (15:39). He is the first to gaze at the Suffering Servant and say, “King Messiah!” He is the first to put it all together and say everything the Father had said at Jesus’ baptism. How important is this scene! It drives the entire story until God’s words resound on earth. And these words give shape to our story.

It took me five years in my spiritual journey to make the discovery that Jesus was Messiah. It was a rapid-paced adventure in which I felt pulled and drawn into a whirlwind, one filled with miraculous things, with blessings more than I could count. Since then the path has gotten steeper, the pace slower, the transcendence deeper. I buried my son, my daughter, my mother-in-law, my sister-in-law, my father-in-law, and my Jewish papa. But I must say that in my thirty years of following Jesus, I never feel more like a son, drenched in the Father’s love, than when I am privileged to share in his sufferings. How precious are these words to me, “You are my beloved Son; in you I am well pleased.”

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1. C. S. Lewis, *The Horse and His Boy* (Puffin/Penguin, 1965) 182, quoted by Richard A. Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 35.

2. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge UP, 1959) 51.

3. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

4. from David Ulansey in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110:1 (Spring 1991) 123-25.