

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – December 10, 2017

[Mark 1:1-8](#) & [2nd Peter 3:8-15a](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Reflect on the provided questions
3. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”
4. Read the provided commentaries below
5. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)

Reflection Questions on Mark 1:1-8:

1. Jesus had John the Baptist to “cry out in the wilderness” and “make the paths straight.” Who in your life has played this role? Who has paved the way for you in your journeys? Thinking in a larger context, what historical figures do you think have paved the way for our faith and for Jesus Christ? What would it look like to pave the way for Christ today?
2. What is the significance of John’s appearance in “the wilderness?” (v.4) How does this location resonate or create dissonance with the centrality of our Christmas celebrations, where nativities have decorated town squares, and Christmas dominates at least a month or more of our cultural calendar?
3. During the Christmas season, we typically herald the birth of Jesus as the beginning of the Good News. Mark’s gospel, however, omits any birth narrative, and instead renders the preaching and baptizing of John as “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” (v.1) How/does this awareness change the way you think about Christmas? Is this simply a narrative decision, or does Mark’s choice indicate a unique theology that contrasts with those of Matthew and Luke, both of whom begin their gospels with birth narratives, genealogies, etc?

Reflection Questions on 2nd Peter 3:8-15a:

1. In verse 8, Peter speaks of the different way in which God views time. Peter stresses that time is different for God, and that ultimately God is patient and wants us to grow and develop. How/do you see this patience in your life or in the world? What makes you question or affirm this teaching?
2. In verse 14, Peter asks Christians to live “without spot or blemish” as they wait for the end times. What does this look like in the real world? Is such living based entirely upon purity, as the text seems to suggest, or is there more? Does the message change whether or not we buy into the theology of waiting realistically for the end times?
3. Reading texts such as these, one might get the impression that the only reason for living a righteous life is fear of divine judgment, or the potential threat of violent end times. So is preparation for the end times and/or final divine judgement a necessary pre-requisite to living a godly life of righteousness?

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?

Commentary on Mark 1:1-8 (From the *Homiletics* archive; “Circles or Straight Paths?” – Dec. 7, 2014)

The gospel reading for the Second Sunday of Advent in this year's lectionary cycle is an anomaly because the beginning of Mark's gospel diverges so drastically from both Matthew and Luke. Mark omits the angelic announcement regarding Jesus' birth, and neither mentions neither the shepherds nor the wise men. There is no flight to Egypt, no genealogy that substantiates Jesus' ancestry, no circumcision and no presentation of a firstborn son at the temple in Jerusalem. In some ways, it's difficult to harmonize the second gospel with the deep-rooted expectations of Advent, given that Mark skips over the traditional Christmas story.

Certainly, Mark's decision to forgo the Christmas narrative reflects a theological perspective that understands one of the most decisive moments in the gospel story as the arrival of and circumstances surrounding the ministry of "John the baptizer when he appeared in the wilderness" (v. 4). While Mark's choice may surprise some believers, it's actually not that unusual even in the other gospels. John also omits Jesus' birth narrative, and despite the inclusion of Jesus' birth, both Matthew and Luke offer scant details about Jesus' life before his public ministry. To state it differently, in one way or another, the other gospels emphasize John the Baptist's role early in their narratives and recognize his work as the initiation of Jesus' public ministry and the "beginning of the good news," just as in Mark.

Instead of recounting the customary details of Jesus' birth, Mark begins with an unqualified declaration, "The beginning [n.b., the word is *αρχη*, not *γενεσις*, which means 'birth,' 'genealogy' or 'lineage'; cf. Matthew 1:1] of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (v. 1). While the initial prose appears remarkably ordinary, further consideration reveals extraordinary forethought. For instance, the term "good news [*εὐαγγέλιον*]," especially its proclamation, will be a core theme in Mark (cf. 1:14-15; 8:35; 10:29; 13:10; 14:9; 16:15). The designation of Jesus as "Christ [*χριστος*]" is a significant moniker despite being limited primarily to the latter half of the gospel where it is used intermittently by Jesus' opponents to mock him (cf. 8:29; 9:41; 12:35; 13:21; 14:61; 15:32). In addition, the appellation, "Son of God," presages a key designation conferred upon Jesus, which resurfaces at pivotal moments throughout Mark (cf. 1:11; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7; 12:6; 14:61; 15:39).

Following the introduction in verse 1, Mark cites an OT prophecy to corroborate the authenticity of John the Baptist's ministry: "See, I am sending my messenger [*τον αγγελιον μου*] ahead of you, / who will prepare your way; / the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: / 'Prepare the way of the Lord, / make his paths straight'" (vv. 2-3). The manuscript evidence favors the phrase "in the prophet Isaiah" (incidentally, Isaiah is explicitly named only in 1:2 and 7:6), but other ancient manuscripts have "in the prophets." This latter variant is understandable because the excerpt is actually a conflation of several OT passages from the Septuagint (LXX), specifically, Exodus 23:20 and/or Malachi 3:1, along with Isaiah 40:3; and, although the wording in the first line -- "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you" -- aligns more precisely with the Exodus passage, the differences are slight. Even so, Malachi 3:1 is, in all probability, Mark's principal source, especially given the subsequent analogy that Jesus speaks of between John the Baptist and Elijah whose return "before the great and terrible day of the LORD" was promised in Malachi 4:5-6 (cf. Mark 9:9-13).

Besides the preceding scriptural support, Mark offers no additional background information before he abruptly introduces "John the baptizer." He, as the prophet Isaiah had foreseen, "appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (v. 4). Without any explicit

clarification, Mark assumes that his readers will identify John as the Lord's messenger and his wilderness ministry as the fulfillment or re-imagination of Isaiah's prophecy, which called Israel to repent -- "Why do you say, O Jacob, 'My way is hidden from the LORD'" -- and promised that those who "wait for the LORD shall renew their strength" (Isaiah 40:27, 31). It's also worth noting that John's proclamation of repentance and forgiveness reiterates two inveterate themes from the prophets (cf. Isaiah 1:10-20; 55:7; Jeremiah 31:34; Hosea 6:1; Joel 2:12-13; Zechariah 1:4).

In contrast to the other gospels, Mark provides only a paltry sampling of John's actual message (cf. Matthew 3:7-12; Luke 3:7-17; John 1:19-34). Yet, despite this scarcity, Mark reports that John's message resonated with everyone who heard him: "And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins" (v. 5). Their response brings to mind a psalm of King David who declared, "Then I acknowledged my sin to you, / and I did not hide my iniquity; / I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,' / and you forgave the guilt of my sin" (Psalm 32:5).

Beyond that, it's important to note that John's baptism was neither the first nor the only baptismal practice known at that time, but its significance was unique. Part of John's mission, therefore, was to convince those who heard him that this particular baptism was different -- not merely another common washing, but a baptism linked with the imminent arrival of "Christ, the Son of God."

Mark, however, does not overtly explain why John's baptism is unprecedented. Rather than cite another OT passage directly, Mark merely describes John's appearance and eating habits: "Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey" (v. 6). The vivid imagery is Mark's indirect way to connect John the Baptist with the prophet Elijah who routinely lived outside the population centers and was "a hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist" (2 Kings 1:8).

The lectionary reading concludes with a précis of John's proclamation, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals" (v. 7). In other words, despite John's compelling message and the overwhelming response of the people, the real source of enduring truth is still to come -- the One whose advent John proclaimed, for "he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (v. 8).

Commentary on 2nd Peter 3:8-15a

(From *Homiletics*; "Thank You for Waiting" – Dec. 10, 2017)

In a consistently applicable letter written to remind believers of what they have been taught (3:1) so that they might grow in Christian maturity (1:5-8) and avoid false teachers (2:1), 2 Peter 3:8-15a is a similarly timeless explanation and exhortation concerning the Day of the Lord. Although it can be -- and has been -- read as a warrant for carelessness because "it is all going to burn anyway," close attention to the text shows that it urges the exact opposite, namely taking great care to live rightly on this earth now, precisely because the Lord is coming to judge.

The author introduces this instruction with a concern about those who mock the delay of the return of the Lord (vv. 3-4). What those people do not understand, the author asserts, is that just as the world was once cleansed of evil people through the flood, a similar destruction is coming, but this time it will be accomplished with fire (v. 7). In light of the fact that his readers understand the world is not a static entity (v. 4) but has been and will be reformed by God's destructive power, there is an important point of which they need to be reminded. The author notes that even though they know that God's intervention *will* come, they must not forget that they are not entitled to know *when* it will come. God relates to time differently than humanity does. The difference between one day and 1,000 years is negligible to the Lord. The author's statement here is an allusion to Psalm 90:4, in which the psalmist answers the scorn elicited by the years of God's judgment with thankfulness for God's discipline and hope for God's mercy. Similarly, 2 Peter also discusses both waiting for God to act and God's mercy, but joins them so that one -- God's delay -- is actually a manifestation of the other -- God's mercy. What some regard as slowness is actually

evidence of the mercy of the Lord, who will not delay in bringing about his promise, which seems to be his return (v. 4) and the judgment that follows. When he comes, the godless will be destroyed as they were in the past (v. 7); but God is not a sadistic lord whose desire is destruction. Instead, he wishes that all might receive repentance.

When the Day of the Lord does come, however, there will be no warning. Like Paul (1 Thessalonians 5), the parables in the gospels (Matthew 24; Luke 12) and Revelation (3:3; 16:15), this author describes the Day of the Lord like the arrival of a thief. Hence, his readers must not lose faith if it takes a thousand years or so. At the same time they must not grow lazy, because it could come tomorrow. Unlike the flood, this coming will not just cleanse the earth, but also the heavens.

The number of textual variants attests to the difficulty of the last line of verse 10. Sinaiticus, Vaticanus and several miniscules simply read, "and the earth and the works in it will be found." Other manuscripts supply the more sensible version that it will be found destroyed or that it will be burned. The surrounding phrases seem to leave little doubt that the author is talking about the violent dissolution of the earth and the heavens. Hence, although the simple "it will be found" is probably the most original reading, this verse shows evidence of early corruption. It would be very difficult to argue that this phrase warrants some reading in which the present system is not drastically changed.

However, it is very important to notice that the point of all this talk of doom and gloom is not to encourage contented or even prideful apathy because his readers find themselves on the right side of the dividing line, but is to urge them to live a certain kind of life. The earth as they know it is looking forward to destruction, but that does not mean the life they live on earth does not matter. Their lives should be defined by holiness and godliness, virtues held up most often in the later texts of the NT, namely the pastorals and 2 Peter, possibly in an effort to mimic the esteemed values of the larger society. If they live in this way, they can look forward to and even desire to hasten the coming of this radically destructive day. The only way one could wish to hasten the shocking overturn of the present order is if one were truly ready to meet the coming judge.

The final word is not one of destruction, however. Out of this dissolution a new earth and new heavens will appear. Here the author is drawing from some of the final prophecies in Isaiah. In chapters 65 and 66, the Lord discusses his coming (66:18) accompanied by both fiery judgment (66:15, 24) and the establishment of a new heaven and earth (65:17; 66:22), where those who were subject to him will dwell. This is a prominent image in the apocalypse of John (Revelation 21:1-4) and might also be in the background of the rhetorical apex of Hebrews (12:27). The author of 2 Peter describes the new heavens and the new earth, which will come as the dwelling place of righteousness. Consequently, his readers must be the kind of people who can dwell in a righteous place. As they wait in expectation of this radical reformation of heaven and earth, they need to apply all diligence to be found spotless and blameless and at peace -- a reiteration, albeit in different wording, of what he said in verse 11.

Consequently, they should regard the patience of the Lord, his delay in coming, not as an embarrassing situation that should cause them to lose hope in the promise of the Lord, but as salvation. The delay of the return of the Lord not only gives time for the ungodly to repent, but also for them to live rightly so that they might be found worthy to become inhabitants of God's new realm.

Additional Resources

- [“The Text this Week”](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for this week...not all will relate to the Matthew passage we are studying, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out the commentaries and additional resources available for this Sunday (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).