

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – January 7, 2018

[Mark 1:4-11](#) & [Acts 19:1-7](#)

(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 1:4-11:

1. This is the second time this text has appeared in our lectionary in less than a month (the other was Dec. 10). 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 and the season that follows it – Epiphany, which begins today? 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, or John, who begins his gospel with the cosmic “Word”?
2. John proclaimed a baptism of repentance, and while our doctrine affirms that Jesus had no personal need for repentance as one without sin, his submission to that baptism is something we need to think about deeply. So how is repentance a life-giving invitation for us in the twenty first century? If all those people in the Jordan were being dipped in water to signify a movement they were joining (John’s movement of repentance) how does that translate for us? What movement of justice or returning to God are we joining when we undergo or reaffirm our baptism today?

Reflection Questions on Acts 19:1-7:

1. One commentator opens reflections on this passage with these words: *“This passages stands as one of the classic battlegrounds for debates over baptism: whether people should be re-baptized, whether water baptism is enough or if the baptism of the Holy Spirit is required as well, or whether prophecy and/or speaking in tongues are necessary elements of what it takes to be a true believer.”* What are your thoughts on these questions? How do you understand the teachings of our particular (Church of the Brethren) tradition on them?
2. In v. 2, when Paul is talking to the disciples in Ephesus, they say they have not even heard of the Holy Spirit. How would you explain the Holy Spirit to someone who didn’t know about it? What is your own experience of the Spirit in your own life?

What questions do you have?

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

Commentary on Mark 1:4-11 (From *Homiletics*; “Cleaning Tips from John” – January 7, 2018)

The beginning of the gospel of Mark, as one might expect, serves as an introduction in a variety of ways. With its terse first verse, Mark starts "in the beginning" of the action, rather than at Jesus' birth (cf. Matthew 1; Luke 2) or the Word's pre-existence (John 1). At the same time, the information that Mark gives us about John, Jesus and God in this first chapter establishes the foundation for understanding the eschatological significance of the rest of the gospel.

Mark 1:4-11 can only be understood in the context of the preliminary introduction (vv. 1-3) and the narrative that follows, describing Jesus' time in the wilderness and the beginning of his preaching ministry (vv. 12-15). Mark's first verse, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," has been the subject of significant discussion over the years. First, it is important to note that the "good news," or "gospel," as the footnote indicates, is not a genre of literature, as Mark was probably the first "gospel" to be written. Instead, "gospel" refers to "good news" in general (cf. 2 Samuel 18:19; Isaiah 52:7), as the NRSV's translation indicates. Of course, "gospel" here can have a more specific sense, which can be summarized by the good news that Jesus is the Christ (8:29), the Son of God (1:1, 11; 14:61; 15:39; cf. Romans 1:15-16; 1 Corinthians 1:17; 15:1-2; Galatians 1:11-2:2). Interestingly, this good news begins, not with Jesus, but with "the prophet Isaiah" (v. 2). Mark conflates a quotation from Exodus 23:20 and Malachi 3:1 about sending a messenger, with Isaiah 40:3, a voice crying out in the wilderness, to describe God's speech to Jesus. Thus, we learn that God is responsible for sending both John, God's messenger, and Jesus. John's major task is preparation, preparing "the way" for Jesus ("you"), the Lord (v. 3; cf. 2:28; 7:28; 11:3 and 12:29-30; 13:20, as instances of "Lord" referring to Jesus and to God, respectively). John is given significant authority on the basis of his role as God's messenger, even before he is officially introduced (v. 4).

John's introduction covers several important facets of his character, all of which point to his role as the "preparer" of God's coming kingdom. John is described as "the baptizer" (v. 4). This title describes the main way he prepares the way for the One who is to follow him. Furthermore, he is located in the wilderness (v. 4). The first scriptural association with "the wilderness" is probably Israel's wilderness wanderings, which are described as a time of both rebellion and punishment (Psalms 78:17-18; 95:7b-11) and as a time of preparation in God's presence (Exodus 19; Isaiah 43:16-17). The latter interpretation is more significant than the former for Mark. The wilderness is a place of preparation for Jesus in the temptation account (1:12-13), as well as throughout the gospel (v. 45; 6:31-32). Indeed, John's prophetic introduction by Isaiah has already described the wilderness as a place of preparation, because it notes that a voice is crying out "in the wilderness," and this cry is to "prepare the way of the Lord" (v. 3; Isaiah 40:3).

John is primarily introduced by his preaching, which is similar to Mark's introduction of Jesus (vv. 14-15). In fact, this shows one of the strongest points of commonality between these two figures. John is an appropriate prophet to prepare the way for Jesus, because his message and Jesus' message complement one another as they both stress the importance of repentance (vv. 4, 15) in preparation for the kingdom of God. John's preaching, in particular, focuses on two phrases: the "baptism of repentance" for "the forgiveness of sins" (v. 4). Interestingly, outside of Mark 1, baptism, repentance, forgiveness and sins are not common themes in Mark, but they do seem to be particularly important when they are mentioned. The most significant citation of baptism occurs when James and John request a place of honor, seated at Jesus' right and left in glory (10:37). Jesus asks them if they can be baptized "with the baptism that [he

is] baptized with" (10:38) and affirms that they will be, even if he cannot grant them seats of honor (10:40). Here, baptism is closely connected with Jesus' death (cf. Romans 6:1-4). Thus, the baptism of repentance that John preaches may well be a preparation for death, whether physical or metaphorical.

At the same time, however, this baptism carries with it metaphors of cleansing. This was certainly true for Jewish sects (like those who lived at the Dead Sea) who used large pools in which they could immerse themselves for purification. Purification is another way that John's baptism and preaching prepare the way for Jesus' ministry. While John's baptism does not cause the forgiveness of sins, it is associated with it, as people ("the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem") "confess[ed] their sins" (v. 5). Later in Jesus' ministry, Mark clarifies that it is only God, and now the Son of Man, who can forgive sins (2:7-10). Confessing one's sins, however, prepares the people to realize that they are those for whom Jesus has come: "sinners" (2:15-17). This interpretation of baptism at the Jordan River (v. 5) is also important, as it is a place particularly associated with Elijah and Elisha. In fact, Elisha once cured a man's leprosy by ordering him to wash himself in the Jordan seven times (2 Kings 5:10-14). This link with Elisha / Elijah may be strengthened by the description of John's clothing, which is comparable to Elijah's appearance in 2 Kings 1:8 (cf. other similarities between John and Elijah, 6:15, 24-25; 8:28; 9:12-13). In fact, John's appearance as Elijah solidifies his role as a prophet of the last days, namely heralding the necessity of preparing for God's kingdom, which will come near in Jesus (v. 15).

John's preaching of preparation and purification finally points to the one for whom he is preparing the way: "the one who is more powerful," whose shoes John deems himself unworthy to untie (1:7; cf. 3:22-30). John's proclamation about Jesus solidifies his role as Jesus' messenger or forerunner, rather than his equal or superior, which one might conclude from the baptism scene alone (vv. 9-11). John clearly states that one of the differences between him and this "more powerful" man who is coming is that the stronger one will baptize not with water, but "with the Holy Spirit" (v. 8). While this baptism is not demonstrated in the gospel, it is clear that the kind of "spirit" with which Jesus is "possessed" (cf. v. 10, and the debate in 3:22-30) is determinative for his ministry (vv. 12-13; 3:28-29) and observers' opinions about him (cf. 11:27-33). In conclusion, John's preaching, in content and in form, mirrors and prepares the way for Jesus' coming as John focuses on the association of Jesus with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, in terms of repentance and forgiveness of sins, which are signs of God's coming kingdom (vv. 14-15; 2:1-12).

Jesus' arrival at the Jordan and his baptism by John are narrated without fanfare or detail, similarly to the crowd's baptism in verse 5. Nevertheless, verse 10 points to the sharp differences between Jesus and the crowd in God's response to Jesus' baptism. The result here is not confession of sin, but rather a divine approbation of Jesus and his coming ministry. Jesus' rising out of the water contrasts nicely with the Spirit's descent onto him, as the latter functions possibly as a metaphor for a kingly or prophetic anointing (cf. 1 Samuel 16:12). Perhaps more significantly, the prophets had foretold the coming of the Spirit as part of the realization of the "last days" (cf. Ezekiel 36:36-37; Joel 2:28-29), which Mark is equating with the "beginning of the gospel" (v. 1; cf. vv. 14-15).

If the eschatological ramifications of Jesus' coming were not clear enough by Mark's introduction of John as Elijah, and John's own introduction of Jesus as the stronger one, baptizing in the Holy Spirit, then surely it would be understood by verse 10, when the heavens are "torn apart" to allow for the descent of the Holy Spirit on Jesus. This language seems to describe a visionary and auditory experience of God in the gospel of Mark. Even though Jesus is the only one who hears God's voice from heaven here (v. 11), the bystanders would have seen the heavens open (cf. Ezekiel 1:1). This revelatory experience will be contrasted with the disciples' experience on the Mount of Transfiguration, where the heavens do not open, but the disciples hear a voice from a cloud making a very similar statement to the one in verse 11: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (cf. 9:7: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him").

Clear revelations, like these announcements from God, are rare in the gospel of Mark. Nevertheless, an allusion to the "tearing" of the heavens occurs once more in the gospel during a very important scene: the crucifixion. There, immediately after Jesus breathes his last, the temple veil is "torn in two, from top to bottom" (15:38). This "tearing" is the same verb that is used to describe the tearing apart of the heavens in verse 10. Thus, both Jesus' baptism and his crucifixion are points of God's revelation. Indeed,

understanding Jesus as the Son of God is part of God's revelation throughout the gospel (cf. vv. 1-2; 9:7; 14:61-62; 15:39). This revelation of Jesus' identity, followed quickly by the Spirit throwing Jesus into the wilderness where he is tempted (vv. 12-13), leads to the arrest of John the Baptist and the beginning of Jesus' ministry (vv. 14-15).

From Isaiah's proclamation of God's message of preparation, followed by John's preaching and baptizing, to Jesus' own baptism and beginning of his ministry, it is clear that a new eschatological age has dawned. Elijah has come (9:12-13; cf. Matthew 11:14) to prepare the way for Jesus, the Son of God, who will proclaim the "gospel of God" (v. 14) in his teaching, his miracles, his death and his resurrection. The preparation of baptism, when the heavens are torn open and the Spirit descends, is not only the beginning of the gospel (v. 1), but it marks the fulfillment of "time" (cf. Galatians 4:4), for the kingdom of God "has come near" (v. 15).

Commentary on Acts 19:1-7 (From the *Homiletics* archive; "Kintsukuroi Christianity" – Jan. 11, 2015)

Throughout *The Acts of the Apostles*, Luke's second volume to the third gospel, the dynamics of authentic discipleship surface on numerous occasions where the bolstering presence of the Holy Spirit is linked with professing faith or taking action in the name of Jesus. Such is the case in Acts 19:1-7, where 12 disciples in Ephesus receive the Holy Spirit after Paul baptizes them in the name of Jesus. At first glance, this passage appears to have enough in common with other stories in Acts to not warrant special attention. But three features argue for a closer inspection.

First, there is the mention of Apollos (v. 1), which immediately follows the summary of his ministry in Ephesus prior to Paul (18:24-28). Though a very capable communicator and teacher (18:24a-25a), Apollos has his limitations. Luke describes him as knowing "only the baptism of John" (18:25b) and needing Priscilla and Aquila to explain "the Way of God to him more accurately" (18:26). Noteworthy here is how verses 1-7 open against the backdrop of the earliest Christians navigating a process of sorting out the meaning of baptism.

Next, Paul navigates this process himself as he addresses the gaps in Apollos' teaching by ascertaining that the Ephesians have no awareness of the Holy Spirit, clarifying the incompleteness of John's baptism, and baptizing in the name of Jesus (vv. 2-4). Underscoring this is Paul's allusion to John the Baptist's preparatory role of calling and baptizing people unto repentance in order that they "believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus" (v. 4b). Of importance here is how Paul makes his case about the inadequacy of John's baptism by way of an explanation that aligns with how all four gospels describe John the Baptist's own understanding of himself and his ministry as not being on a par with, but rather preliminary to, Jesus.

Then, after having been baptized by Paul, the Ephesian disciples have the Holy Spirit come upon them, which is manifested through speaking in tongues and prophesying. In their encounter with Paul, these disciples go rather briskly from having "not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit" (v. 2b) to having a firsthand encounter with being empowered by the Holy Spirit. Not only are they "baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus" (v. 5), they undergo a baptism similar to that of Jesus with respect to receiving the Holy Spirit.

These three features make Acts 19:1-7 a compelling text to preach on the Sunday designated for the traditional celebration of the baptism of Christ. If arguments can be made that the development of doctrine is already underway by the time Acts is written, then this passage indicates that doctrinal formulations about baptism are intersecting with, if not emerging from, accounts of first-century Christians who are actually experiencing baptism. Here, the preacher would do well to tease out the importance of how, more than viewing the baptism of Christ as a model for a ritual, the early church witnesses to how the baptism of Christ inaugurates a new reality in the Holy Spirit for all who believe and act in the name of Jesus.

Accordingly, Acts 19:1-7 corresponds with other biblical events that feature the connection between baptism and the new reality in the Holy Spirit. Notably, all three synoptic gospels bear witness to the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus when he is baptized (Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:9-10; Luke 3:21-22 -- the gospel of John testifies to the Spirit descending, but does not clearly state whether this follows from John the Baptist baptizing Jesus).

While there are some variations in detail from story to story, Acts 19:1-7 especially echoes Pentecost (2:1-13) as well as the conversion of Cornelius and his household (10:44-48). All three passages mark significant beginnings: the birth of the church (2:1-13), the first Gentile Christian converts (10:44-48), and the full commencement of Paul's third, and longest, missionary journey (vv. 1-7). More important, all three hold baptism together with the Holy Spirit vis-à-vis the recipients being able to speak in tongues (2:4, 10:46, 19:6b). Granted, not all, not even many, can claim speaking in tongues as part of their spiritual toolkit following baptism. However, the particular gift of glossolalia is representative of the more comprehensive variety of ways the Holy Spirit is manifested among those who are baptized in the name of Jesus. The central point here is that baptism is accompanied by the gift of the presence of the Holy Spirit through which the baptized are equipped to be disciples.

There are two more features of Acts 19:1-7 that may spark further consideration of baptism and the new reality in the Holy Spirit. This involves taking a second look at Apollos and a first look at Paul laying hands on the 12 Ephesians (v. 6). That Apollos is viewed as having an incomplete understanding of baptism, even though his reputation for teaching about Jesus and encouraging believers is otherwise commendable, indicates a concern for nurturing a commonly held perspective that baptism is inextricably connected to the person and work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit -- which is how, according to Acts, the earliest Christians frequently enough report their experiences of baptism. This is more than a matter of uniformity. It speaks of finding a shared understanding of the sacred in our midst that nurtures unity in the Spirit and avoids division into factions (see 1 Corinthians 1:10-17).

As for the laying on of hands: Whether one person lays hands on many or many people lay hands on the few, the laying on of hands embodies the kind of unity that baptism is meant to foster among the communion of saints. This is more than symbolic. It is a palpable reminder that baptism brings us into contact with the risen Christ, contact with the power of the Holy Spirit, contact with humankind in and beyond the community of faith.

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.