

Jesus *in context*

Let's pray...

Alright, so last Sunday we began into a study in the gospel of Mark – on the gospel of Jesus – with an extended look at Mark's opening sentence: “The *beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ...*”

Which we discovered meant and means much more than our 21st Century surface-reading suggests. *In context* – that is, heard through the lens of a first century Roman and Jewish perspective – this opening line is an announcement of the highest order – **a public declaration about a public event that changes life for all who hear...**

It would be similar to the significance of those **Messengers** who were dispatched across Europe in the days following **D-Day – June 6th, 1944**. Carrying the news – the good news – of the decisive victory at Normandy that brought the end of the Second World War... This victory and the news of it meant that life would and could now be different... The victory on the Normandy battlefield meant a radical re-ordering of life – for the good – all across Europe and beyond!

This is what **gospel** meant in Mark's day – **a public declaration about a public event – a VICTORY – that changes life for all who hear...**

And so last Sunday's text (Mark 1:1-8) was really just Mark's attempt to **set the scene for introducing Jesus** – who doesn't actually enter the stage until **v.9** – where we pick up today – **Mark 1:9-13.**

And I want to preface this with a question that Aithan Wilcox, one of the kids in the church, recently asked his dad, Alec. He asked, “Why did Jesus need to be baptized? If John’s baptism was for the forgiveness of sins, why did Jesus need to be baptized?”

A bit stumped by the question, Alec did what any good Dad would do – he asked the pastor! To which I said – as any good pastor would do – *“You’ll have to wait till next Sunday – because we’ll be talking about the baptism of Jesus!”*

Which gives you a clue as to what’s coming in our text this morning – the Baptism and Testing of Jesus (at least that’s what the headings in my Bible say!).

But as we read this quick series of events in Mark’s gospel, keep in mind that Mark is still just *introducing us to Jesus* – and *very intentionally*, as we’ll see. Because just like the opening line of Mark’s gospel only makes sense *in context* – we need to understand *Jesus in context...*

In truth, if we are to truly understand the gospel – and all that it means for us and for the world – then we must *understand Jesus – in context*. And by that I mean, *in the context that God has chosen to present Him to us...*

And our text this morning seeks to *give us to this context* – **Mark 1:9-13**.

At that time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn

open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

Now we’re limiting ourselves to a small collection of verses here – just 5 verses in fact – and yet, as is often the case, **these verses tell us so much.**

At the core of which is **the baptism of Jesus** – and the **dramatic signs** that accompany this event.

Mark tells us (v.10) that “**Just as Jesus** was coming up out of the water, **he saw heaven being torn open** – and the Spirit descended on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven...”

It’s easy to read through this quickly – as we often do – but **this is no minor, forgettable moment** in Jesus’ life, is it?

“He saw heaven being torn open”.

What does that mean?

I’m sure I’ve often imagined it as though Jesus looked up and something like **a divine doorway** opened up in the sky.

But that’s not what the text says – because heaven isn’t just a synonym for sky.

Heaven is the realm where God rules – where things are as they are supposed to be – and ultimately will be – in Christ.

It’s not just some place up in the sky.

It’s the realm where God rules. *Which means it can be right here*, when we bow to the rule of Jesus.

Heaven is the realm where God rules – *where life as it is supposed to be*.

In truth, to speak of Heaven is to speak of not some **escape** from reality, but the invasion of **Reality**. The invasion of Life – **Reality** – as it is *supposed to be* and ultimately **will be** – in Christ.

And here – at His baptism – Jesus “*saw heaven being torn open*.”

It’s as though, in that moment, the Curtain of Reality was **pulled open** – and *what is often unseen was seen*.

So, what was seen?

Well, Mark tells us – in **vs.10-11**...

“Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and **the Spirit** descending on him like a dove. And **a voice** came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

Whatever else we can say, we know this for sure – *there is more going on here than just a baptism, isn’t there?*

In this moment – in this event – we are invited to see that Jesus was not simply baptized by John, but that **God Himself – Father, Son and Holy Spirit** – are all on hand and at work here – *revealing Jesus to us...*

Listen to Mark’s account once again...

At that time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

Here’s what we need to grasp – at this point:

In the baptism of Jesus, Mark – the gospel writer – and more importantly, **God the Father and the Spirit** – are inviting us to see Jesus *in context*.

And not just in his 1st Century Jewish and Palestinian context – but *in the context of God’s Historic and Ongoing Redemptive Work in the World...*

A work that began long before Jesus’ baptism...

Let me explain what I mean.

→ Some words mean far more than their dictionary meaning, don’t they?

We talked about one last Sunday – **gospel**. It’s a word that means a lot more than just “good news”.

In our day, we have lots of words that mean a lot!

Metoo – that’s a term that means a lot.

9-11, or *inclusive*, or *residential schools*, or *Pipeline* or *the Wall*, or *the shoes I’m wearing!*

To you these might just be shoes – but to me, these are **my late Grandfather’s shoes** – which means they are far more than just shoes to me. Far more!

Each of these terms, objects or words are more than just words these days – they invoke a world of meaning and emotion, far beyond their dictionary definitions.

Are you with me?

I’m sure we could make a long list of words that open up a world to us... that trigger memories, emotions, responses, **stories!** That get us thinking about **a whole story...**

And these 5 verses, in Mark 1, are full of words like this... story-words...

If we pay attention to what’s going on in these 5 verses – we’ll notice **a heap of words** rich with a world of meaning. Words that speak of **larger realities** or that bring to mind **larger events** – *specifically*, events in the history of Israel – the nation God chose for the sake of the world... For the sake of His redemptive revelation and work in the world...

Story-words like **baptism and the Jordan River**. *Mark’s original audience couldn’t fail to notice the evocative power or significant of these references...*

And then we hear of the coming of **the Spirit and God’s Voice** being heard from heaven. *In Jesus’ day, nothing grabbed the attention of the Jews like a rumor of God’s Spirit being at hand or God’s Voice being heard... It had been so long!*

And then **there’s the Wilderness**, and the number **40** as a period of sacred time.

And in the wilderness, there is **Temptation and Testing**.

And, lastly, related to this, there is the presence of **enemies or Satan** himself.

Each of these **words** would have sparked so much in the minds of Mark’s 1st Century readers. Making them think about the formative moments in Israel’s history.

But **all together** – piled up like this – *all in reference to Jesus* – it’s as though Mark was retelling the story – the history – of Israel – and God’s purposes with Israel.... All as *the essential context for introducing Jesus* – as though Jesus was now somehow *taking up this Story as His own! Stepping into Israel’s shoes... Entering into experience and identity of Israel...*

Think of the **Exodus** (those of you who journeyed with us last year hopefully know it well by now).

In keeping with His promises and character, we read in the book of Exodus about how **God rescued the Israelites** – the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – from slavery in Egypt and claimed them as His own.

In **Exodus 4:22**, God instructed Moses to say to Pharaoh – “*Israel is my firstborn son – let my son go, so he may worship me.*”

In the Exodus, God declared the nation of Israel to be **His Son – his one and only Son**. Amidst all the terms of relationship and endearment that God used to refer to different people and prophets through the Old Testament era – **only Israel** – and her kings – were **ever** referred to as **God’s Son**. And not just God’s Son, but God’s beloved Son...

And at the height of this **Great Rescue** – *the Exodus*, the Israelites walked through the Red Sea – forever after celebrated and symbolized in the **baptism** of non-jewish converts.

Which is still the case today – if any of us were to convert to Judaism, at the heart of our conversion, **we would need to be baptized** – and in so doing, to become a part of the people whom God brought through the waters of the Red Sea...

But the story doesn't end with the Red Sea, right?

From there, the Israelites entered into **what?**

Into the **Wilderness** – where they remained for **40 years**.

And there they were **tested** by God, and confronted by **enemies**, and had to learn – through it all – to trust the God who saved them.

But the Wilderness wasn't just the place of testing – it was also the place where **God spoke to the Israelites**.

At the foot of Mt.Sinai, **God spoke to them from the heavens** – and entered into a covenant with them – that *He would be their God and they would be His people – a people for His Glory*. A people – a nation – who's life together – as they worshipped and followed God's ways – would become **a living witness** to God's glory and goodness, to God's justice and mercy... That through them, God would bless all the nations of the world.

That was God's dream and vision and purpose for Israel...

And with this in mind, God gave the Israelites the Law – the outworking of His justice and mercy – for all...

But the story doesn't end with the Law – *it ends with God*...

In the final scene of the Exodus, God Himself – **by the Spirit** – comes to dwell with and among the Israelites... *to empower them in this life of fruitful obedience*...

And you'll notice, the only word here I haven't explicitly referenced is the **Jordan** – or the Jordan River. And not because it's less relevant – but because it marks the **final step** of Israel's journey – **from slavery in Egypt to life in the Promised Land**.

This is the story – the account of Israel – called *by God* for the sake of God's redemptive revelation and work in the world...

Are you with me?

Ok, so what does all this have to do with Jesus and the gospel?

Well, **EVERYTHING!** *Doesn't it?*

And not just according to Mark, the gospel writer – but *according to God* – who *tears open the heavens so that we will see this*.

Hear again the account of Jesus' baptism... **He writes,**

“Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

In the baptism of Jesus, **God has torn open the heavens!** God has pulled back the curtain on Reality – *inviting us to see Jesus in context.*

To see that Jesus is now **fulfilling** the story of Israel... That Jesus is now **fulfilling** the calling of Israel – the **purpose** God had for Israel. A people called by God’s Name... A people alive in God’s Glory... A people whose life would be a **living witness** to God’s grace and goodness, God’s justice and mercy... A sign, instrument and foretaste of God’s Kingdom Reign on Earth...

Through whom, God would extend His blessing to all people...

That was God’s dream and vision, calling and purpose for Israel...

But, as the story tells us – the people of God failed to worship and obey, honor and represent God.

But in the grace and mercy of God, as the gospel of Mark will show us – Jesus would prove faithful...

And not just to **take up** the Story of Israel – but to **fulfill** and **complete** and **resolve** the Story and Calling of Israel.

This is the undeniable meaning of the words spoken by the Voice – when the Heaven were torn open... The Voice of God spoke over Jesus – *“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”*

“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased...”

So, why was Jesus baptized?

Well, according to what Mark tells us here – and what God **says** through what He **does** here – Jesus was baptized *for the same reason that He died on the cross.*

He was baptized for us...

Just as at the cross, Jesus would ultimately take our sin upon Himself – *identifying with us* – taking upon Himself the consequence of our sin – of our God-defiance – and dying *for us*.

So, here, at the outside of His ministry – in His baptism – *Jesus identifies with us* – entering into *Israel’s story*... Entering into the experience and journey and calling of God’s people – that, where Israel failed and we have failed – *Jesus might prove faithful.*

That through His faithfulness, *we would experience God’s rescue and drawn into His redemptive revelation and work in the world...*

And if that wasn't amazing enough – **hear this:**

Because **Jesus has identified with us** – in His baptism and in His death – **we**, by grace, through faith, **are now *identified with Him...***

We are now called **by His Name** and **affirmed by the Father - *in Him***.

Which makes the Father's word of acceptance, love and affirmation to Jesus here at His baptism – also now ***His Word to us***.

In Jesus and because of Jesus – this is now God's Word to all who are in Christ – ***“You are my son – You are my daughter, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”***

All because ***Jesus has entered into our story – that we might be found in HIS...***

→ Invitation to the Lord's Supper – to the cross