

### **Mark 1:1-10**

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger 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,' " John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

### **“Marked for Life”**

Mark's gospel starts, not with an explanation of the mystery of God's incarnation, or a long genealogy proving Jesus' place as Davidic descendent, but with a proclamation which assumes its readers are insiders of the faith the Gospel proclaims. The first verse assumes knowledge of Judaism and of the Jesus movement within it. "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." What is this good news? Well, Mark's audience knew the term Son of God meant "Messiah" the savior who had come. The word good news was heard as a saving proclamation. In the first 11 verses the writer of Mark shares that the gospel proclamation is rooted in God's love and grace known to the community through Jesus the Messiah, and the Spirit. Right in the beginning the community is reminded of their need for a Savior for their reconciliation to God, and of God's amazing grace through the Spirit in baptism.

At seminary I had a professor named Dr. Kay for a Worship class and two semesters of preaching. Dr. Kay made many students uncomfortable during my years at seminary, including me. Dr. Kay was a distinguished, physically fit, middle aged, well educated Caucasian male who cried all the time! I don't mean he shed a tear or two once in awhile. When he cried his voice shook and he would have to get out his handkerchief and collect himself before he could speak again. At first I thought he was on the verge of a breakdown. Then I started to take note of what it was he was reacting to when he began crying. It was the gospel message that would set him off! The good news of Jesus Christ, the mercy of our triune God, and the power of the Holy Spirit constantly melted this man's heart.

Now the good news for Dr. Kay was not confined to worship in the chapel. My professor would cry while having a discussion in the cafeteria or reading his lecture notes to us in class! We'd be sitting in a large lecture, taking notes, intently listening, and then there would be a pause, which you learned to recognize and interpret after awhile. By the time you dared to look up the floodgates had opened. I'll remember one particular episode for the rest of my life. Dr. Kay was lecturing on the Sacrament of Baptism. Although the class was "Worship in the Reformed Tradition" not all who were present believed in a Reformed theology of baptism; that God's grace initiates and calls forth the baptism verses the belief that human response determines a baptism's timing.

Dr. Kay's lecture stated, "Long before we know about grace (*it*), God is loving us. Long before we can hold on, we are being held. Grace grounds the sacramental sign. God's grace is operative before, in and after baptism for its recipient!"<sup>i</sup> Now, for students who believed in a

believer's or salvific baptism Dr. Kay's words were anathema. They questioned him on his theology and beliefs till he laid all his highly Reformed cards on the table for full exposure.

He told us about a standing argument with a lifelong agnostic friend of his who denied his infant baptism had any meaning. Dr Kay would say to his friend, "You cannot deny your baptism! You are powerless to invalidate your baptism. It was God's action, not yours!" Dr. Kay proclaimed that baptism is a mark of God's grace for and with us that cannot be washed away no matter what we believe. Asked what his friend would say to all of this, Dr. Kay responded that after a number of go-a-rounds they would let the subject go, agreeing to disagree. A student questioned him, "Doesn't your friend get mad at your insistence that he cannot take back his baptism?" "No," replied Dr. Kay. He went on to say something to the effect of, "He knows I believe in the good news, not a proclamation of human judgment on one another."

Then, through tears, Dr. Kay told us future ministers, "We have been baptized and that is a fact! It is not our power to take it away; God loves us and has claimed us. God does not give up on anybody, ever. We are not in a position to tell God to give up so don't you ever give up on anyone either. We are only in the position to preach the good news, and the judgment within it." I remember thinking that Dr. Kay was laying on our Reformed belief in the sovereignty of God pretty thick in that ecumenical context. Since then, I have grown in the conviction, that Dr. Kay, his tears mixed with his theological beliefs, was one of the most powerful bearers of God's good news for and with me in my life. He is right. The good news of God is meant to be known as God's grace and steadfast love with us, always. It is to be claimed in our lives as we are moved to see ourselves and the world and those within it differently, because of grace.

But do we, the church, claim hold of God's grace for us in this way? Would people who drift into the sanctuary or meet us on the street know this is our story of faith? Or when we hear the biblical story do we tend to avoid this transforming message preferring to latch on to a moralistic view of Jesus' message which denies God's grace for those who don't fit our morals claiming some are beyond God's love? Eventually this message leads to the denial of God's grace for the moralists as we are all sinners. A message of moral obligation which subverts the good news leaves no room for God's grace and transformation. This message may guilt us into looking at an area of our lives that needs work, but that work gets listed as ours alone. God is left out of the picture. A moralistic view of the good news binds us to the unattainable. Sometimes we in the church run from God's grace in the opposite direction. We latch on to such a liberal reading of the biblical story that we begin to claim that neither we, nor others, stand in need of transformation, that we are all ok just as we are. The problem with this interpretation is that our need for reconciliation with God, for our Savior is denied. We are not self-sufficient on our own.

Maybe the real problem behind both sides of these two biblical interpretations is that we have a hard time believing that we are beloved by God and claiming that love! Dr. Kay believes it. The narrator of Mark also believes it is so. Scriptural witness confirms that Jesus believed God's grace to be true not only for himself, but for all he came into contact with. He taught his followers that we are all beloved. The Gospel of God's grace invades the entirety of all God made us to be, mind, body and soul, providing the continual transformation and love we need to admit we are not as we should be.

We are marked in life by many things; our relationships, jobs, education, suffering, sickness, joys, interests, romantic and friendly love. What might it be like to claim the grace which leads to baptism as the main mark we live by? To live in God's reality knowing ourselves as beloved, always. We do this corporately every week in worship. Nothing that goes on in this sanctuary is normal to the culture we live in. In case you hadn't noticed, it is not ok out there to claim that we are not self sufficient! Our society shuns weakness. Yet faith calls us to recognize we are not autonomous individuals. We stand in need. We cannot save ourselves. Here, we are a company of sinners, a fellowship of the forgiven. Faith in the God of grace calls us to claim our needs, our emptiness and our wandering ways before God who has already claimed us as beloved children.

Anthony Robinson, a minister in Seattle, claims that the words “Remember your baptism and be thankful,” which were a part of our Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant liturgy earlier, mean that we are to “Remember that by the grace of God – not because you are so good but because God is so good – you are a child of God, a disciple of Christ and a member of the church. This is God’s gift to you and to us all, our identity in Christ as baptized and beloved children of the Most High God. Because this is God’s doing, we say, it cannot be taken from you.”<sup>iii</sup> God’s grace is made perfect in weakness. This is the good news for those who need it—each one of us! Our baptisms are a tangible sign and symbol of God’s enduring grace for us.

It is risky to live into a new life and worldview which is what our baptisms ask of us. We are to risk reliance upon God’s grace for ourselves and the world instead of judging others to build ourselves up. God has reordered us. In our baptisms we became part of something larger than our own life. Just the heavens were torn in two and the Spirit descended on Jesus, God’s grace breaks into our lives and transforms us through the gift of the Spirit! God is on the loose; living with humanity in Jesus who shows us that God is with us always, doing the same old, same old, and an ever new thing in our lives through grace.

God separated the light from the darkness back in creation’s genesis, and promises to do so day by day in our lives. Through grace we claim for ourselves that out of the darkness in our lives, there shall be light! You are God’s beloved, marked for life by God’s merciful grace: now live in this reality. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> This story and the quotes are taken from my lecture notes from “Worship in the Reformed Tradition” in the Spring of 2002, at Princeton Theological Seminary.

<sup>ii</sup> Anthony B. Robinson, *Transforming Congregational Culture* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.: Grand Rapids, 2003) 70.