

As we begin 2018, most of our Gospel readings from now through November will be from Mark. We heard a lot of Matthew last year. Next year it'll be Luke. But this year, our Gospel readings come mainly from Mark, with a little bit of John thrown in.

Since we're going to be spending so much time with Mark this year, I thought I'd make a few general comments today about this particular Gospel. And then I'd like to zero in on what Mark has to say about Jesus' Baptism and what that means for us.

First off, Mark is the only Gospel that calls itself a Gospel. Mark 1:1 begins: "The beginning of the Good News" or "the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

Right off the bat, Mark lets us know who Jesus is. There's no mystery. He's the Son of God.

And then, as Mark tells about what Jesus does, he's very excited. Mark was originally written all in present tense, though it is translated into past tense in English.

It's very fast moving. One of Mark's favorite words that appears over and over again is "immediately." Immediately, after saying this, Jesus does thus and such. And, in the Greek, the word "and" appears over and over again, making Mark into a series of fast paced run on sentences. Jesus does this and then he does this and then he does this.

Mark is the shortest of the 4 Gospels. You can easily sit down and read it in one sitting, which is something we don't often do. We forget today that the books of the New Testament were all designed to be heard in one sitting, and not to be read silently in little chunks.

When I was in seminary, I got to hear an actor stand up and recite the Gospel According to Mark from memory. It took him a little less than 2 hours. It reminded me of how Mark must have sounded when it was read out loud to its original audience.

Of the 4 Gospels, Mark is the oldest. It was probably written 5 or 10 or even 15 years before Matthew and Luke, and a good 20 or 25 years before John.

In the old days, scholars used to think that Matthew was the oldest Gospel, and that Mark was just a shortened Readers Digest Condensed version of Matthew. So they kind of poo-pooed Mark. They figured he was just giving us Cliff Notes instead of the real thing.

But instead they got things backwards. Mark was first.

And when Matthew and Luke sat down to write their Gospels, they each apparently took a copy of Mark, and they fluffed it out and made their own additions and alterations to it. Out of the 670 verses in Mark, Matthew copies 600 of those verses, and over half of those are copied verbatim. Luke copied 500 verses from Mark, and likewise, over half of those are copied verbatim. Without Mark as a basis, Matthew and Luke would have been very different.

Ancient church tradition tells us that the author of this Gospel was John Mark. The non-English version of his name would have been Jonah Marcus, both a Hebrew and a Roman name put together.

Acts tells us that Mark's mother's house was a meeting place of the early church.¹ There are traditions that it was also the location where Jesus held his Last Supper. There are also traditions that it was the place where the disciples were gathered when the Holy Spirit came upon them on the day of Pentecost.

It is thought that John Mark was in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of Jesus' arrest. Only Mark's Gospel mentions a young man who was hiding in the garden. When the arresting soldiers tried to seize him by the cloak, he ripped out of his clothes and ran away naked. Most scholars think this is an autobiographical story from Mark—Mark's way of saying, "I was there."

Mark was a cousin of St. Barnabas. He traveled with Paul and Barnabas in the early days. Later Mark bailed out of a missionary trip and had a falling out with Paul. But much later, when Paul was writing his Epistles in captivity in Rome, apparently, he and Mark had reconciled, for Paul mentions him in several Epistles, saying basically, "Mark also says 'Hi.'" Mark is mentioned the same way in one of the Epistles of Peter.

The Gospel of Mark is quite possibly based upon the teachings of St. Peter, whom Mark was apparently with both in Jerusalem and in Rome. The Gospel was written soon after Peter's death. And an ancient tradition suggests that Mark's account is basically the written form of the teachings and memories and stories told by St. Peter.

The episodes in Mark are usually short. We don't get the sermons or the longer parables that we find in Matthew and Luke. There are no long speeches of Jesus like we read in John. Instead, everything is quick, sharp, and to the point, and then Mark immediately moves on to something else.

In today's reading from Mark, we get one of those short, quick, episodes, the baptism of Jesus. Matthew, Luke and John tell us more. But Mark tells it short and sweet.

¹ Acts 12:12

After telling us in v1 that this book is the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Mark jumps immediately to the prophecy from Isaiah surrounding John the Baptist.

Then, we're told John the Baptist appeared and was baptizing. Right after that, John the Baptizer points ahead to Jesus.

And then immediately we meet Jesus for the first time. In Matthew, Luke, and John, we first hear in different ways about the birth of Jesus. But in Mark, it is an adult Jesus whom we meet right off the bat.

Mark tells it matter-of-factly. Jesus came from Nazareth and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

But then Mark says something unique. He says,
"And just as (Jesus) was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him."

The heavens torn apart. This is unique to Mark. What is Mark talking about?

You may remember several weeks back in Advent that we heard the prophecy in Isaiah 64. The prophet said to God, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down."

Things aren't going well, so God, come down now. Come down as fast as you can. Rip your way through the sky if it stands in your way, but come.

That's what's happening at Jesus' baptism. Mark says that the heavens were torn apart, ripped apart. The Greek word is *schizein*, related to our words for schism and for scissors. Mark is saying that in Jesus baptism, God rips through the division between earth and heaven. God comes through for us in Jesus.

And then Mark says: "And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"

Son. God calls Jesus "Son. My Son." In the ancient world that had special significance. An adult Son would have power of attorney. A son was totally empowered to speak for his father.

So Mark is telling us, when Jesus speaks and acts, he is doing so on God's behalf. God tears open the heavens. God comes through the opening. And God affirms that Jesus is his total representative on earth. And then, immediately, Jesus goes out and begins that work.

On this feast day celebrating Jesus' baptism, we remember our own baptisms. In baptism, we are adopted as God's sons and daughters. That means that God empowers us to do what Jesus did. God empowers us to act on his behalf as his representatives on earth.

And as God's representatives, perhaps we need to catch a part of the spirit of the Gospel of Mark. We need some of Mark's joy and energy and freshness. We need some of that immediacy.

There is much for us to do in this world. In this new year, let us listen to Mark. And let us be enthusiastic as we proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.