

Share Your Dreams
By Reverend Litton Logan
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Scriptures:

¹The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, □
who will prepare your way;

³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,”

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And 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. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He 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. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

The Baptism of Jesus

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

¹⁰And 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. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

The Temptation of Jesus

¹²And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” Mark 1:1-15 (NRSV)

Sermon:

There is a scholarly consensus that the Gospel of Mark was written around the time of the great Jewish rebellion of 66-70 C.E., or shortly thereafter. I tend to believe it was as late as 75 C.E. To this point, some sociologists of the New Testament believe the Gospel of Mark, in part, was intended not only to make the author’s case for Jesus as the Christ, but also to head off any potential ramifications from the Jewish rebellion for his Jesus-community in Rome. Although many scholars indicate that Mark used the theme of the hiddenness of who and what Jesus was as a literary device, I think he was trying to make the point for the Jewish and non-Jewish community in Rome that Jesus was not a rebel or had played any part in the Jewish insurrection. I say this because in Mark not even Jesus’ family, his disciples, his Jewish people, and their leadership really recognize or understand who he is and what his mission was. As Mark would say, look at how he died - a common criminal, not a rebel with all the venerations and accolades such a death would have brought. In Mark and the other gospels, the Jewish leadership may have seen Jesus as seditious but evidently the Zealots didn’t, even though he was crucified

between two of them. The Zealots were referred to as robbers and thieves because they were rumored to have stolen from the rich to give to the poor. Also, crucifixion was not the prescribed punishment for thieves but it was for sedition or rebellion. In addition, the author wanted to signal to his community the need to be prepared for the Lord's return soon. Thus, the only ones who recognized Jesus in Mark's Gospel as the Son of the Most High God (Theos Hypsistos) were the demons.

Also, in the opening verses of the Gospel of Mark, we do not find a story about Jesus' birth or stories about his childhood. One reason for this lack could be that Mark, given his time, location, and sources didn't have any, or if he had such stories, he didn't feel they were important in his sense of urgency. Therefore, given Mark's sense of the nearness of Jesus' return and all that the destruction of the Temple meant to and for the Jews, Mark wanted to present the Good News of God in Jesus with integrity while downplaying Jesus' or any Jesus believer's active role in the overthrow of the powers that be past, present, or future.

Therefore, the opening verses in Mark's Gospel, our scriptures today, do not find Jesus' Jewish religious pedigree, his honor standing, and thus his authority through a lineage or a wondrous conception, as in Luke and Matthew. Jesus' authority and honor standing was established in and through the appearance of John the Baptist, the Hebrew Scriptures, and Jesus' mighty deeds read backwards through the lenses of his resurrection.

John comes out of the wilderness, symbolic of the chaotic, unorganized, and demonic as obviously a highly, honored person, who speaks with authority about the coming day of God's judgment and calling the people to repentance.

I think it is extremely important that we understand John's notion of sin in context. John calls Jewish people, religious people, from town and country with all their traditional differences, suspicions, prejudices, and mutual antagonisms to repent of their sins. Many if not most of these people would have been devout Jews, not a bunch of immoral scoundrels. Some in the crowd may have just been curious about John while others may have wanted to know about the signs of the end times just as many today who go and listen to apocalyptic preachers.

Therefore, John was not calling the people to turn from acts of immorality so much as from their misunderstandings of religious piety that missed the divine mark and victimized the less fortunate and powerless or excluded those not like themselves. The people are called to seek a new internal orientation in God's will and publicly demonstrate that new reorientation in an act of baptism, symbolic of washing off the old, cleansing oneself of the contamination of bad or misguided religion if you will, and signaling an inner change of heart and mind. Throughout Mark's Gospel we hear this theme of sin, as Jesus accuses the scribes and Pharisees of having corrupted the Law of Moses and the words of the prophets; thereby misleading, victimizing, and needlessly polarizing the people. Thus, sin here is more about missing the mark in doing what God desires in one's religious intentions and practices. In short, religion for many of these people and their leaders had become an end unto itself, simply a matter of formulaic participation in the sanctity and security of God's elect, not the ways and means of honoring God and living out God's will and ways in the world. As we are aware, these insights figure heavily in Jesus' teachings and calls for repentance also.

I think passages from the prophet Jeremiah will summarize what I am saying about misguided and ineffectual religion:

"Thus says YAHWEH of hosts, the God of Israel, "Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices and eat the flesh yourselves. For I did not speak to your fathers, or command them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. But this is what I commanded them, saying, 'Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you will be My people;

and you will walk in all the way which I command you, that it may be well with you.' Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in their own counsels and in the stubbornness of their evil heart, and went backward and not forward...Now my people do not know the requirements of God. How can you say, 'we are wise, for we have the laws of God', when, behold, the lying pen of the scribes has worked falsely." (*Jeremiah 7:2; 8; 7*)

John called for the chosen ones to turn from vain, empty religious traditions because the Messenger-Judge of God was coming soon, and he would bring the final judgment, rewards for the righteous, and punishment for the unrighteous.

Therefore, in Mark, Jesus' baptism is not that of a repentant, immoral person, but a public act of identifying with God's highest claim on his life as it was with others baptized by John. Jesus, as his ministry will reveal, identified with what we might call the greater spiritual demands of the Law, especially wherein the spirit ran contrary to prevailing interpretations of the letter of the Law. In Jesus' act of obedience to God in baptism, he is anointed or divinely commissioned by the Spirit and declared to be a beloved son of God.

However, this title or identification of Jesus as God's son here in Mark does not seem to carry the same supernatural dimensions as in the Apostle Paul's thought; the writer of the Gospel of John's thought, or what will emerge three-hundred years later in the Apostle's Creed at the Council of Nicaea. In Hebrew thought, as important as the paternal, biological dimensions were to being called someone's son, a true son was one who honored his father and was obedient. Thus, we can understand how and why the kings, prophets, etc., who were obedient to God, were called "sons of God." Under the Holy Spirit's leadership all this changed to include the metaphysical understandings of substances and begetting that many of us hold today.

I hope in sharing some of these insights that we, like Jesus, the highly religious Jew in Mark's Gospel, may also retreat into the wilderness of discernment and be open to the Spirit's leadership just as he was in his wilderness experience. Jesus in the wilderness had to sort through a life-time of religion to decide how he was going to live out God's commission. Jesus, as we note in the gospel, rejects the temptations to pursue his divine calling and commission from within certain traditional, religious-political power models.

Jesus' first words in Mark were an announcement. He announced that the time is ripe; the kingdom of God has come near; so, repent - people turn from your current ineffectual, self-limiting, and divine-limiting religious beliefs and practices, embrace the good news not only in the letter of the Law of Moses but in its spirit.

Do such words or ideas from an ancient, Jewish Jesus have any meaning for us, as God's people, today? I mean, we are after all Christians, the la crème de la crème of God's people. We don't elevate external religious rites and rituals; militant Christian nationalism, or ethnic identity to the levels of idolatry, do we? In fact, the rejection of such things figured heavily in the Protestant Reformation. We have not placed our hopes in the material trappings of our faith like church buildings, cathedrals, temples, etc., like some of the ancient Jews seem to have done, do we? It is not important what Christian sect a person belongs to is it? What is important to us is that a person is a professing Christian, right? A person's value as a divine and holy end in and of himself or herself is far more important to us than how many theological idiots they believe can dance on the head of a bishop's miter, right? We did not repent, get baptized, work hard not to breach the moral codes of God, just to escape the fires of hell, did we?

Folks, John and Jesus both condemned self-serving religion along with complacency and hypocrisy. A close look at all the gospels reveals Jesus confronted people of the religious establishment more often than he did immoral people. Jesus' greatest condemnations were leveled at people who had heard the truths of God and still made religious doctrines, rites,

rituals, and elitism more important than the living presence of God's grace, justice, and compassion in their lives and in the world of God's people.

Jesus' vision for the Kingdom of God - the coming fullness of God's presence and blessings on earth - was conceived in the Mosaic Laws and the words of the prophets but lived out in the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit, not just in habituated, religious practices. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the kingdom is growing into its maturity through the lives of countless people across the ages, who have and do live out God's holy presence in acts of kindness, compassion, justice, and naturally, moral choices.

You and I know that the kingdom is to a significant degree already here in us, in our worlds. Whether it will grow is dependent upon how willingly Christians, individually and collectively, will allow themselves to be energized by God's vision for the world. The vision of God for the world is to bless all life with justice, wholeness, prosperity, and peace. To reach down to the lowest with words and deeds of kindness, compassion, justice, forgiveness, and love. To reach out to the high and mighty, reminding them that with great position comes the great responsibility to ensure that God's grace, justice, and compassion not only guide their lives but is delivered to all.

Through the people of the Christ, universal Shalom - wholeness, justice, mercy, health, and prosperity - should be available to all life. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit is available to every Christian to empower and guide them just as it did John the Baptist, Jesus, Peter, Paul, and others across the ages.

Sometimes, I fear that much of Christianity today has fallen victim to some of the sins of the ancient Jews - religious idolatry, worshiping the trappings of religious institutionalism, religious emotionalism, and human religious doctrines at the expense of internalizing kingdom values and imperatives. Could it be that many Christians today are not committed to God's claim on their lives beyond their own personal sense of salvation and emotional comfort? Could it be that we are not committed to the mission of fulfilling God's vision for the world? Could it be that we refuse to be energized by the Holy Spirit beyond our comfort zones?

When individual Christians refuse to make their mission in life the fulfillment of God's vision for the world and reside in the comfort of their own salvation, they stagnate in their spiritual growth and development, which in turns impedes the growth of the Kingdom of God.

The time is ripe; the kingdom of God is here, right now waiting for our commitment, our energy. Can't you just see it? Can't you see a world where Shalom is the order of the day? A world where peace, justice, compassion, wholeness, health and prosperity reigns supreme for all, not just a few?

Oh, Litton, Litton, Litton, you are truly, truly, an old air head! Get a life man! Look around you; we are too old, our time is past, such gospel work is for a younger generation. NO! No! No! In the book of Joel and in Luke Acts, we hear these words, "In the last days, God says, I will pour out My Spirit on all people; your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men [people] will see visions, your old men [people] will dream dreams. Also, John the Baptist indicated that the one who is and has come will baptize or pour out the Holy Spirit upon God's people.

Please, on this first Sunday of a new year, old people - dream a little dream with me of what should be, what could be, and let us renew our commitment to God's vision for the world that possibly we saw clearly in our youth. Old people, share your dreams with the world, or otherwise, how will the young people know how or what to prophesy? Our dreams can bring focus and energy to the visions of the young. Young people listen to the dreams of the old and envision how it can be and in the power of the Holy Spirit go about the work of proclaiming the Good News. Have a blessed New Year.

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