

## **The Opening Scene**

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Mark 1: 1-8

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Today we are going to take a journey in a time machine. It is of course an imaginary time machine, and not a real one, but on this time machine we are going to journey back to first century Palestine. The first century begins of course, with the birth of Jesus. He walks the earth for roughly thirty-three years. He comes to have a small band of disciples, he is crucified, dead and buried. On the third day he arose from the dead and ascended into heaven as we say in the Apostle's Creed. A short time after that, the Holy Spirit comes at Pentecost and the church is born among these original disciples. And then some thirty to thirty-five years go by. A number of things happen. People who were young when they saw Jesus grow old, many people are born and grow up who never saw Jesus at all. And in the meantime, three decades worth of events happen in the life of the church. The church grows by leaps and bounds. Gentiles pour into the church. The apostle Paul takes his three missionary journeys. The church faces persecution. And then finally, someone writes a gospel, the first gospel recording the events of Jesus' life and that person's name was John Mark, or as we know him, just Mark.

Now, if the first century were the twenty-first century, then, as you all know, the gospel of Mark would not just have come out as a book, but as a movie. If it were to be a successful movie, it would probably look like a little something from George Lucas. You start out with a picture of the stars, and the music from John Williams and the London Symphony Orchestra, and the words scrolling across the screen: The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is written in the prophet Isaiah: I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will

prepare your way---the voice of one calling out in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight paths for him.

And then the camera pans down to our opening scene. A crowd of people are all lined up in the wilderness getting ready to be baptized, and there is a man standing there knee deep in the Jordan River, preaching with a long beard wearing clothes of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist. "Surely this must be him" the audience says, "this must be Jesus. After all, everyone is lining up to see him, and he is baptizing people, washing away their sins, tears running down their cheeks."

But alas, he tells them he is not him. "After me will come one who is more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am unworthy to untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit, and with fire."

Now, I don't know about you, but I am thinking that all the people who were lined up to see this man wouldn't have lined up and waited for hours in the middle of the woods had they thought he was just a messenger of the Lord and not the Lord himself. I am sure they had to be more than a little disappointed to find out that this was not who he was. But John the Baptist is called to proclaim the truth as all of those who are called to preach a message from the Lord. And as one who is called to proclaim the truth it is his duty to say "No, this is not who I am. I am only the one who is called to prepare the way.

Why do we begin this way? Why do we begin the gospel of Mark not with Jesus' birth or not with the beginning of Jesus' ministry, but with a scene of a man who tells us that he is not Jesus, that he is only there to prepare the way? Well, I don't know. But I think it is interesting that the gospel begins not with the Lord himself, but with someone who could easily be

confused with the Lord, someone who could easily be mistaken for the Lord. I think it is interesting, because in the long history of the people of God, this happens quite a bit. It often happens that the people of God confuse something that may look a little divine with the divine itself, and they will worship that in place of the divine. The most obvious ways people can do this of course is to follow another god, or to build another idol and worship that in the place of God. You may remember the story of the Israelites, who worshipped a golden calf that in its shiny and enchanting beauty started to mesmerize them and they got confused. But there are also less obvious ways in which this happens. Sometimes a dynamic and charismatic pastor or bishop or pope might be confused with God. Sometimes the scripture can be confused with God. Sometimes all kinds of things like church buildings and the sacraments and even our gifts and abilities can be confused with God.

Now, lest you think I have lost my mind, I am not suggesting that anyone actually believes that a pastor or a member of the clergy is all knowing or all powerful and they certainly don't think that about a building or a book. But these things come to replace God when they become the things we worship in place of God. And that is what the opening scene of Mark warns us against. Of course, all of these things have their place. The words of scripture, or the words of a pastor can lead us to a deeper knowledge of God, our gifts and our buildings can be used for the sake of God, all these things point to God in various ways, but we get in trouble when we start confusing the things that can lead us to God with the only one we should ever worship. This didn't just happen to John the Baptist. It seems to happen among God's people all the time.

Now, the moment we realize that we are confusing things that are not divine with the divine, we can start to get pretty anxious, I think. If you know the story about the golden calf, you know that in that story God wanted to destroy all of the Israelites for worshipping the golden calf and Moses essentially had to calm God down. But this morning, I would like to suggest that we not worry too much about all of that, and think about why it matters that we not confuse other things with God. Why is this something God should care about? It matters, because none of these things which we confuse with God can ever measure up to the holiness and perfection of God. I was recently watching the series on Netflix called *The Keepers*. I don't know if you've seen this series or not, but if you haven't, you should consider doing so because it is pretty remarkable. It is the story about sister Cathy Cesnik, a young nun who taught in a Catholic high school in the Baltimore area who was beloved by all her students and who was as kind and as dedicated to the Lord as she could be, but one day she went missing and later her body was found. She was the victim of a murder. It was a heartbreaking tragedy as well as an incredible mystery. Who on earth would want to kill this kind and compassionate nun? Well, if you watch this series, you will learn that the priests in this school were using the power given to them by the church to sexually abuse school girls and many people suspect that sister Cathy was killed because she was on to them. Now, all of this abuse took place in the late sixties, and all these many years later, these women have all told stories about how their lives were absolutely destroyed by these priests, and their faith was absolutely destroyed. Think of what happens to us when we associate God with people who are ordained in the name of God, or who hold offices in the name of God and who use their power for purposes as evil as that. Now, of course most priests and ministers and elders and deacons will not do anything remotely like

what these priests are accused of doing. But, you see even the best of us are imperfect, even the best of us with the best of intentions can at least do things to hurt others and wound others and neglect others.

And people can even use the bible to wound others. Years ago, a friend of mine named Ralph was the new pastor at a church where he was teaching a children's Sunday school class. All the kids of the church would go to this Sunday school class, but he noticed this one little girl who sat with her parents in church every week would never go. Ralph didn't know why, but he later found out that the girl, Lucy was her name, told her parents she never wanted to go back to Sunday school again. "I don't understand" Ralph said. Well, Lucy's mother explained that the pastor before him also taught that class and as he was teaching a lesson Lucy became interested in what he was teaching and she raised her hand. Now as every decent human being knows it is so nice to have children raise their hands because they are interested in what you teach. But the pastor said she wasn't supposed to raise her hand and speak. After all it said so in the bible. Paul in first Corinthians says women are to remain silent in the church. Women and therefore all females, this pastor said, are supposed to remain silent in the church. This pastor was taking Paul's words out of context, but you can imagine the damage it did to that little girl's self-esteem for her to believe that this is what the bible teaches.

I have never seen the Lord with my own two eyes. Like most of you, I believe that Jesus Christ is the visible image of the invisible God, but nowhere in the New Testament are we ever even given a description of what Jesus looks like. And so in the church and in our faith we have things that give us a picture of God. We have the church, we have the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion. We have the bible, we have ordained officers in the church. But it is an

essential part of our faith to know that none of these things or people take the place of God. In fact, it is such an essential part of our faith that this is the lesson the gospel of Mark begins with as John the Baptist the one who comes to lead us to the Lord and prepare the way for the Lord, nonetheless declares that he is not the Lord. And as we see what those people and things we confuse with the Lord can do, that is something to celebrate. It is indeed something to celebrate.

Maybe there has been a time or two in your own life, when you have been hurt or damaged by someone or something which you have confused with God. Maybe that experience is something that is buried deep down inside you, buried deep down in your subconscious, or maybe it is still as raw and painful to you today as it was ten, twenty, thirty years ago. Maybe you were charmed and mesmerized by someone or something that sparkles and shines. And maybe you learned that when we are mesmerized and we get caught up in all the charm and beauty of these golden calves, our emotions can get stirred up, and we can forget the simple lesson that even the things which sparkle and shine and which when used properly can lead us to God are not God. We can forget whatever it is or whoever it is that would damage or hurt us is not God. And so maybe it bears repeating over and over again to you that they are not. Maybe it bears repeating to you not to let the one God, not to let the one and only God who loves you unconditionally and who is always for you be confused with anything less. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.