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Title: The Beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ - His Forerunner
Text: Mark 1:1-13 (vv. 2-8)
Theme: The ministry of John the Baptist in relation to Jesus Christ shows Him to be worthy of the ministry entrusted to Him.

The Advent Emphasis:

Today is the second Sunday of the Advent Season. The church historically celebrated this season as a time of anticipation of His arrival in fulfillment of the promises made in the Old Testament. Let us consider the reading for today from Isaiah 11:1-9 and the implications of it for us as His people.

¹“Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, And a branch from his roots will bear fruit. ² The Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him, The spirit of wisdom and understanding, The spirit of counsel and strength, The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. ³ And He will delight in the fear of the LORD, And He will not judge by what His eyes see, Nor make a decision by what His ears hear; ⁴ But with righteousness He will judge the poor, And decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth; And He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, And with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked. ⁵ Also righteousness will be the belt about His loins, And faithfulness the belt about His waist. ⁶ And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, And the leopard will lie down with the young goat, And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little boy will lead them. ⁷ Also the cow and the bear will graze, Their young will lie down together, And the lion will eat straw like the ox. ⁸ The nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, And the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den. ⁹ They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD As the waters cover the sea” (Isa. 11:1-9).

The wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid, the calf and the lion, the cow and the bear--and they shall be led by a child. There will be no pain or destruction. The whole earth will know the LORD. If only we could live in this world. But alas, our world is far more like the world of the Davidic dynasty when Isaiah was writing. Then and now, it is a world immersed in war, a world where many people are oppressed and poor, while a few rule with heavy hands and wickedness.

But Isaiah shows us that this is not the way that it will always be. This is not the way that God intends for us to live. Isaiah provides us with hope and expectation--hope for a better tomorrow through the expectation of a ruler in the line of David upon whom the spirit of the LORD will rest. This one will have extraordinary insight and will judge with righteousness and faithfulness, caring for the meek and the poor. There will be harsh judgment for the oppressors.

This is the same justice for which the psalmist prays in Psalm 72. “Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son.” The psalmist prays

for one who will judge with righteousness that shows favor for the poor, to “give deliverance to the needy and crush the oppressor” (v. 14). This king will offer refreshment like the rain showering on the earth as peace will abound forever. The key, however, is that this righteousness and justice do not come from the king himself. No, the justice with which this one will reign is the justice that comes from God. It is only with God that this peace can come, and it is this peace for which we continue to hope. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0MDO/is_5_31/ai_n15652815

Introduction:

The intent of this passage is to verify the character of Jesus Christ and the efficacious nature of redemptive activity. His forerunner, His baptism, and His temptation all seek to explain why He is worthy and why the sacrifice He offers is efficacious against sin.

ILLUSTRATION “What does this look like?”

“How can I lay my hand on this abstract concept? Have you ever taken a real hard test at school? What did you do before you took the test? You prepared (preparation). Have you ever seen a bunch of people with skates on smacking a small, round object with sticks? Did you every wonder what they were doing? (Baptism/identification) Have you been told not to do something and yet felt almost compelled to do what you were told not to do? (Temptation) Today, we will look at those three thoughts in the life of Jesus Christ. In all weights and measurement, there lies (somewhere) an absolute standard. And it is against this absolute standard that all things are compared.

INTRODUCTION “Where am I going?”

God the Son became like us when He was born of the Virgin Mary in the town of Bethlehem. He lived for 30 years in relative obscurity. Mark chapter 1 gives us the start of His ministry. It is like His initiation or training camp period.

APPLICATION/ASSIMILATION “How do I use this?”

“What difference does this truth matter in my life?”

John prepared the way for Jesus to have an effective ministry. Are you? Jesus was baptized in order to identify with us. Will we be baptized in order to be identified with Him? Jesus resisted temptation by quoting Scripture and fleeing from it. How are we doing with temptation? Do we even put up a fight?

ARGUMENTATION “Why should I do this?”

If you want to please the Lord, then you will seem to be preparing the way, identifying with Him through baptism, and resisting temptation.

EXHORTATION “Come on, let’s do it!”

- Have you been lazy with reference to living right?
- Have you been baptized?
- Have you been constantly giving to temptation?

The forerunner was necessary for the Messiah's appearance.

How will they best hear?

- The imagery of a family's preparation around the house when guests are expected.
- The imagery of preparing for a "date" with your spouse *before* you were married.
- If the President of our great nation was to visit the small town in which I live, we would be assured that a preliminary group of individuals would precede his arrival and the town itself would do what was necessary to put their best foot forward and receive him warmly. This is equally true of John's ministry and the coming of God's Son.

Questions:

1. Why a forerunner?
2. Are we, right now, in a ministry of preparation for the coming of the Lord?
3. Is baptism important for us?

To Know: To know why a ministry of preparation is still valid today.

To Choose: To choose to spread the gospel to whom and wherever we can.

To Feel: To feel the joy of preparing the way for the coming Christ.

John's ministry was like a splash of cold water in the dead of sleep. It isn't the surprise of an unexpected gift but the surprise of being awakened after falling asleep at the wheel while still driving. The Jewish nation was looking for a deliverer from Roman rule; they were not expecting a prophet calling them to repentance. He uses the word "behold" introducing something unexpected and surprising. In this historical setting of prophetic silence we have one who comes as it is written.

The Eternal Value:

In the absence of repentance and faith, there is no life. **Unless and until** a person comes to repentance and faith in Jesus, there is no hope or help.

The Present Danger:

No one comes to Jesus by accident. The heart that embraces the Messiah as Lord and Savior is a heart that has been prepared by the Holy Spirit through various means. There is always an ever present danger of forgetting that we live in an eternal world. Our temporal world often blocks us from seeing how this world is only a tangible shadow of something that is far more enduring and important.

John's entire ministry is to identify and affirm the one who fulfills the promises of God.

- I. His Forerunner - John the Baptizer (vv. 2-8)

Whatever the idea is behind the forerunner, it deals directly with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Everything about the forerunner is in preparation for the coming King.

A. John's nativity (Luke 1:5-25, 39-80)

Although Mark does not include the events preceding and during John's birth, Luke gives us a detailed account of what happened. The key components of this account are as follows.

- his miraculous conception (v. 7)
- his ministry of preparation (vv. 16-17)
- his meeting with Jesus within the womb (vv. 39-45)
- his manner of life (vv. 15, 80)

All of this information is outside of Mark's account but helps us in filling in some of the gaps concerning John.

B. John's authority (v. 2a "as it is written")

"Mark cites the OT to show that any true understanding of the ministry of Jesus must be firmly grounded there." (Walter W. Wessell, "Mark," EBC, [Zondervan, 1984], 619).

"The Greek verb is in the perfect tense, which stresses both completed action and a continuing state. The full force of the Greek is: 'Even as it has been written and still stands written' - a mighty affirmation of the divine inspiration and authority of the Old Testament Scriptures." (Ralph Earle, Word Meanings in the New Testament, 29)

"The writer's purpose here is **to connect** the ministry of Christ, through that of his forerunner, with the ancient Scriptures and the church of the Old Testament." (Joseph Addison Alexander, The Gospel According to Mark, [Baker, 1858], 2).

Mark is picking up the story line that was silent after the writings of the prophet Malachi in 400 BC. Who John is and what his ministry consists of is directly tied into what has preceded him by way of biblical revelation. Who he is and what he does is not new or mysterious.

"'It stands written,' refers to the regulative and authoritative character of the document." (Rogers and Rogers, 67).

To understand fully the life of Jesus Christ one must begin with the Old Testament. There is a singular idea that binds all of Scripture together and to which the sub-plots contribute.

ILLUSTRATION:

It is like the mighty Amazon River in South America, whose enormous size is approximately equal to that of the continental United States. There are hundreds of lesser tributaries that contribute to this one river, but all the tributaries pale in comparison to the mighty Amazon.

The Amazon River of South America is the largest river in the world by volume, with a total river flow greater than the top ten largest rivers flowing into the ocean combined.

The Amazon River accounts for approximately 1/5 of total world's river flow, and it has the largest drainage basin in the world. Recent findings indicate that the Amazon may in fact be the longest river as well, since it is second to the Nile River by only 400 meters. Because of its vast dimensions, it is sometimes called *The River Sea*, and at no point is it crossed by bridges. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amazon_River

In the Gospel of Mark we must see the greatness of Jesus Christ and His redemptive work and all other elements of his account as being tributaries of this greater truth.

C. John's ministry (vv. 2b-5)

"The quotation that immediately follows comes from Malachi 3:1 but is followed by one from Isaiah 40:3." John's ministry was one of "preparation." He came preparing people for the coming Lord by "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Many people responded by "confessing their sins" and being "baptized."

There are three ideas I would like to consider concerning John's ministry, the ministry of preparation, then the ministry of repentance and confession, and finally, that of baptism.

i. A ministry of preparation

"The urgency of the action is stressed by the use of the aorist imperative, 'Prepare now!'" (Walter W. Wessell, "Mark," *EBC*, [Zondervan, 1984], 621).

Here the word "prepare" speaks of "clearing a road by the removal of obstructions." (Joseph Addison Alexander, *The Gospel According to Mark*, [Baker, 1858], 3).

John came to a people who were spiritually asleep. There were those who were living in anticipation of this event like Anna of the Temple and Zechariah, John's father, but the nation as a whole was asleep and John came to "agitate the comfortable and comfort the agitated."

ii. A ministry of repentance and confession (i.e. verbal)

As we will see in our study of Mark, what John called the people to was not unusual, to whom the appeal was made was. The Jews fully understood the nature of John's invitation for the Gentile, but not for the natural descendents of Abraham. Thus John's message to the Jews was startling and abrasive.

John came preaching purification from ceremonial defilement. "Wherever Christianity comes it brings purification." (William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, DSBS,

[Westminster John Knox Press, 1975], 12) The steps to forgiveness come through the path of repentance and confession. "There can be no forgiveness without humiliation. It is the end of pride where forgiveness begins." (Barclay, The Gospel of Mark, 15)

The church has struggled with its understanding of John's baptism as to its nature and significance, but it is rather easy to understand if you consider the larger idea of repentance, confession, baptism, and forgiveness.

"'The baptism of repentance,' has no article in Greek. [It] should be 'a baptism of repentance.' The latter word is a genitive of description, indicating **what kind of a baptism is meant. It was a baptism connected with the repentance of the individual.**" (Kenneth S. Wuest, Wuest's Word Studies, [Eerdmans, 1973], 1:17, 18).

"**The baptism indicated that repentance had already occurred** or was being accompanied by it." (Walter W. Wessell, "Mark," EBC, [Zondervan, 1984], 8:620).

As a result of repentance and confession, God grants the remission of sins. By submitting to water baptism an individual is affirming publicly that they have placed their faith in the true message of God. Through confession an individual is recognizing who they are, who God is, and what they must do in light of this.

"A baptism of repentance" is a Semitism, meaning "**a baptism which symbolized or expressed repentance.**" (Walter W. Wessell, "Mark," EBC, [Zondervan, 1984], 8:621).

John's intent for them is, "repent, and be baptized because of the remission of sins." He only would baptize those who repented and confessed. He withheld baptism from the Pharisees and Sadducees because they did not show evidences of repentance in Matthew 3:7-9.

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees **coming for baptism**, he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ **Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance;** ⁹ and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham" (Matt. 3:7-9).

Biblical repentance is a change of mind, or attitude, toward God, sin, and ourselves.

"John required genuine repentance as a condition for being baptized." (Ralph Earle, Word Meanings in the New Testament, 30)

"Confessing their sins," the Greek verb being an intensive compound, denotes the act of free and full confession or acknowledgement.

This idea of repentance and confession and baptism as a picture of forgiveness is still valid in our theology.

iii. A ministry of baptism (i.e. visual)

We will consider the idea of baptism in greater detail in verses 9-11. However, we will make the following comments concerning our present passage:

The Jordan is the principle river in Palestine, beginning in the snows of Mount Hermon and ending in the Dead Sea. Its closest point to Jerusalem is about 20 miles.

“The Jew was familiar with ritual washings. Leviticus 11-15 details this for them. Symbolic washing and purifying was woven into the very fabric of Jewish ritual.” (William Barclay, The Gospel of Mark, DSBS, [Westminster John Knox Press, 1975], 13)

“It was from these familiar and significant [washings] that John’s baptism was derived.” (Joseph Addison Alexander, The Gospel According to Mark, [Baker, 1858], 4).

John contrasts his baptism with water with that of the Coming One who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. John continues to show the superiority of the One who is coming to himself. “We must be careful to note that the baptism of which we are now speaking, is not Christian baptism, but a baptism connected with Israel and its acceptance of its Messiah.” (Kenneth S. Wuest, Wuest’s Word Studies, [Eerdmans, 1973], 1:16)

In verse 5, Mark informs us how John’s message was received and the impact it had on its audience.

“John’s preaching caused great excitement. Although there is an element of hyperbole in Mark’s report, it nevertheless implies that John’s preaching aroused much interest and created a great stir.” (Walter W. Wessell, “Mark,” EBC, [Zondervan, 1984], 8:620).

John’s message was in preparation of the coming “messiah.” Everything from Genesis to Malachi **pointed to** and **prepared us** for this moment. This is what they looked for and why they came. Some might have come out of curiosity, but most came because the groundwork had already been laid.

D. John’s humility (vv. 6-8)

Notice the related passages to John the Baptizer in Mark’s account (Mark 6:14-29; 9:11-13; 11:27-33). It is of interest to see the number of times reference is made to John in Mark’s account.

Mark 1:2-8	Mark 6:14-29	Mark 9:11-13	Mark 11:27-33
His Authority His Ministry His Humility	His Martyrdom - The Forerunner/Prophet	His Ministry - The Forerunner	His Authority - The Prophet

John dressed in the attire of the prophet. This same imagery was cast by Elijah and other prophets (2 Kings 1:8; Zechariah 13:4). The description given of John is typical of a “holy man” of the Near East.

“They answered him, ‘He was a hairy man with **a leather girdle bound about his loins.**’ And he said, ‘It is Elijah the Tishbite’” (2 Kings 1:8).

“Also it will come about in that day that the prophets will each be ashamed of his vision when he prophesies, and **they will not put on a hairy robe** in order to deceive” (Zech. 13:4).

John lived his message. Everything about him pointed others to someone bigger than John. Three things about him preached the supremacy of God in all things.

- a. There was the place in which he stayed – the wilderness.
- b. There were the clothes he wore – a garment woven of camel’s hair and a leather belt about his waist.
- c. There was the food he ate – locusts and wild honey.

“If a person vowed to abstain from flesh, he was permitted to eat fish or locusts. Honey water was a substitute for wine. To eat only locust and honey indicated the refusal to eat meat or drink wine.” (Roger and Rogers, 67)

Although John occupied a specific role in the coming King, does where we live, how we dress, and what we eat preach Christ? St. Francis of Assisi, “Preach the gospel. And if necessary, use words.” John recognized his role in relation to the Lamb of God. “To remove the sandals was the work and office of a slave. John asked nothing for himself but everything for the Christ whom he proclaimed. John pointed to something and someone beyond himself.” (Barclay, The Gospel of Mark, 17)

John clearly saw his role as subservient to that of the Christ. Both Matthew (3:11, 12) and Luke (3:15-18) point out how the baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire that comes when the Christ winnows the wheat from the chaff. The good news about Jesus Christ separates the believing from the unbelieving. In contrast to John’s baptism by water, His baptism is stronger.

John the Baptist is the fulfillment of Malachi 3:1. He came as the forerunner to the arrival of King Jesus. He came to prepare the way by calling people to repentance and confession for the forgiveness of sin. John is a unique person. Although the role of prophet would continue after John, he is the last of his kind. After him a new order would begin. The simplicity of John’s life is compelling. He was one of only three life-time Nazarites (cf. Samson, Samuel). One of the arresting features of a life-long Nazarite was their vow never to cut their hair (Numbers 6). John was thirty years old when he appeared baptizing individuals in the Jordan. The imagery of a man with thirty years worth of hair wearing the garment of skin set him apart from the general populace. Anyone existing at that time in that geographical location fully understood what he represented.

John's entire life consisted in his complete devotion to God by preparing the way of one who was coming. This marked him and his ministry. Nothing John did detracted from this singular pursuit. The text before us highlights three aspects of John's ministry (Mark 1:2-8): the source of his authority, the nature his ministry, and the quality of his humility.

It is in verse 7 that we see John's humility. John clearly saw his ministry as one of secondary importance when contrasted with that of the One to come. He knew that he was of lesser strength and lesser worth. John fully understood that he was not the Christ (John 3:28). He understood that his role was one of preparation. He equally knew that the One to come must "increase" while John, of necessity, must "decrease" (John 3:30). John knew that the One to come was "from above [and] is above all" (John 3:31).

Mark expresses John's humility by noting John's confession that he was not worthy to unloose the latchet of the Messiah's sandal. When a guest enters a home, the thong of the visitor's sandals would be untied by a slave before entering the foot bath.

John places himself lower than the house servant. Was John using exaggerated speech, or was John sincere? Personally, John understood who the One was and thus saw himself as nothing in contrast to Him who alone is worthy. Man's inbred arrogance blinds him to his true nature. Man believes himself to be better than he actually is. Modern talk shows always paint the picture of man as intrinsically good. The snap shots are always "air brushed." Never do we see man for what he is. Our self-deception exists because we compare ourselves against others when the comparison should be between God and man. It is only when this happens that we will see ourselves for what we are, and it is only when this happens that we can receive, by grace alone through faith alone, the offer of Christ alone.

It is when this happens that we, like John, will readily admit that we are lower than any household servant and that we, like John, are unworthy to unlatch the sandals of the Messiah. May the Holy Spirit continue to open our eyes to the reality of our Lord's "above all" status and may we always see ourselves in need of and recipients of His excessive grace.

APPLICATION: (What the NEXT STEP? - Let us leave with three practical thoughts)

1. Are we prepared for the coming of our Lord? Are you saved, do you know Jesus as the good news, the anointed one, the Son of God?
2. As a Christian, are you awake and aware of His coming? Jesus Christ is coming again, are you living in anticipation of that coming? I am not telling you how to live only that you should be fully awake to the coming Christ.
3. Is the life we are living preparing people for the coming Christ?