

A New Beginning

Mark 1:4-11

We've just begun the adventure that is the year 2012. When I was a boy I couldn't imagine the world lasting this long. My religious viewpoint was that God would have come in and ended the world before I reached middle age. There goes that theory!

But the big expectation building up this year is the whole story about the Mayan calendar. Somehow word has gone around that this ancient culture thought the world would end this year.

Now that's not exactly true, but truth has never been required in order for something to be widely reported. The Mayans, who lived in Central America between 250 and 900 AD, measured time in both large and small portions.

Whereas we have decades and centuries and millennia as ways of ordering our years, they measured time in terms of human lifetimes, which they averaged at fifty two years. Obviously medicine has come a long way since.

But for larger periods of time they developed a calendar, based in some part on the movement of stars. That calendar lasted 5,126 years. They started it in 3114 BC, which means that it runs out this year.

They don't predict any apocalyptic disasters, or even the end of the world. There isn't anything about planet's core exploding like in the movie, or any kind of calamity. The folks who made the movie "2012" added those details.

So even though the Mayans themselves were silent about what they thought would happen after this year, people have filled in the blanks, mostly with stuff from the Bible or popular culture or something they saw in a movie.

We've developed this expectation that something new is going to happen, that the world we know is going to be changed forever. Part of that expectation is rooted in the perception that things are bad, and that there are forces outside of our control that might make things better in a dramatic way.

For instance, one internet poster commented, "Well, at least if the world ends this year, we won't have to hear any more about the Kardashians." Boy, can I get an "amen" on that one brothers and sisters?

The reason I bring this up is because when people started writing about Jesus' life and trying to explain what it meant in terms of God acting in the world, they described the

situation using passages from the Old Testament that talked about God bringing an end to the world as they knew it and starting over.

We just got done celebrating Christmas and remembering the stories of Jesus' birth. We talked about shepherds and angels and magi and Mary and Joseph. But if you look at the way Mark begins his story of Jesus' life, he doesn't include any of that.

No story about Jesus birth, no family tree, no miraculous events during Jesus' childhood. Mark starts by talking about this controversial guy named John who stood out in the desert before the ministry of Jesus and told people that God was coming to change things forever.

You see, for 2,000 years Jesus' followers have been connecting Jesus' coming to an OT prophecy by a prophet named Malachi. Malachi ministered over 500 years before Jesus, but his book ended with an oracle about the return of the prophet Elijah, who had died hundreds of years before.

Malachi said that Elijah would return to announce that God was going to completely change the world. And the sense was that Malachi was the last person to prophesy. People felt like they hadn't heard anything from God for the past 500 years.

Their situation was so bad that they wondered if God was ever going to do something about it. Mark believed that Jesus was the thing God did about it. And he believed that John the Baptist was the "Elijah" figure that Malachi spoke of.

When Mark describes John, he looks like Elijah, he sounds like Elijah, and he gets into trouble with the king like Elijah. But not before telling people that someone greater than himself was coming.

You see, Mark is pulling out all the stops to tell his readers just how important this all was, how it would change the world. But Jesus doesn't simply start preaching and healing and doing all the stuff he did during his ministry.

Jesus does like everyone else at the time – he leaves his home in Nazareth, walks through the desert, and comes to hear John preach. And just like so many others, Jesus is baptized by John.

The thing is, Jesus' baptism doesn't mean the same thing for him as it does for everyone else. Mark tells us that people were baptized as a way of showing that they were going to change the way they lived their lives.

Going into the water was symbolic of cleansing themselves of their sin. Jesus, on the other hand, didn't have any sin to confess. He didn't need to repent. He wasn't cleansing himself by getting into the water.

When Jesus gets into the water, God affirms him as God's own son, using a variety of images from the Old Testament. Now this is kind of strange, because Mark hasn't told us anything about Jesus being born of a virgin.

He doesn't say that Jesus was chosen by God before he was born. There's no sense in Mark's gospel that Jesus was God's son up in heaven before he came to earth. Jesus doesn't have any spectacular knowledge as a child. He isn't born into the right family.

He's just a guy from Nazareth in Mark. That's it. HE just says, "this guy is the Messiah." He doesn't bother to explain why or how Jesus could be the Messiah. He just says, Jesus is anointed by God.

These days so many famous people, whether they're athletes or entertainers or actors or whatever, so many of them come from families where their parents were famous for something, and the kids seem to have been born with the same genes, or the same connections as their parents.

For instance, on the Brewers alone we've seen Prince Fielder, Jerry Hairston and Tony Gwynn. I used to watch all of their fathers play baseball back in the day. Same thing for entertainment. From Jaden Smith to Ben Stiller, to Michael Douglas to Liza Minnelli. The same can also be said in the worlds of politics and business.

So many famous people are born into that fame. I'm not saying they don't earn it. But they come from a family where that level of success is the norm. It's expected. And their families honestly have enough money and connections to make success a lot easier than it is for the rest of us.

In Jesus' world it was even more like that. People of fame and power generally came from the right families. And if you weren't from a noble family, it really didn't matter what you thought you could do. You were almost always relegated to a life of manual labor in service of someone else who was born to the right family.

So when Mark tells us that Jesus is some guy from Nazareth, and Mark doesn't tell us who his parents were or Jesus' family name, that struck people as odd, almost hard to believe.

In order to convince people that Jesus was who Mark said he was, people would need confirmation from God. And that's part of the reason why Mark tells us the story of Jesus' baptism. It's proof that Jesus really was God's son, God's anointed.

Now notice how Mark describes Jesus' baptism. Jesus goes down into the water after listening to John preach. He says that when Jesus came up out of the water, Jesus saw the sky open up. He saw God's spirit descend on him like a dove.

He also heard a voice from heaven which said “You are my son, the beloved; I am very pleased with you.” Mark’s readers, who probably had some familiarity with the Old Testament, would have recognized a number of OT images in the background of this experience.

In order to understand what Mark’s trying to tell us about this story, we need to be aware of those images. There are a number of passages in the OT which Mark uses to give meaning to Jesus’ baptism.

When the voice from heaven, obviously God’s voice, says “you are my son”, it’s a reference to the many places in the Old Testament where God calls the king “God’s son”. This would be the kind of thing you heard spoken when Israel crowned a new king.

So Jesus is being acknowledged as a king, just as other kings had been crowned in the past. And instead of a priest saying those words, God himself speaks them from heaven. The problem is that Jesus isn’t the king, not like all the other kings in the world. Jesus lived under the rule of King Herod in Galilee, who in turn lived under the rule of Caesar.

So if God’s calling Jesus a king, his kingdom has to be a different kind of kingdom. In fact, Jesus and his followers go around telling people about God’s kingdom. They keep telling people that they are bringing about God’s reign in the world, through one kind act after another.

Every time Jesus heals someone from disease, every time Jesus casts a demon out of some possessed person, every time Jesus sits down to teach people how God wants them to live, each of those acts makes God’s kingdom more and more of a reality in the world.

So Jesus’ baptism is like his coronation in Mark. It is the beginning of his reign, his ministry. After feeling like they haven’t heard anything from God for a long time, Jesus brings an end to the past and ushers in a new era. He’s helping people relate to God in an entirely different way.

He brings new teaching. He doesn’t say that the things people heard from God in the past were wrong. But since Jesus is the Son of God, Mark tells us that has the right to teach people a new way of relating to God. A new way of understanding what they had heard from God in the past.

It was a fresh start. It was a lot more significant than the end of the Mayan calendar. Jesus’ baptism was the event which kicked it all off. And in a way, what God says to Jesus really becomes what God says to all of us: You are my sons, my daughters, those whom I love. I am well pleased with you.

I think the problem many people have with all of this talk of a new start is that we've all tried to make a fresh break from the past. We've all tried to turn over a new leaf. We've all come to the point in our lives, probably many points, where we take stock of our lives and say, "I want to change things. I want to do better. I want to cleanse myself of those bad habits. My family deserves better from me, God deserves better from me. I deserve better from myself."

And then after a few weeks or a couple of months we find ourselves falling into the same habits again. We do things that we swore we wouldn't do. We eat things we swore we wouldn't eat. We drink more than we promised ourselves we would. We fail to do the things we swore we would. You fill in the blank here.

When that happens, we feel like complete failures. Because we always know someone who has that aspect of their life under control. And we wonder, "What's wrong with me? Why can't I be like that?"

And the next time we try and make a fresh start, we find it even harder to be successful because we know good and well that we've failed in the past. So why should anything be different this time?

And I think the good news of this passage for people who have faltered and failed and have beat themselves up for not being who they think they should be is that God also starts things over. God gave us a fresh start in the person of Jesus.

But the difference this time is that it's more about what God's doing than about what we need to do in order to please God. Here we are trying to fix all the problems of the world and trying to be that perfect image of who we think we should be, and yet we're kind of in the same condition that Jesus found his world in: stressed, in despair, sick, cynical, wondering if things will ever change.

Jesus doesn't come in and say, "You all better try harder or God's going to strike you." He says, "Let me be a part of the healing process. Let me do some of the things you can't do. You're not alone in this. I'm with you. God's with you. Even when you fall, I'm still with you."

When you are trying to reform. When you acknowledge the need to change and are ready to turn away from the old, you qualify for John's baptism. That is you are ready to make the change. The problem is this. You are going to change in principle but have little power to change in fact!

A minister told the story of a friend who was a recovering alcoholic. The friend said, "If I heard once, I heard a million times that I needed to 'change' -- as though I didn't know that. I decided to change almost every night of my drinking life. I would finish my bottle

with the absolute promise to myself that the next day would be different. It would be a 'new' day. And it never was."

"I have baptized you with water," John said, "But he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." In other words, John asked for a promise to change while Jesus would give the power to change.

Baptism for a Christian is the spiritual equivalent of a Genesis day one. It is a "brand spanking new" day. The literal sense for the verb "to baptize" means "to immerse or place fully into". This sense is reflected in Second Corinthians 5:17, "... if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

The recovering friend said that his new day came when he quit fighting his addiction in his own strength and made a fresh commitment to give God the controls for his life. "It may be weird," he said, "But it's like I handed over the remote." [Not weird at all if you know men and their remotes!] When he quit struggling with the notion of reforming his life for good, he received enough strength to have a brand new day -- every day -- one day at a time.

Jesus baptizes us with the Holy Spirit -- or in other words -- places us in the Spirit who can give power from within instead of simply pressure from without. There's a huge difference, and it makes all the difference in the world.

So this week as you go through this relatively new, untainted year, and you wonder, "how long is it going to take me to screw things up again" and "how disappointed is God going to be with me, remember that you are not alone. It is not a matter of you standing before God, wrestling with all your willpower to be the person you think you should be.

All of our attempts to do good and be righteous are dwarfed by the work of Jesus to bring the kingdom of God to this world. His efforts are much more significant than ours. His patience with us is much greater than our patience with ourselves and others. So give yourself some grace. Today is a new day, but in God's kingdom, tomorrow is also.