

Come and Meet the King

Mark 1:1–8

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The Gospel According to the Lion

There is a remarkable image that runs through both the book of Ezekiel and the book of Revelation — four living creatures surrounding the throne of God, crying out *Holy, holy, holy*. A lion, a man, an ox, and an eagle. The early church, steeped in that imagery, saw in those four creatures a picture of the four Gospels — each one a witness surrounding the testimony of Jesus and pointing toward him. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John: four angles of vision on one Lord.

The creature assigned to the Gospel of Mark is the lion. From the very first verse, Mark wants you to know: this is a story about a King.

This morning we begin a journey through that Gospel. I do not know how long it will take us — we will follow the text at its own pace, pausing for seasons and special occasions as they come. But I am genuinely looking forward to the study. The last time I preached through Mark was eleven years ago, and my soul is ready to sit inside a Gospel again.

Before we come to the text itself, a word about the man who wrote it.

We first meet Mark in Acts 12, when Peter, freshly escaped from prison, makes his way to a house in Jerusalem — Mark's house, where believers had gathered to pray. Mark was young then, likely a teenager, perhaps one of the earliest followers of Christ. His cousin was Barnabas, which brought him into the orbit of the earliest missionary journeys. He traveled with Barnabas and Paul for a time, though homesickness got the better of him and he turned back — a decision that caused a serious rift between those two great men.

But Mark grew. He matured. And God used him in ways that no one could have predicted in those early, uncertain days. By the end of Paul's life, he had become indispensable. Writing from prison, Paul speaks warmly of Mark as one who cared for him; and in 2 Timothy, near the very end, Paul makes a special request for Mark to come and help in the ministry. Meanwhile, the apostle Peter — in his first letter — calls Mark *my son*, with all the tenderness that phrase implies. Tradition holds that Mark was with Peter in Rome, and that he was present when Peter was killed.

What all of this means is that the author of this Gospel is a remarkably singular figure. As a young man, he would have been an eyewitness to the ministry of Jesus. He lived among the first disciples. He heard Peter preach. He traveled with Paul. His entire life, from boyhood to old age, was saturated with the Gospel — not as a doctrine to be defended, but as a reality he had breathed in from the beginning. And it is out of that life, those relationships, and the Spirit of God working through him, that this remarkable book was written.

The Text

“The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is written in Isaiah the prophet: ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way’ — ‘a voice of one calling in the desert, Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’ And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: ‘After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’”

— Mark 1:1–8

The World Into Which the King Came

To understand why these eight verses hit with such force, you have to understand the world into which they were spoken.

For four hundred years before the birth of Christ, the people of Israel had been ground down — oppressed, displaced, enslaved, killed. The wars that swept across the ancient world in the wake of Alexander the Great’s conquests, beginning around 330 BC, never really stopped. And then, around 170 BC, a ruler came to power whose name became synonymous with horror for the Jewish people: Antiochus Epiphanes IV. He set out to extinguish Jewish identity altogether, forcing Greek pagan culture on the people, outlawing the reading of Scripture, outlawing the observance of the Sabbath. Those who remained faithful — who refused to abandon the law of God — were put to death.

It was a dark time. And the question on people's lips was ancient and familiar: *Where is God? Why is he silent? Why do the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer? Is he present? Is he at work? When will he come and make things right?*

And into that silence, four hundred years of it, Mark begins his Gospel: *The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

The word *gospel* simply means good news. But notice what Mark says the good news is *about*. It is about Jesus, who is *Christ* — a title meaning the anointed King. And it is about Jesus, who is *the Son of God*. Now, we speak of ourselves as sons and daughters of God, children of God — and that is true and precious. But when Mark uses this title for Jesus, he means something categorically different, and the very next verses tell us what.

It is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way" — "a voice of one calling in the desert, Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him."

Mark is not proof-texting. He is not reaching back into the Old Testament to find a verse that loosely fits his situation. He is drawing on a passage that his readers would have known in their bones, a passage that carried enormous weight — because of what it actually says.

Isaiah 40 is written into a moment of darkness, a time of exile and slavery. But then something shifts, and the prophecy announces that God himself will come to Jerusalem. Not a great leader. Not a prophet. *God himself*. Listen to how it reads:

“A voice of one calling: ‘In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.’”

— Isaiah 40:3–5

The word translated *LORD* in that passage is the Hebrew name *Yahweh* — the high and holy covenant name of God. It was a name so sacred that a scribe would bathe his entire body before he was permitted to write it on a scroll. It was forbidden to speak aloud, except by the High Priest, once a year, as he entered the Holy of Holies.

And Mark opens his Gospel by saying: *that* is who is here.

The Lord himself. The great high God. Creator, ruler, judge — coming in his glory. The unapproachable is now fully present. The totally invulnerable is becoming vulnerable. The impossible is becoming possible. The all-powerful and almighty is stepping into our world.

Are you ready to meet God?

Preparing the Way — Then and Now

A messenger was sent ahead to prepare people for the arrival of this King. We know him as John the Baptist. And what John did to prepare the hearts of people two thousand years ago is not simply a chapter in ancient history — it is as relevant for us this morning as it was on the banks of the Jordan River.

We are people with hardened hearts. We live in a world of ego and pride and self-sufficiency. We are spiritually blinded by sin, by guilt, by shame. What we need is for the rugged places to be made smooth — for hearts that are broken open, for pride to be knocked down, for guilt and shame to be healed — so that we too might have hearts that are genuinely receptive to the Lord God Almighty.

So let us look carefully at what John actually did, and what it shows us about how we open our own lives to God.

Notice first what John did *not* do. He did not send an announcement. He did not organize a welcoming committee or secure speaking engagements or arrange the right meetings with the right officials. None of the things we might instinctively reach for. What John did was radically different, and far more costly.

And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Three things in John's ministry tell us how a person gets ready to meet the King.

First: Recognize That You Are Dead Without God

You meet Jesus in the wilderness.

The translation *desert region* is helpful here, because in West Virginia, the word *wilderness* conjures something green and teeming with life — wild and wonderful, yes, but a place where a person can survive. That is not the kind of wilderness being described. This is desert — a place that has nothing, where no one can survive on their own.

And yet it is precisely in the wilderness that people meet God.

Jacob wrestles with God in the wilderness. Moses encounters God in the wilderness. The people of Israel meet God in the wilderness — the law, the covenants, the very formation of a nation, all of it happens there. And Jesus himself will go into the wilderness.

What is it about this barren, lifeless place? The wilderness is the place where you cannot live without the direct assistance of God. There is no water. There is no food. Life cannot be sustained on its own terms. The entire forty years that Israel spent wandering was designed to teach them exactly that: that in a place where there is nothing, God provides water from the rock and bread from heaven. You meet God where there is nothing to sustain you but God.

That has not changed.

Many people want God — want a relationship with God — but treat him as an accessory, an add-on, something to supplement a life that is already fairly well arranged. It is not until a person enters a wilderness that they discover they have no hope *but* God. That all the wells of life go dry, except one.

This is what it means for you and me to enter the wilderness. Whether by choice or by hardship, you come to the place where you discover that everything — family, career, children, friendships, money, success, health — *everything* that you have been drawing on as a source of meaning and purpose and joy, can never satisfy the deep yearnings of the heart. That is the wilderness. These are blessings from God, things we are rightly grateful for. But they are not the source of our lives. And if they are the source of your purpose and happiness and contentment, then you have not yet come to the wilderness, and you are not ready to meet God.

The wilderness is when something happens that makes you realize you are going to die without him. When you understand, down in your bones, that without the direct intervention of God in your life, you are lost — that is the wilderness, and that is where you meet the King.

Some people arrive there through disaster. Some through personal failure — a sin, a habit, a collapsed dream — and they find themselves on their knees. Some arrive when life does not turn out as expected. Some arrive through grief, and discover in the hole left by a loved one that God has never left them.

But some — those who are wise — enter the wilderness by choice. They recognize, through wisdom rather than through suffering, that only God can ultimately serve as the source of all meaning, purpose, joy, and happiness in their lives. He is the only well that never runs dry.

So the first movement of preparation: *recognize that without God, you are dead.*

Second: Recognize That You Cannot Save Yourself

When you find yourself in the wilderness — whether by choice or by suffering, whether the wells have just begun to run dry or have been dry for years — what do you do?

John answers with baptism. And the baptism of John is worth pausing over, because there is something in it that was genuinely unprecedented.

Ritual washing was not new. The Old Testament law prescribed immersion for a wide range of circumstances: touching a dead body, converting to Judaism, certain skin conditions, entering the temple, observing particular holy days. And ritual washing was practiced across many of the religions of the ancient world. None of that was new.

What was new about John's baptism was this: *he did it*. In every other form of ritual immersion, the individual washed themselves. The act was self-administered. John came along and said — no. I will baptize you. It does not matter who you are. It does not matter if you are a priest or a sinner, rich or poor, religious or not. The only way you will be ready for this King is through the hand of another. You cannot get yourself clean. You cannot prepare your own heart.

I am going to baptize you with water. And the one who comes after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

The second movement of preparation: *recognize that you cannot save yourself.*

Third: Cry Out for Help

There are people who find themselves in the wilderness and keep digging new wells. They recognize the pain, they feel the emptiness, but they cannot stop trying to fix it themselves — some new source of meaning, some new strategy, some new relationship or achievement. They will not let go.

There are others who arrive at the point of recognizing that they cannot save themselves, and yet they still do not ask for help. They know it. They feel it. And they stay silent.

And then there are those who find themselves in the wilderness, understand that they cannot save themselves, *and* cry out for help.

That cry for help is what repentance means.

And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

At its core, repentance is saying: *Help. God, I have made a mess of this, and I cannot fix it myself.* That is it. It is not first and foremost a moral program or a religious achievement. It is a cry — a cry that recognizes deep helplessness, deep rebellion, and deep need.

If you do not think you need help, you are not yet ready to meet the King.

But if you do cry out — we have one who is able to forgive every sin. To heal every wound. To set captives free. To make the lame walk and the blind see. He is able.

Meeting the King Changes You

John finishes with this:

“After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

— Mark 1:7–8

John is saying: the best I can offer is water. But the one who is coming is so great, so powerful, that I am not even worthy to perform the most menial act of service for him. And when he comes, he will do what I cannot — he will immerse you in the Holy Spirit. Real forgiveness. Real change. Not an adjustment at the edges, but transformation at the core.

Meeting the King changes you.

Most people are driven by fear — fear of missing out, fear of not being liked, fear of not having enough. Or by greed — for power, for position, for possessions. Or simply by the pursuit of feeling good. But when you meet the King, something shifts at the center. He becomes the driving force of your life. He changes the very source of your joy, and that joy — rooted in him — cannot be taken from you. It is with you in hardship and in sorrow. It does not depend on circumstances.

And he changes not only your relationship with God, but your relationship with everyone around you. Meeting this King leads to a radical discipleship — a life marked by compassion, mercy, patience, gentleness, and grace. Not as a performance, but as the overflow of a life that has been immersed in his Spirit.

Come and Meet the King

He alone can suffice. He alone can save.

The wilderness is the place where you discover that. Repentance is the cry that opens the door. And the King — the one John was pointing toward, the one Mark wants us to meet in the very first verse of his Gospel — is ready to receive you.

Cry out to him.