

Bible Study Guide: Week of 1-4-2021

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Mark 1:4-11

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."

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."

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The entire first portion of this reading should be familiar to us since we looked at it together during the First Sunday in Advent. For notes on this section, see my commentary from the week of 11-30-2020. Interestingly, when we looked at this passage last time we did so through the lens of Advent. This time, we are looking at it through a post-Christmas lens, specifically with an eye toward the Baptism of Jesus.

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This is only the second mention of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. The first mention of Jesus was in Mark 1:1—"The beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As we talked about back in Advent, Mark's gospel account begins quite abruptly with Jesus emerging on the scene here at roughly age 30. Mark seemingly knows nothing about Jesus' earlier years. There is no mention of Bethlehem or Egypt or Mary or Joseph. Mark is at least aware of the tradition that Jesus made his home in Nazareth of Galilee. Unlike, Matthew and Luke, Mark offers little or no explanation or qualification about the details surrounding Jesus' baptism by John. Matthew in particular goes to great lengths in his Gospel account to explain why Jesus (who was without sin) would need to be baptized by John whose baptism was "of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

Unlike in John's Gospel account in which John the Baptist witnessed the Spirit resting on Jesus (see John 1:32ff), here it is Jesus himself who is aware of the splitting of the heavens and the descent of the Spirit.

The root word for "torn apart" here in Greek is *skidzo*. It is the same root as our English words schism and schizophrenia. It is the same word used in Mark 15:38 to describe the ripping of the temple curtain which coincided with Jesus' last breath from the cross. Both occurrences of this verb in Mark's gospel are symbolic of the inbreaking of God's kingdom through Jesus—at the beginning of his ministry, the "heavens" are split open—that is, the boundaries that separate God from humankind and heaven from earth have been breached by God's presence. At the end of Jesus' ministry, the temple curtain—an earthly symbol for this separateness—was similarly

breached. Jesus' coming has broken down barriers—barriers that God put in place at creation (see Genesis 1:6-8) and barriers that humans put in place to separate the holiness of God from the brokenness of humankind (see Exodus 26:31-35).

Mark simply reports the fact that the baptism occurred. Like Luke, Mark reports that the events surrounding the baptism of Jesus were evident to Jesus. Matthew, on the other hand, reports that the events were evident to the crowds (compare with Matthew 3:17, in which the voice from heaven speaks to others about Jesus rather than to Jesus about himself—"you are my son" vs. "this is my son"). For Mark, Jesus' baptism was less about a public revelation of Jesus to the world and more about a moment of intimacy and affirmation between the Father and Jesus. This is, in essence, the call story of Jesus—he is anointed, chosen, and commissioned in this passage just as the kings of the Old Testament and the prophets of old were.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. The first part of this passage is one that we read during Advent. How does your understanding of this passage change reading it before Christmas and now after Christmas?**
- 2. As I mentioned above, Mark's version of this story focuses on the voice from heaven speaking to Jesus about himself. Matthew's version focuses on the voice from heaven speaking to the crowds about Jesus. Do you think this makes a difference in how we understand this story?**
- 3. According to Mark, Jesus' baptism was the beginning of his ministry. In what way(s) is your baptism the beginning of your ministry?**