

The Arrival of God

Genesis 1:1-5 | Psalm 29 | Acts 19:1-7 | Mark 1:4-11

MARK 1:2-11

² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; ³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight"', ⁴ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And 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. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He 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. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.' ⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And 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. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

INTRODUCTION

The original and two photocopies of my passport. The original and a photocopy of my current *aufenthaltstitel*. A copy of my marriage certificate. And a full set of fingerprints. This is what I took with me, this last Thursday, to prove my identity. Why would I need to prove my identity, you might be wondering? That's right, it's that time of year: It's my annual battle with the MA-35 for a residence permit. For those of you who don't know, or who have not had the immense pleasure, the MA-35 is Municipal Department Number 35, in charge of immigration and citizenship here in Vienna. And as a foreigner, I must get a residence permit from the MA-35 each year. When I entered the little office on Zelinkagasse, the first thing I had to do was show my passport. It's the same in a lot of situations. Whether it is picking up a registered letter at the post office or servicing your account at the bank or just getting paperwork from any number of offices, the first step is always proving your identity. It's important to be able to prove who you are.

But what about Jesus? During Advent and Christmas, we focused very much on the Incarnation, that Jesus became human, that he came down and entered human history as a little child. We read of his swaddling cloths and sang of his crib. And Patrick reminded us yesterday that the Epiphany shows us that Jesus became like us. And yet, that's not the fullness of his identity. The other half is what we find here in our Gospel reading: Mark's bold assertion that Jesus is divine, that he is also God. And that's what we are meant to learn here. *Jesus Christ is divine*. But how does Mark prove this identity? How does Mark make this case? He does so in three ways. Let's take a brief look.

1. THE APPEARANCE OF THE BAPTIST

First, in the two verses before our reading begins—the lectionary has omitted verses essential to understanding the role of John the Baptists here—we find a composite prophecy. The prophets wrote: "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"¹ Isaiah and

¹ Mark 1:2-3.

Malachi foresaw one who would come and prepare the way for the Lord—a messenger.² The Malachi reference is especially important because in Malachi, the appearance of the messenger is described as the return of a famous and important prophet: Elijah.³ And for whom does the messenger, the Elijah-like figure, prepare the way? Both prophets refer to God himself—not the Messiah. The appearance of the messenger means Yahweh is returning to his people. And so, when we read that John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a message, it should signal something to us. And just in case it wasn't clear, Mark adds detail. He describes John as wearing camel's hair with a leather belt. This very distinctive clothing, we learn in the Old Testament, is the uniform that the prophet Elijah wore—the only other such description in the Bible.⁴ The appearance of John the Baptist, then, in his Elijah-like clothing and making his Elijah-like proclamations, indicates that he prepares the way for God to return to his people. His mere presence indicates that the one he anticipates, the one we should expect, is God himself.

2. THE TESTIMONY OF THE BAPTIST

Secondly, this idea that John the Baptist is preparing the way for God is made explicit when we consider what he says. His testimony also makes the case. *"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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*⁵ Here is the Baptist, a figure so popular and influential that *all* the people of Jerusalem were coming out to see him, and he self-consciously points to one greater than himself.⁶ He takes a posture of humility. And then he reveals exactly one detail about the one to come: that he will baptize with the Holy Spirit. Again, if we look in the Old Testament, there are just a few places where the outpouring of the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of God—is anticipated.⁷ In each case, it is God himself who pours out his Spirit on his people. And so, if John the Baptist is correct, that this one coming will baptize with the Holy Spirit, then this one could only be God himself. And who shows up? Jesus.

3. THE TESTIMONY AT THE BAPTISM

Thirdly, just in case the presence and the testimony of John the Baptist were not enough, we also have the baptism of Jesus narrated, very briefly here. This is often one of those difficult-to-interpret moments in the Gospels. Our context for baptism, the entrance right into the community of faith that represents the washing away of sin, does not seem very appropriate for Jesus. He does not have sin to symbolically wash away. His baptism is, as such, a bit different than ours. And what does it mean? If we look at Luke's Gospel, for example, we see that it functions as a kind of anointing, a declaration that Christ is the Messianic king. But in Mark, we have a slightly different focus. The heavens are torn open, and a voice comes down. *"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*⁸ The voice of God rings out, the crowds look upon

² The messenger gets a bit of fanfare from the prophets. Isaiah is cited, but the quotation is a composite of Isaiah and Malachi—the first and last prophets in books of the Prophets (a synecdoche or shorthand way of calling upon the whole corpus of the prophets, representative of the whole—think alpha and omega). See Isa 40:3 and Mal 3:1.

³ See Mal 4:5.

⁴ See 2 Kgs 1:8.

⁵ Mark 1:7-8.

⁶ Mark 1:5, 7.

⁷ See Joel 2:28-29, Isa 32:14-15 and Isa 44:3, and Ezek 39:25-29. Importantly, in Acts 2:15-21, Peter equates the fulfillment of the Joel prophecy with the events of Pentecost.

⁸ Mark 1:11.

Jesus and hears this declaration from God the Father: “*You are my Son.*” If John the Baptist’s subtle testimony was not sufficient to prove his deity, the booming declaration of Jesus’ divine Sonship from God himself surely is enough. Mark’s point here, particularly in the first 15 verses of his Gospel, but also throughout his whole Gospel, is quite clear: Jesus is divine, he is God himself, returned to his people. And as we look more into Mark in the coming year, I think we will see this idea again and again.

4. THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE TESTIMONY

This brings us to a final question. Why does it matter that Jesus is God? What does it mean for us? I think there are three implications that are worthy of our consideration.

First, if Jesus is God, that should mean something to us. This claim is uniquely Christian. A divine Messiah does not cohere with Jewish monotheism and Islam treats Jesus as simply a prophet and messenger of God, not God. But the divinity of Jesus Christ is more than an intellectual assertion in the pantheon of world religions. It is a foundational truth of our faith that should have real meaning for us. He is more than a guy who said some clever things in the first century. He is more than an example of righteous living. He is, as we heard in John’s Gospel on Christmas Day, from before Creation. He is, as we recite in the Nicene Creed each week, “true God from true God,” or as the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* puts it: “very God of very God.”⁹ He was Incarnate, but not simply a man. And because he is God, again as we were reminded yesterday, he is then worthy of our worship—just as the wisemen showed us.

Jesus’ divinity is especially important because, secondly, it means he was able to save us. While each and every human deserves the wrath of God for our sins—our evil and rebellious thoughts and deeds—no mere human could have borne that wrath. No mere human could have presented himself as a perfect and sinless sacrifice, free from the sinful nature of humanity, and then withstood the punishment of death and hell.¹⁰ It took God the Son to satisfy the wrath of God the Father—and that Jesus did by dying on the cross. This is the only reason that we, by faith, are reconciled to God. His divinity is essential to our liberty from sin and death.

Third, if Jesus is God, it means we should listen to him. Or to put it differently, Jesus is God, and we are not. We may sometimes think we are. We have the technology and information to think we are as wise as our Creator. Some of us have the means and power to satisfy our own desires and so confuse ourselves for the Lord of all that is. Some of us believe so strongly in our own worth and our own intelligence as to think we are as infallible as a perfect God. But we are not. None of us is God. But it’s easy to forget that. It’s easy to think we deserve more than we do, to think we are better than we are, to not humble ourselves as John the Baptist did. This is why we need Jesus to be our Saviour (see point number 2 above). And it means we should listen to him as more than a wise man who gives good advice. His words, recorded here in the Gospels, are the very Word of God. We must strive to live humbly under them, trading in our own wisdom for his, even when it pushes against the culture and world in which we live.

⁹ For the modern rendering of the Nicene Creed, see The Archbishop’s Council 2000, *Common Worship* (London: Church House Publishing, 2000), 171. For the 1662 rendering, see the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 297.

¹⁰ See Acts 2:24-25, Rom 3:24-26, Rom 4:25, Titus 2:13-14, and Heb 9:11-15.

CONCLUSION

But in the end, Mark's point here in the beginning of his Gospel is an important one. Jesus Christ is divine. The presence and the testimony of the Baptist, and the baptism itself, confirm this identity. Jesus is God.

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, help us to come to know Jesus as your divine Son, and in so doing, find forgiveness from our sins and a posture of humility before him. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*