

A New and Better Direction 2024  
Mark 1:1, 4-11

Mark 1:1, 4-11 (New Revised Standard Version)

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 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. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

And so we gather today for **our 1<sup>st</sup> worship service of the new year**,  
I perceive it as a special "in-between" space and opportunity  
to review and reflect on the events of this past year,  
as we move into the possibilities of this coming year—  
- to think about where we have been, all that has happened,  
and what we have learned as we're moving into a new year.

The ancient Romans recognized this as an opportunity to re-assess,  
and in fact, worshipped a god who ruled over doors & transitions,  
who governed & ruled over the connecting space between  
the end of something and the beginning of the next,  
**a god named "Janus", as in the month of "January".**

The image of Janus was depicted as a double-faced head  
with each face looking in the opposite direction ---  
- and which was often engraved into doorframes and thresholds  
as looking in and out, looking behind and looking ahead.

The passage we read from Mark offers a similar perspective  
of looking both backward and looking toward what's ahead.

The Gospel of Mark tells the story briefly and urgently  
of who Jesus is and why that is the Good News that matters, vs. 1  
**The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.**

The author begins with John the Baptist, by presenting him  
as the link between the Old Testament and the New Testament,  
using OT images to locate Jesus as the fulfilment of the OT,  
sent to announce & point ahead toward the coming of the Lord, vs. 4-5

John the baptizer appeared **in the wilderness**, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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.

John appeared in the wilderness,  
wilderness is a place mentioned all through Scripture  
because of the many significant events that occur there.

baptized by him in the river Jordan,  
the river Jordan marks the boundary that connects  
and stands between the wilderness and the Promised Land,

much like John's connection between Old & New Testaments.

**John's appearance** matches that of Elijah an OT prophet sent with a message of God's judgment and fervent call to repent, vs. 6

Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

That description of John matches Elijah and places him squarely in OT context as a prophet, sent to reveal truth about Jesus, who will be shown to be the absolute fulfillment of all God's promises and dealings with Israel.

The baptism practiced by John was about personal repentance, but Jesus redefines the baptism of repentance practiced by John, because Jesus was sinless and had no need for such cleansing vs. 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.

By being baptized, Jesus chose to identify with us, with sinners, and looks and points ahead to taking on all our sin on the cross.

**In baptism, Jesus began the work that he completed on the cross,**  
a sign of God's healing grace that seeks the lost & broken,  
a sign of God's love, invitation, and redeeming purpose...

... **for we live far less** than the rich meaningful & purposeful lives, the full blessings that our God & loving Creator intends for us.

It was his baptism that initiated the public ministry of Jesus,  
a sign that the coming kingdom of God was arriving,  
a journey and process for the redemption of humankind.

Through Jesus, baptism had now been given a new purpose & meaning, as a sign that God loves us enough to become one of us, vs. 10-11

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. And **a voice came from heaven**, "You are **my Son, the Beloved**; with you I am well pleased."

The phrase, **the heavens torn apart**, is a special Greek word that means a forceful ripping apart, a word that is used only one other time in Mark to describe when the curtain was torn in the Temple when Jesus died...  
**...both as symbol of tearing apart that which separates us from God**, the Lord tearing through the heavens to reach the people he loves.

The next phrase, "**the Spirit descending like a dove**" looks ahead to when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples as tongues of fire giving them holy speech at Pentecost.

"a voice came from heaven"

The Father speaks looking ahead to his earthly ministry & mission, and the Father speaks again at the mountaintop transfiguration, marking end of his ministry before events of the Passion, vs. 9:7

Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "**This is my Son, the Beloved**; listen to him!"

my Son, the Beloved serves as brackets before and after his ministry.

Through his baptism, Jesus began the work of healing and salvation,  
as a the sign of God declaring to us that **we are** God's children...  
**... not because of what we've done, but by what God has done for us.**

Our world and the culture in which we live,  
tells us we're nobodies whose lives don't really matter,  
but God says otherwise, and that we are God's beloved children,  
and that wherever we go, whatever we do or is done to us,  
God continues to love us, to welcome us and hold onto us,  
and declare, you are beloved my son or my daughter.

God never rejects us, even when damaged, broken or mistaken,  
nor does he set us aside when we've failed or messed up,  
for God chooses to see through **grace-colored Son-glasses.**

Consider the ministry of Jesus and how he reached out with grace  
toward those whom the religious leaders rejected & excluded,  
e.g. lepers, outcasts, blind, tax collectors and sinners.  
The Good News is that God will never abandon or give up on us,  
**and that is the wonderful message of grace that Jesus proclaimed.**

**The powerful, unfathomable, wonderful mystery of God's love,**  
is signified by God's gracious invitation to the Lord's Table,  
a shared family meal, a banquet for the beloved people of God,  
and a most excellent opportunity to reflect and consider,  
and perhaps adjust the direction and focus of our lives.

Our call & hope is to intentionally move toward more worthy goals  
by recalibrating our lives toward the will and purpose of God,  
**so as to not waste or squander our life and opportunities.**

This year, I want to be more intentional about whatever God is up to,  
and how I can manage to somehow get more in on the works of our Lord...

... which begins by asking ourselves, through prayer and Scripture,  
how does God want to use my life, my gifts, my time and resources  
to accomplish something meaningful that makes a difference ...  
... and how can I get started on it and do it now?

It is possible, that God has something more and far better for us  
than just repeating our lives and the faith that we lived last year.  
So the challenges of last year could have been God preparing us  
for something new, for our growth and journey this coming year.

So are you entirely satisfied with your life, as it is right now?  
Is there any possibility for improvement and growth?,  
or anything you'd like to be different next year?

Is there anything that a year from now, that could be better?  
or areas of your life where you might welcome some change,  
or that might help you move toward becoming your best?

This is the truth about our God who created and loves us:  
that stagnation and rust are never God's plan or will for us,  
and that the Lord's purpose and goal and desire  
is not to make our lives simple, trouble-free and easy.

No, far from it.

**God is about depth, change and growing our Christian character,  
with the assurance & hope that our fears, mistakes & failures  
are never greater than or beyond the reach of God's grace.**

Our task today is to reflect on and build on our past, even mistakes,  
and thereby to grow deeper through the things of last year,  
toward the best and the blessings that God intends for us.

And now a week into the new year, it is a most excellent time  
to recognize and clear away any spiritual obstacles or sin  
that can stand in the way, that compromise or distract us  
**from a joyful, growing and wonder-filled faith,  
and authentically vibrant relationship with God.**

Therefore the Lord God is always being calling us to a fresh,  
to a deeper and more faithful journey as we travel along  
this adventure of spiritual development we call, life...  
... for we are always in the process of being reshaped & reconfigured.

12 months from now, what change and growth and spiritual progress  
do you hope God's grace, presence & power will bring into your life?

Today we are challenged, to make good, wise and faithful decisions  
that will influence, even determine what we will see on that day.

No, we cannot go back to change the past or start our lives over,  
but we can decide to make some changes today – make them now  
which will lead to a different and better tomorrow and end.

Our call, continues to be  
to a new awakening, and a spiritual reawakening,  
to a fresh awareness of the presence of God and God's grace.

As we come to the Lord's Table this day, hear the word of the Lord,  
and as we are beginning our New Year, as Paul wrote  
in his letter to the Christians living in Philippi, vs. 3:13b-14

... but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I  
press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.