

Title: You Are My Son

Text: Mark 1:9-11

Mark: The First Gospel

Christmas Gospels:

Sometime between what we now know as 7 B.C. and 4 B.C. a Jewish girl named Mary gave birth to a boy – a boy who would grow up to change the world forever. Virtually everything about this boy proved to be unusual, or controversial. His parents weren't married, nor had they ever had sexual relations. The pregnancy almost ended their marriage before it had even begun. Angels, prophets and prophetesses, kings, astrologers, even shepherds weighed in on what the child's birth was all about.

And amazingly, that child's birth still has the power to get people worked up. I recently read a story about how the PTA at Butler Elementary School in Belmont, Massachusetts secretly cancelled a trip it was sponsoring to a performance of *The Nutcracker* ballet. Why? Because some concerned parent discovered to his or her horror that there right in the middle of the ballet was, of all things, a *Christmas Tree*. You would have thought that someone had invited Billy Graham to give an altar call in between the first and second act! In the ensuing uproar the PTA reversed its stand, but you get the picture: baby's birth creates existential crisis for world's greatest democracy. And the tree isn't even a religious symbol!

So how to cut through all of the confusion? The best and only way is to turn to the documents that tell us about the baby: the Four Gospels. *Four Gospels*, some of you are thinking? Isn't the Christmas Story only in Matthew and Luke? Well, this Christmas season we're going to look at *all four Gospels* to see how they introduce us to Jesus, the baby whose birth we celebrate at this time of year. I think you'll find that the Christmas Story – or its true meaning – is present in each Gospel.

Eye Witness Testimony

The first gospel to be written was the Gospel of Mark. In Mark's day the gold standard for accurate knowledge of the past was the *eye witness report*. We know from Luke that Jesus specifically commanded His disciples to go into the whole known world and bear witness to what they had seen. The star witness turned out to be Peter. Listen to how he validates Jesus' story to an audience of Gentiles in the house of Cornelius:

Acts 10:39-42 NIV

*“We are **witnesses** of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross,⁴⁰ but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.⁴¹ He was not seen by all the people, but by **witnesses** whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to **testify** that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.”*

Mark: The First Gospel

The ancient Christian writer Papias tells us that Mark’s Gospel is an interpretation or translation of Peter’s memoirs about Jesus. Quoting a disciple that he calls The Elder, he writes:

The Elder used to say: Mark, in his capacity as Peter’s interpreter, wrote down accurately as many things as he [Peter?] recalled from memory – though not in an ordered form – of the things either said or done by the Lord. (as cited in Bauckham, Jesus and the Eyewitnesses, p. 203)

A close examination of Mark’s Gospel reveals that the first disciple and the last disciple to be named are...Simon Peter. Richard Bauckham argues that in so doing, Mark is signaling to us the source of his material: the eyewitness, Peter.

Richard Bauckham argues that the very reason Mark wrote his gospel was because the Eyewitness Generation was dying out. While eye witness testimony was the “gold standard,” a written account of the eye witness testimony was better than no testimony at all! Peter” was martyred in Rome by the Emperor Nero. It was likely there in Rome that Mark wrote down Peter’s eye witness accounts of Jesus actions and words, preserving Peter’s testimony for us all.

This helps us understand at least one reason why Mark does not have the story of Jesus’ birth. Peter, after all, may not have even been born at that time. But that does not mean that we can learn nothing about the meaning of Christmas from Mark.

“You Are My Son!”

The “Where” of Mark’s Christmas Story:

Mark begins the story of Jesus in the same place where Israel herself was spiritually birthed: in the wilderness. The first person we meet is a desert prophet named John the Baptist. He is calling Israel to come out of her past failed existence to be reborn as the true people of God. You can sum up his preaching with one word: **Repent**. His call is the same as that of so many prophets before him, brave men and women who challenged God’s people to return to their God.

The baptism that John performs is a re-enactment of the crossing of the Red Sea, by which Israel left the slavery and idolatry of Egypt in order to become God's Son. It was there in the vast wilderness of the Sinai Desert Israel entered into a covenant relationship with Yahweh. It was there that a ragtag entourage of ex-slaves became a nation. Now, John announces that God is about to enter into human history once again to rule His people and His world.

The person who comes as Messenger and Lord will baptize not with water, but with the Spirit of God. Once again, Israel will be led by God's Spirit on her Exodus. Once again, God will bring His people to life. It will be just as Isaiah had prophesied:

Isaiah 44:3 NIV

*For I will pour water on the thirsty land,
and streams on the dry ground;
I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring,
and my blessing on your descendants.*

The "What" of Mark's Christmas Story:

We are all familiar with the story of Jesus' birth. Every Christmas we relive the awe of the shepherds as they gather around the manger and the reverence of the Wise Men when they present their treasures. Mark's "Christmas Story" has no stable or manger; instead, it happens in a river!

He tells us:

Mark 1:9 NIV

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

We marvel that the Great King could come down from Heaven to be born in a barn and put to bed in a food trough. But the idea that the Coming One, who would baptize not with mere water, but with the very Spirit of God, would be baptized along with the rest of sinful and rebellious Israel is just as jarring. William Lane writes:

*Jesus comes "in the role of the lowly penitent, passively receiving the sign of repentance."
(Lane, The Gospel of Mark, p. 53)*

It is here in the wilderness that God's People are reborn. It is here in the wilderness that Jesus stands with them – in both their shame and in their hope. It is here that the message of the manger becomes the ministry of the rabbi from Nazareth named Jesus.

The "Who" of Mark's Christmas Story:

Jesus' baptism was more than a way of identifying with His people in their sin and desire to repent. It was the time and place where Heaven and Earth came together:

Mark 1:10 NIV

Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove."

Isaiah captures the longing of God's people for God to come and make things right:

Isaiah 64:1 NIV

*Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains would tremble before you!*

Now, Mark tells us, this ancient prayer was answered:

- As Jesus came out of the water "he saw heaven being torn open."
- Then the Spirit came to rest upon Him, to lead His people and give them new life.

Then comes Mark's Christmas announcement:

Mark 1:11 NIV

And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

The baby that Luke tells us was born in the manger and that Matthew tells us was honored by foreign wise men as the King of the Jews is first and foremost God's Son. The phrase "whom I love" carries the meaning of being "the one and only." There is no other. The voice from Heaven reiterates what God said of Israel's King in Psalm 2:

Psalms 2:7-8 NIV

I will proclaim the LORD's decree:

*He said to me, "You are my son;
today I have become your father.*

*Ask me,
and I will make the nations your inheritance,
the ends of the earth your possession.*

When the voice from Heaven says, "With you I am well pleased," He is speaking of the fact that Jesus is uniquely qualified for the mission of bringing into existence the new People of God. He will do so through the creative power of the same Holy Spirit who rested on the

waters of Creation. That same Spirit will guide God's People throughout their earthly Exodus journey.

The "Who" of Mark's Christmas Story is the Son of God. He alone can stand with us in our shame and sin, while at the same time bring us God's full forgiveness and new life.

Making Mark's Christmas Our Own

Where?

Where are you at this Christmas? To understand the real meaning of Christmas we need to take our own journey into the "wilderness." Christmas means understanding that God has come into our world. We're no longer captive to the status quo. Like Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and the Wise Men, we're called to journey into the wilderness of a place in between the way this world does things and the fullness of God's Kingdom.

What?

Mark's Christmas Story calls us to *repent*. To repent means to change.

Like the people of Jesus' own time, we cannot change ourselves in our own strength. But we can come to God and ask Him to forgive us for our sins and empower us with His new life. We cannot make ourselves arrive at the Promised Land! But we can join with Jesus in the journey. He will guide through His Holy Spirit. He will baptize us with Heaven's power. But it all starts with our decision to repent.

Who?

Most important of all, Mark's Christmas Story is the story of God Himself coming down into our world. On this point all four Gospels agree: the baby born in Bethlehem is Israel's God come to dwell with His people.

When you make Mark's Christmas Story your own, God comes to dwell with you as well. Heaven and Earth come together – just as they did when Jesus came out of the Jordan River. The same God who sent His Spirit to rest upon Jesus sends His Spirit to live within us. The same Voice that said, "You are my beloved Son," now – through His Spirit – declares that we are His daughters and sons.

Romans 8:14-16 NIV

For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

No longer slaves: we are on our Exodus Journey!

No longer spiritual orphans: we have been made part of God's family.

That is the meaning of Mark's Christmas Story.