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Mark 1:9-15
2nd Message
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A VOICE FROM THE HEAVENS

SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Adam Trask, the father in John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, has two sons, Aron and Cal. Aron lives respectably and delights his father. Cal, on the other hand, is unable to do anything right and grieves his father. After Adam loses most of his wealth in a failed business venture, Cal hatches a money-making scheme of his own. His plan succeeds, and at a dinner party he presents his father with a gift: his earnings. Cal hopes that the gift will console his father in the wake of the failed business venture. More than that, he hopes it will win his father's love. Cal's father, however, refuses the money and tells his son to give him the gift of living a good life, like Aron. His father's displeasure enrages Cal and provokes him to hatch another scheme, not to win his father's love but to destroy his brother.

Every son aches for his father's approval. Children who never feel affirmed by their parents often live with deep wounds. The Hebrew Scriptures feature such stories, particularly the narratives of Genesis 12-50: Abraham and Ishmael, Isaac and Jacob, Jacob and his sons. In these stories, the sons fail to win the approval of their fathers. The Scriptures, however, tell another father-son story, the story that completes all our stories of broken relationships. It is *the* father-son story: the story of the Father and the Son. Seen in light of the entire Biblical story, the story of the Father and the Son becomes our story as well. Therefore, when the Father speaks to the Son in Mark 1:9-15, he also speaks to us.

Whereas Mark 1:1-8 featured a voice in the wilderness, Mark 1:9-15 features a voice from the heavens. The voice in the wilderness belongs to the prophet John, who prepares the way for Jesus. The voice from the heavens belongs to God, who declares Jesus to be his Son. The heavenly voice and the earthly voice agree: Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, God's final king.(1) In Mark 1:1-8, we listened to the voice of John. In Mark 1:9-15, we listen to the voice of God. If we listen carefully, we will hear what we have longed to hear all our lives, and the words of the Father will heal our wounds.

Mark 1:9-15:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Immediately coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens opening, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon Him; and a voice came out of the heavens: "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased."

Immediately the Spirit impelled Him to go out into the wilderness. And He was in the wilderness forty days being tempted by Satan; and He was with the wild beasts, and the angels were ministering to Him.

Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”(2)

Hick from the sticks

Everyone else whom John baptized came from the southern region of Judea, while Jesus comes from the northern region of Galilee. Ever since the 10 northern tribes split off from the two southern tribes in 931 B.C., southern Jews had held northerners in contempt. They were seen as being compromised by their involvement with Gentiles. Even the Scriptures called their region “Galilee of the Gentiles” (Isaiah 9:1). Law-keeping Jews from the south couldn’t conceive of a prophet, let alone the Messiah, coming from Galilee (John 7:40-52). Many came to John from the city of Jerusalem, the leading city of the south, the city of kings, the city of dreams. Jesus, on the other hand, comes from the northern village of Nazareth, so insignificant a place that even a Galilean could dismiss it (John 1:46).

The individual stands out in contrast to the many, but not in a promising way. Mark has prepared us for a mighty king who will baptize us with the Holy Spirit, but he hasn’t prepared us for a hick from the sticks. Jesus comes from a nowhere place in the north, but he will journey to the south, even to its capital, Jerusalem, the city of God. In so doing, he will repair the ancient breach in Israel between north and south, and he will tear down the wall between Jew and Gentile—the wall that divides one race from another. He will heal a fractured world and bring it to God.

The reason for Jesus’ baptism emerges in the events of verses 10-13, which portray him both as the new Israel and as the Messiah who represents Israel. Ever since the days of King David, the fate of Israel was seen as being wrapped up in its king. Jesus, as the final king of Israel, takes on its destiny, submitting to the baptism of repentance required of it. The Messiah would embody God’s purposes for Israel to bless “all the families of the earth” (Genesis 12:3). The kingdom of God would advance through the king, particularly through his suffering. The new Israel, of course, would expand beyond an individual, for Jesus would reconstitute the people of God by baptizing them with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8).

The new Israel

Inspired by the prophet Isaiah, Israel was waiting for God to act decisively and liberate it from its oppressors in a new Exodus. In the Exodus, when Israel met with God in the wilderness, the mountain burned and trembled (Exodus 19:18). Isaiah asked God to do it again:

Oh, that You would rend the heavens and come down,
That the mountains might quake at Your presence—

As fire kindles the brushwood, as fire causes water to boil—
To make Your name known to Your adversaries
That the nations may tremble at Your presence! (Isaiah 64:1)

In the Exodus, Israel came through the waters of the Red Sea and the Jordan River. When Jesus comes out of the waters of the Jordan, God rends the heavens and comes down. With the baptism of Jesus, the new Exodus is under way—in the beginning, at least, for one Israelite.

The Spirit of God, which appeared in the wilderness after Israel came out of the water in the first Exodus, now comes upon Jesus in the wilderness as he comes out of the water (Exodus 13:21, Isaiah 63:11). God tells Jesus in the wilderness that he is his Son, just as he told Moses in the wilderness that Israel was his son (Exodus 4:22). The Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tested for 40 days, echoing Israel's 40-year wilderness journey (Deuteronomy 8:2, 16). Isaiah noted that Israel was called to be the servant of the Lord, but he also anticipated a new Servant—a new Israel—who would bring God's blessing to the world:

Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold;
My chosen one in whom My soul delights.
I have put My Spirit upon Him;
He will bring forth justice to the nations. (Isaiah 42:1)

The Spirit comes on Jesus, the new Servant, the one with whom God is well-pleased, the one in whom God's soul delights. The Father both shows and tells Jesus, in the descent of the Spirit and the voice from the heavens, that he is the beloved Son.

The new David

To be God's Son was not only to be God's Israel but also to be God's king, especially in that God's purposes for Israel devolve onto his final king. In Psalm 2:6-7, first God speaks, then the king, whom God identifies as his son—ultimately, the Messiah, *the Son*.

[God:]
“But as for Me, I have installed My King
Upon Zion, My holy mountain.”

[King:]
“I will surely tell of the decree of the Lord:
He said to Me, ‘You are My Son,
Today I have begotten You.’”

Jesus' experience therefore not only echoes that of Israel, it also echoes that of David, the prototypical Israelite king from whose line the Messiah, God's final king, would come. Just as the prophet Samuel anointed David, the prophet John anoints Jesus. The Spirit immediately comes upon Jesus, just as he came upon David (1 Samuel 16:13). David, as the representative Israelite, proceeded to take on Goliath, the giant pagan

champion (1 Samuel 17). David won; therefore, Israel won. Jesus takes on Satan, a far mightier foe. If Jesus wins, Israel wins—and the world wins, because God tasked Israel with bringing his justice to the nations and because the world was in the clutches of Satan, not Goliath. When the Spirit comes upon Jesus, he not only identifies him as the Messiah, he also empowers him for his mission. When Samuel anointed David, the Spirit came “mightily” on him. Mark portrays Jesus not only as the new Israel but also as the new David.(3)

Over everything is the Father, who tears the heavens and drenches his Son with love, with words that every son or daughter longs to hear from his father: “in you I am well-pleased.” Father, Son, and Spirit are all present in this scene as the kingdom of the Triune God draws near.

Hearing the Father’s voice

If Jesus is the Son of God—the new Israel and the new David—then those who believe in him are also sons of God. Jesus tells us to “believe in the gospel.” The Apostle Paul tells us, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:26-27).(4) Faith in Christ unites us with Christ so that what is true of him in his humanity becomes true of us. He shares his “sonship”—his “Israelness” and “Davidness” with us.

Many of us feel, in one way or another, that we’re from the wrong place and that we are unacceptable to our world. We wonder, “Do I matter?” If such is the case, we have a friend in Jesus, who hailed from the wrong place and was dismissed by the leaders of his world before they even heard him speak. If we believe in Jesus, we belong to Jesus. Our world builds us up and tears us down. We do the same things to ourselves. Nevertheless, we are sons and daughters of God regardless of either our world’s perception of us or our perception of ourselves.

The stars of this world aligned for novelist Jonathan Franzen when he wrote the way he wanted to write and *The Corrections* was applauded by both critics and the reading public. “I wrote the book that I wanted to write, and then—which couldn’t be counted on—it got a tremendous amount of attention,” he said in an interview. “So that burning feeling of being unrecognized for what I felt myself to be is momentarily alleviated.”(5) Even if our world appreciates us for who we are, we know that it can only alleviate the burning feeling of being unrecognized for a moment. God’s approval of us, however, lasts more than a lifetime.

If you have been baptized into Christ, then Christ’s baptism becomes your baptism. So when Jesus comes to be baptized in the Jordan River, he brings you with him. You go under with him. When you come out, what happens? Look, the Spirit like a dove is descending on you. Listen, a voice comes out of the heavens and speaks to you: “You are my beloved son; in you I am well-pleased.” You hear what everyone aches to hear: a father’s words of affirmation. You hear more than what you ached to hear, for these are not the words of your earthly father but the words of the heavenly Father, your creator. The Father tears open the heavens and drenches you with his love.

The words of your world may build you up or tear you down, but the one who created you, knows everything about you, and re-created you by the Spirit has the authority to affirm you. And even if 100 voices build you up, sometimes all it takes is one voice to tear you down. The one we need to listen to, though, is the one that comes from

heaven. Strive, by the power of the Spirit who dwells within you, to listen to the Father's voice above all others. Hear his words of love with your heart and let them into your soul: "You are my beloved son; in you I am well-pleased."

Is it true that God is pleased with his sons and daughters? Think of your own creative work. Don't you, at least once in a while, delight in what you've created? Writing is one of my creative outlets. Not everything I write satisfies me. I am, of course, a flawed creator. Sometimes, though, I begin stringing words together and it feels like magic. I read the words I've written and I'm satisfied that they convey the essence of something. I would even say at such moments that what I've created delights me. God, on the other hand, is not a flawed creator. When he creates, and when he re-creates, his work always pleases him. He delights in it. He delights in us. The gospel, as it ministers to the deepest regions of our hearts, comes down to this: you are enough.

The real enemy

The Spirit impels Jesus to go out into the wilderness to face Satan, the ancient enemy of humanity. Immediately after the Father affirms his Son, the Spirit throws him to the wolves—or so it seems. Why does God treat his beloved Son this way? The word translated "impelled" would be literally translated "cast out" (*ekballō*). Jesus, at different points in Mark, is depicted as casting out demons, beginning with Mark 1:34. Before Jesus begins casting out demons, however, the Spirit casts him out to face their leader. Staring down Satan, taking on the full force of evil—it's what the Messiah came to do. In this light, the Father's words of affirmation are like the cheers of a city as it sends its sons into battle.

As Jesus squares off against Satan, earth is also against him, for the animals in the wilderness are described as "wild beasts." Heaven, though, comes to his aid when angels serve him—how, specifically, Mark doesn't say. After leaving Egypt, Israel stumbled in the wilderness by worshiping the golden calf. Mark would have us believe that Jesus, on the other hand, remained faithful to God in the wilderness and emerged unscathed from his first encounter with Satan. There would be other encounters, however, culminating in a final, furious showdown in Jerusalem. What would happen there?

Another echo from the Hebrew Scriptures is ominous. God told Jesus that he was his beloved Son—that is, his one and only Son. More than 2,000 years earlier, God had told Abraham, the first Israelite: "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you." Turns out Abraham didn't have to go through with it because God provided a ram. Abraham called the place "The Lord Will Provide," and it continued to be said, even centuries later, "In the mount of the Lord it will be provided" (Genesis 22:1-14).

God did not require Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son, raising the question, inasmuch as God calls Jesus his beloved Son: what would God require of himself? What would happen when God's beloved Son arrived at Jerusalem, perched as it was atop Mount Zion? Would it be said of Mount Zion, some 2,000 years after the Son's ascent, "In the mount of the Lord it *was* provided"? Indeed it would. Would God require himself to sacrifice his one and only Son for the sake of his other children, you and me? Indeed he would. The veil of the temple would be torn from top to bottom on that day, just as the heavens were torn when the Spirit descended on the Son.(6)

Preaching in Galilee

Mark notes that John the Baptist, who heralded the arrival of the Messiah, was taken into custody. John preached about repentance and was arrested—literally, “delivered over.” Risking his life, Jesus too preaches about repentance. The messenger was taken into custody, but not the message, which Jesus carries forward. Later, Jesus too would be delivered over (Mark 9:31, 10:33, 14:41). John prepared the way of the Messiah not only by preaching a baptism of repentance but also by suffering. John thereby demonstrated that the way of the Messiah would involve suffering.

After his anointing as king in the river and his battle with Satan in the wilderness, Jesus might have been expected to march into Jerusalem and take over. The voice crying in the wilderness in Isaiah 40:3, which turns out to be John’s, was preparing the way for the Lord to come to Jerusalem and bare his mighty arm (Isaiah 40:9-11). Instead, Jesus, who first came from Galilee for John’s baptism in the wilderness, returns to Galilee and begins preaching there. Neither he nor his disciples, whom he hasn’t even identified yet, were ready for what they would inevitably face in Jerusalem.

Jesus preaches the gospel of God: God is establishing his kingdom—that is, his rule. This is the good news that Israel has been waiting for since Isaiah’s day (Isaiah 40:9, 52:7-10). The kingdom is at hand: it has already arrived, and it will come in full force. God is about to act decisively to save his people from their enemies (Isaiah 46:13, 51:5, 56:1). Jesus can say these things because he understands himself to be the Son of God, the Messiah, God’s final king. The kingdom of God is at hand because God’s king has come. Mark, with references to “the gospel” in both verse 1 and verses 14-15, equates the gospel of God with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Israel’s dream is about to come true. The king is here, but will Israel recognize the day of its visitation? Like John before him, Jesus will not affirm Israel as it stands. He calls Israel to repent, which will involve, as Mark’s narrative progresses, the abandonment of nationalistic zeal. From Jesus’ perspective, the enemies of God’s people aren’t the Roman rulers, oppressing them from without, but spiritual rulers oppressing them from within and fomenting, among other pagan notions, nationalistic fervor. The kingdom comes—Jesus comes—to cast such rulers and such notions out of Israel.

Jesus not only calls for repentance but also for belief in the gospel, which means, at least at first, believing that God is in fact establishing his kingdom. It will also involve believing that God is establishing his kingdom in and through Jesus. As such, believing the gospel will involve embracing Jesus’ unconventional understanding of the kingdom of God.

Serving God’s purposes

In high school, I had a basketball coach who took a liking to me. By the time I played for Charlie Cooke, he had been coaching for 30 years. He was old school, wearing a crew cut even in the 1970s. Our school, on the other hand, was a haven for nonconformists, and Charlie’s ways were no longer popular with many teenagers. I think Charlie saw in me someone who resonated with his ways. I wasn’t a very talented player, but Charlie believed in me. Early in my senior year, I sprained my ankle during a game. For the rest of the season, Charlie dutifully taped up my ankle before every practice and every game. During another game later in the year, I re-sprained my already-tender ankle

and screeched in pain. The next thing I saw, as I was writhing on the floor, was the face of Charlie Cooke. In the locker room after the game, a teammate told me, “Scott, you should have seen it. When you hit the floor, Mr. Cooke sprinted from the sidelines to be by your side. It was as if his own son were lying there.” I think I rose above my abilities because of Charlie’s belief in me. He treated me like a son. There wasn’t anything I wouldn’t do for him.

We are sons and daughters of the living God, created by him, redeemed by him, and affirmed by him. He affirms us that we might serve his purposes in the world. Is there anything you wouldn’t do for him?

God affirms us, but he also seemingly throws us to the wolves. It makes no sense at first. In the wilderness, you cannot depend on familiar props and you feel deprived, even terrified. You didn’t think this was part of the deal. But finally you realize that it had to be this way. If you are going to serve God’s purposes in the world, you need to be tested. If you’re not tested, you may get the wrong idea about the kingdom of God. You may think that God wants to spare you from suffering. You may never discover that God uses the suffering of his people to implement his victory over evil. You may never release your commitment to self-adequacy. In the wilderness, you may wonder whether this decision you made to identify with Jesus was all a terrible mistake and whether you ever really did hear from God. But you know you need some dry and dusty times—some time in the wilderness—so that you may learn to put on the full armor of God and resist the evil one.

The wilderness is a good place—a necessary place. God thrusts us into the wilderness, not because he doesn’t love us but precisely because he *does* love us. If you find yourself in the wilderness, let the wilderness do its work. Deprivation will prepare you for the days ahead.

God sent his Son into the world and endowed him with his Spirit to preach and enact the gospel: the good news of God’s victory over evil. God endows us, his sons and daughters, with his Spirit not that we might cultivate a private spirituality but that we might engage in public mission. Just as the Spirit descended on God’s Son, the Spirit descended on the church, whereupon followers of Jesus immediately proclaimed “the mighty deeds of God” and the apostle Peter risked his life to preach the gospel in Jerusalem, which had crucified Jesus only a few weeks earlier (Acts 2). Now that the kingdom has come in the death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ, and now that God has endowed us with his Holy Spirit, our task is to implement the victory of God.

How do we do it? We proclaim that Jesus is Lord and carry his love to the world. A new world is coming—indeed, in some measure, it has already come. When we preach the gospel and love the world in tangible ways, we signal the presence of God’s kingdom and herald its consummation. Preaching the gospel and loving the world will invariably look different in different cultures, churches, and individuals. The Holy Spirit is creative. It is therefore incumbent on each church and each believer to ask for the Spirit’s direction and empowerment for mission to the world.

Isn’t this what we want—a purpose that extends beyond ourselves and embraces a mission to the world? It doesn’t take much poking around in your heart to realize that something within you wants to get out of you to bless the world. We’ve been made in the image of God, as his representatives on earth. Furthermore, if we’ve given our lives to Jesus, he has baptized us with the Holy Spirit, who will not rest until he moves us beyond ourselves. Do you feel the stirring of the Spirit? If so, how might you respond to it?

The arrows of the story

In Mark 1:9-15, Mark introduces us to the subject of his narrative: Jesus. In showing us Jesus, he shows us, by echoing the Hebrew Scriptures, who Jesus is and what he came to do. Jesus is the new Israel and the new David: the Messiah who draws the destiny of Israel onto himself in order to fulfill its vocation to establish God's kingdom by defeating evil and bringing God's justice to the world. It's no surprise, then, that Jesus begins by announcing to Israel that the kingdom of God is at hand.

Mark draws together the story of the world, from Genesis to Malachi, and shows us that history reached a climax with the appearance of Jesus of Nazareth. Everything in Mark's prologue says, "This is the one"—the one for whom the world was waiting. All the arrows of the Biblical story point to Jesus. Perhaps we, like Israel of old, have been waiting for God to act decisively—to rend the heavens and come down. To us, Mark says, "God has already acted: he has given you his beloved Son, Jesus Christ." Many in Jesus' day doubted him because he came from the wrong place: Galilee. Likewise, many today doubt him because they assume he comes from the wrong place: history. True, he came from Galilee and he lived in history—but he also lives today as the resurrected Lord of the world.

Perhaps the story of your own life is coming together now, just as the story of the world came together some two millennia ago, in such a way that compels you to take a fresh look at Jesus. Don't you in some way want to connect your story to some larger story? There is no larger story than the story of God, which is played out in the story of the world, which culminates in the story of Jesus Christ. Mark invites you to connect your story to the story of God. God has acted—and he continues to act—in Jesus Christ. Perhaps you are beginning to see that the arrows of your story point to Jesus.

Jesus, however, will not affirm us as we stand. Instead, he calls us to repent and believe in the gospel—to forsake cultural, familial, and personal definitions of life and follow him in a new way of being human.

Repent and believe

In Mark 1:1-8, we saw that the repentance to which John the Baptist calls us can be compared to taking down the "no admittance" sign we've placed outside the wounded places in our hearts. Jesus the Messiah calls us not only to repent but to believe in the gospel. To believe in the gospel is to believe in God's love for the world and, yes, for you. To repent and believe is to take down the "no admittance" sign and let the Father in to speak to your wounded heart: "You are my beloved son; in you I am well-pleased." Hearing the Father's voice will increasingly liberate you, with the help of some time in the wilderness, to carry God's love to the world.

I need Mark 1:9-15 as much as anyone. Relationally, I have sought affirmation from people who were unable to give it. Vocationally and spiritually, I have sought to do well, but no matter how well I have done, I have not done well enough to satisfy myself. I seem bent, seemingly against my will, on proving myself to a world that cannot begin to satisfy my voracious appetite for approval. I am convinced that my appetite for approval comes from another world and that I should not try to suppress it. I am equally convinced that another world has broken into this world in the person of God's Son. I am also

convinced that my faith in him unites me with him and makes me, too, a son of God. Therefore, I will listen for my Father's voice, even if I can only hear it as a distant echo, as long as I tarry in this world, so that I may freely give myself to this world.

Finally, when the other world overtakes this world, the Father's words will ring out strong and clear throughout the land. With new ears, I'll be able to hear his voice: "You are my beloved son; in you I am well-pleased." Hearing those words, I will gladly serve him all my days, which will never end.

Care to join me?

Notes

- (1) The Mosaic Law considered valid the "evidence of two or three witnesses" (Deuteronomy 19:15).
- (2) A Narrator announces gospel of Jesus Christ (1)
 - B John in the wilderness: "Repent" (2-4)
 - C Crowd comes to be baptized; coming one will baptize with Spirit (5-8)
 - C' Jesus comes to be baptized; Spirit descends on Jesus (9-11)
 - B' Jesus in the wilderness: temptation (12-13)
 - A' Jesus preaches gospel of God (14-15)
- (3) The Son comes up and the Spirit comes down, uniting heaven and earth in anticipation of the new creation, when earth and heaven will be one (Revelation 21:1-2). The presence of the Spirit, descending like a dove on Jesus in the way that it hovered over the waters in the first creation, also anticipates the new creation.
- (4) The noun translated "faith" (*pistis*) in Galatians 3:26 comes from the verb translated "believe" (*pisteuō*) in Mark 1:15.
- (5) Lev Grossman, "How Jonathan Franzen Learned to Stop Worrying," *Time Magazine*, June 28, 2006, 62.
- (6) The word translated "opening" (*schizō*), with reference to the heavens in Mark 1:10, is the same verb that is translated "torn," with reference to the veil of the temple in Mark 15:38.

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