

ADVENT SERMON SERIES

DOMINUS

The Advent of the Son of God in the Gospel of Mark



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INTRODUCTION

The seasons of Advent and Christmas are not typically a good time for the Gospel of Mark. Even in Series B of the Three-Year Lectionary, the very year devoted to Mark's Gospel, there are only two occasions for readings taken from Mark during Advent. On Advent 1 the pastor has the choice of two readings—Mark 11:1-10 or Mark 13:23-37. The first relates Jesus's entry into Jerusalem before his passion. The second relates Jesus's teaching about the coming of the Son of Man (likely fulfilled in the judgment over Jerusalem in AD 70) and his coming on "that day" (13:32ff), that is, his parousia on the last day. On Advent 2 the reading is Mark 1:1-8 which relates the ministry of John the Baptizer—the traditional focus on Advent 2. Then no other reading from Mark is used again throughout the remainder of Advent and Christmas. Mark is read again finally on Epiphany 1, the baptism of our Lord.

And by that time the pastor and the people may have even forgotten that Series B is the year for the Gospel of Mark!

Yet the reason for this seems obvious enough. Advent readies us for Christmas, and Christmas is about the baby born in Bethlehem. So, this is the time of year to hear from the birth and infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke. This is the time of year to hear about the incarnation of our Lord as related in the prologue of John's Gospel. Jesus's actual ministry can wait for the season of Epiphany—or *this is how the lectionary seems to operate*.

Mark's Gospel begins with Jesus entering the narrative as an adult. In the space of some seven verses, Jesus is anointed with the Holy Spirit at his baptism, tempted for 40 days in the wilderness, and then begins his ministry of proclaiming the in-breaking of the reign and rule of God. Then in the verses that follow his ministry begins full force as he calls disciples, teaches with authority, casts out unclean spirits, heals the sick, and so on. There is no mention of Jesus as a child in Mark's narrative, and so, it seems, there is not much use for Mark's Gospel in the season when many in our culture—even outside of the church—focus upon the birth of a baby.

Yet there has been a reversal if we were to compare expectations during the seasons of Advent and Christmas today with those of Israel in the first century. In this time of the year Americans await the birth of a baby, and this baby is then often viewed through the lens of sentimentality. He is harmless and inoffensive. He represents God's love for everyone apart from any deep focus on fallen creation. Or for some he represents generally "the miracle of birth and new life." He poses no threat to anyone.

The people of Israel, however, were not looking for a baby, but for a *mighty ruler* who would crush their enemies. This Messiah would pose a deadly threat to all of the enemies of God—including those within Israel itself.

So, why have an Advent series that uses Mark's Gospel rather than the other three? For one thing, there is actually an advent in Mark's narrative of Jesus's ministry. Advent means arrival, and in Mark Jesus does arrive, even if this appears suddenly when he comes as an adult to be baptized by John in the Jordan. Yes, he arrives as an adult in Mark's narrative, not as a baby, but he does *arrive*. Then at his baptism Jesus receives the Holy Spirit, is demonstrated to be the Messiah and Lord, is declared to be the Son of God, and then is thrown out into battle against Israel's enemies—not the Romans—but the devil, sin, and death. In this version of our Lord's advent, the dominion of these spiritual powers is defeated, we are freed, and Jesus alone has become Lord.

"I believe that Jesus Christ true Son of God has become my Lord. What is it 'to become a lord'?" asked Luther in the Large Catechism. "It means that he has redeemed and released me from sin, from the devil, from death . . . those tyrants and jailers have now been routed, and their place has been taken by Jesus Christ, the Lord of life, righteousness, and every good blessing."

When Jesus arrives on the scene in Mark, there is no doubt who Jesus is. Here is the Spirit-anointed Son of God, our Lord who has come to deliver the nations of Israel, all men, and even fallen creation itself.

So, yes, a pastor can preach a sermon series on the Gospel of Mark for the season of Advent. This series will present Jesus who enters the narrative of Mark as the Spirit-anointed Messiah and Lord, and who then as Lord defeats the enemies of God who are opposed to His reign.

In the following series, the first week focuses upon Jesus's baptism where he enters the narrative of Mark's Gospel and is demonstrated to be Lord. The second week focuses upon the Lord Jesus's authority and victory over the satanic realm. The third week focuses upon the Lord Jesus's authority and victory over the power of sin. And the fourth week focuses upon the Lord Jesus's authority and victory over death itself.

OUTLINE:

Week one: The Advent of Our Lord (Mark 1:1-15)

Week two: Our Lord's Authority over the Satanic Realm (Mark 1:21-34)

Week three: Our Lord's Authority over Sin (Mark 2:1-17)

Week four: Our Lord's Authority over Death (Mark 5:21-43)

ADVENT WEEK 1

Study Notes on Mark 1:1-15

1. The prologue of Mark is found in 1:1-8. These verses relate the ministry of John the Baptizer. James W. Voelz identifies this section as “the beginning of the preaching of the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God” where 1:1 introduces John’s ministry as one that was about the proclamation of Jesus.¹ Notice how in this section Jesus has not yet appeared as a character in the narrative, yet the careful reader learns a great amount about who Jesus is even before he does appear. *Who is Jesus according to Mark 1:1-8?*
 - a. In 1:1 the narrator identifies Jesus with two titles, the Christ and the Son of God. The first title implies that Jesus is the Messiah, likely understood in Mark’s Gospel in terms of the promise to David’s house (see 11:10 and 12:35-37). As David was anointed by Samuel, received the Spirit of Yahweh (see 1 Samuel 16:13), and then went to war with Israel’s enemies, so Jesus is anointed at his baptism, receives the same Spirit, and goes to war with the enemies of God.
 - b. The title Son of God can have multiple nuanced meanings (e.g., Israel is God’s son and so Jesus is Israel-reduced to one), in the narrative of Mark this title primarily points to Jesus as the One who *authoritatively* speaks and acts for God the Father (see the parable of the tenants in 12:1-12). What is more, as the Son of God, Jesus is faithful and obedient to his Father’s will and plans (see 14:32-42). Finally, this is a divine title signifying that Jesus himself is divine, evident when the reader sees Jesus do what God does (e.g., calm a storm, feed crowds, and walk on water).²
 - c. The reference to the OT in 1:2-3 identifies John as “my messenger who is sent before you” and “the voice of one crying in the wilderness” who prepares the way of the Lord and makes straight his paths. Since John was sent ahead of Jesus and prepares Jesus’s way, then this means that the reader learns further of Jesus’s identity in these verses. *Who is the one for whom John is preparing the way?*
 - d. *What is the referent of σου in 1:2?* I read this verse as a conflation of both Exodus 23:20 and Malachi 3:1 (see the margin in NA 28). In Exodus the angel/messenger is sent ahead of the people Israel as they journey through the wilderness. Therefore, σου refers to Israel in Exodus 23, but now also to Jesus in Mark 1:2. Jesus is Israel itself personified into one man, Israel-reduced-to-one. As Israel, Jesus will be baptized in the Jordan and spend forty days (versus years) in the wilderness. The reader should see Jesus as one who personifies God’s people. The mission that God gave to Israel to be a blessing to the nations will be completed in the person of Jesus.
 - e. In Malachi 3:1 the messenger is sent to prepare the way “before me” (לפני) instead of “before you” as read in Mark. Now we are driven back into the text of Malachi. Since Yahweh is speaking, then this indicates that Jesus should indeed be identified as someone who is divine. Jesus is not just a son of god, but the divine Son of God.

¹ James W. Voelz, *Mark 1:1-8:26 Concordia Commentary* (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 92, 95-96.
² *Ibid.*, 42.

- f. Also, the messenger sent in Malachi 3:1 will be followed by a second messenger. The second messenger is identified as “the Lord (הַאֲדֹנָי) whom you seek” and “the messenger of the covenant (מִלְאָךְ הַבְּרִית) in whom you delight.” This introduces Jesus as a messianic figure (Adonai v. Yahweh) whom Israel awaits and as the messenger who will establish the (new) covenant in whom they delight.
- g. What is the referent of *αὐτοῦ* in 1:3? This is evident when looking at the Hebrew text of Isaiah 4:30: “Prepare the way of Yahweh; make straight the paths for *our* God (אֱלֹהֵינוּ).” If Jesus is the one who comes after John in fulfillment of this prophecy, then Jesus is identified once again with the God of Israel. Again, he is not just a son of god, but the divine Son of God.
- h. Note again that all of this is known about Jesus even before he appears in the story in 1:9. Jesus is the Messiah, the personification of Israel, the Lord and Messenger of the new covenant whom Israel awaits, and the divine Son of God.
- i. Finally, in 1:7–8 John proclaims that someone who is stronger than he will come after him. This person is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit subsequently comes down into Jesus at his baptism, the reader knows that Jesus is “the One stronger than John who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.”
2. John’s water baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This was a baptism for sinners, not just for the mere removal of ceremonial impurities (as practiced among Jews in the first century). Francis Maloney and James W. Voelz argue further that John’s baptism is the fulfillment of God’s promise in Ezekiel 36:25.³ “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean from all of your uncleanness, and from all of your idols I will cleanse you.” Therefore, in John’s baptism we see both the purification of persons from individual sins and the eschatological purification of the nation of Israel from its national sins. These are the very sins—especially the sin of idolatry—that resulted in the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles and Israel’s present servitude to Rome.
3. In light of the purpose of John’s baptism, the reader may find something challenging and even troublesome in Jesus’s advent/arrival in Mark’s narrative. Jesus comes (from the north, not Judea or Jerusalem) and is baptized by John. No comment is made by the narrator as to why this happens. It happens. In light of both who the reader knows Jesus to be and the purpose of John’s baptism—to purify sinners—it might appear shocking that Jesus would receive a baptism meant for sinners. *Why is the divine Son of God baptized? Jesus is certainly not a sinner in need of purification, is he?*
4. What Mark does clearly demonstrate, however, is that this is the occasion for Jesus’s anointing with the Holy Spirit and his entrance into his office as Messiah.
5. *Why does Jesus receive baptism?* One reason may be that as Israel-reduced-to-one and as the divine Son of God, Jesus is obedient to the will of his Father. If God calls the Israelites to be baptized, then the man who personifies Israel will be baptized (even if he is the sinless

³ Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 35; and Voelz, *Mark 1:1-8:26*, 102–103.

Son of God). If God wants his Son to be baptized to fulfill his mission of redemption, then his Son will be baptized. Note, however, that whether or not Mark tells us directly why Jesus received baptism, we see Jesus here identifying with sinners. In his incarnation and birth Jesus came down to earth with humanity. At his baptism, however, he came *all the way down* into the Jordan River with fallen humanity. **Jesus came to identify with and save sinners!**

6. That this is Mark's intention is evident from an interesting literary feature in Mark. The narrative of Jesus's ministry begins in 1:9 with the baptism account. The entire narrative of Jesus's ministry is then framed by the narrative of his baptism (1:9-11) and the narrative of his death (15:37-39). *How is this done?*

- a. At Jesus's baptism the heavens are split open. At his death the curtain the Temple was split open. In both cases the verb σχίζω is used. Voelz notes that the curtain in the Temple was embroidered with images from the heavens.⁴
- b. At Jesus's baptism the Spirit came down into (εἰς) him. At his death Jesus "spirits out" (the verb ἐκπνεύω is used). There is a contrast between the prepositions εἰς and ἐκ. The Spirit goes into Jesus at this baptism, then the Spirit goes out of Jesus at the cross.
- c. At Jesus's baptism the voice (of God) from heaven identifies Jesus as the Son of God. At his death the centurion standing on earth identifies Jesus as the Son of God. The significance of the centurion's confession is that he is the only *human* character (other than Jesus himself) to confess that Jesus is the Son of God.
- d. Through this framing we see that Jesus is baptized not just for the ministry that unfolds after he receives the Spirit, but ultimately to suffer and die upon the cross. His ministry is taking him to the cross. There the Son of Man serves by giving his life as a ransom for many (10:45). And so, we see that Jesus at his baptism does truly identify with sinners and that he came to save fallen mankind.
- e. Therefore, there is great significance that Jesus's advent/arrival in Mark's Gospel is his baptism by John in 1:9.

7. Nevertheless, if anyone has any doubts about what makes Jesus different from all the other people who were baptized by John, the events that follow his baptism should make this clear. As Jesus comes out of the water, the heavens are split open, the Spirit comes down into him, and the voice from heaven identifies him as God's beloved Son.

8. Jesus's reception of the Holy Spirit can also be matrixed with the promises of God found in Ezekiel 36. Ezekiel 36:27 reads "and I will put my Spirit within you . . ." Jesus is Israel personified. Therefore, this promise is fulfilled when the Spirit literally comes down into Jesus. Jesus is Israel receiving the Spirit of God, and Jesus is now the One who will baptize with that same Spirit. John the Baptizer fulfills Ezekiel 36:25; Jesus fulfills Ezekiel 36:27.⁵

9. After the baptism the Spirit "throws" Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan for forty days. Jesus then goes to Galilee and proclaims the in-breaking of God's reign and

⁴ James W. Voelz, *Mark 8:27-16:8 Concordia Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2019), 1180-1185.

⁵ Voelz, *Mark 1:1-8:26*, 102-103.

rule: “The time is fulfilled. The reign and rule of God has arrived. Repent and believe the good news!” Note that God’s reign is present in the person and work of Jesus. Every act of Jesus that follows should now be understood in connection with the in-breaking of God’s reign through the actions of his Son.

10. *What of the goal of God’s reign?* It represents judgment upon the forces that oppose God—the devil, sin, and death. Yet it represents salvation for rebellious Israel, sinful humanity, and fallen creation. In Jesus God is fulfilling his promises in the Old Testament.

11. In the first sermon we focus on the actual advent/arrival of Jesus in Mark’s narrative. Note that the introduction of this sermon, I call attention to an episode of the YouTube channel CineFix that looks at character introductions. I begin here because in Mark 1:9–15 Jesus is first introduced as a character. It would be worth your time to watch this episode on YouTube. You may come up with other ideas to discuss how Jesus is introduced as a character in the Gospel of Mark. Here is the link to this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5psXjzWUve8&list=PLgDzS1EqMeytU2OgMX8qrzs-nU9EqsrmY&index=1>

Sermon 1: The Advent of Our Lord! Mark 1:1–15

On YouTube there is a channel named CineFix. As you might guess from its name, this channel is devoted to the discussion of film. Actually, each episode on CineFix contains a top ten list in which the makers present their choices for the best examples of some category related to film. There is an episode on the top ten best western films, another on the top ten best opening credits, and episodes for just about any other category you might associate with film.

One particular episode on CineFix presents their choices for the top ten “character introductions” in film. This may initially sound like a silly category. Isn’t there a point in a film where every character is introduced as they appear for the first time? Yet filmmakers will often make greater effort in introducing one particular character who will play a most important role in the story. This could be the main character. Think of Indiana Jones emerging from the shadows at the beginning of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. This could be the bad guy in the story. Think of the Joker orchestrating an elaborate bank robbery at the beginning of *The Dark Knight*. Whoever this character is, the makers of the film go out of their way to spend extra time and focus on this one character. This character’s arrival into the story—or advent, so to speak—means something. They want you to know that this one character will be significant. They want you to know just what to expect from this character as the story unfolds.

In that particular episode of CineFix, they award the number one character introduction to actor Gene Wilder’s portrayal of Willy Wonka in the 1973 film *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*. Interestingly, though the title character, Willy Wonka does not actually appear

until almost a quarter of the way into the movie. Before this he is only discussed by other characters. He owns a factory that produces the best candy in the world. He initiates a contest that captivates the entire globe as everyone searches for “golden tickets” hidden in candy wrappers. Apparently, he was something of a showman in the past or, as one character describes him, “Willy Wonka, the greatest of them all!” Yet he has not appeared in public for many years. Now Wonka finally plans to emerge from his factory on an appointed day. A crowd outside awaits his arrival with great anticipation.

Well, when Wonka finally does emerge, he appears to be partially crippled and walking with a cane. Though he approaches the crowd steadily and deliberately, both the crowd and the audience see a man who does not, in fact, appear to be the greatest of them all. Instead, here is a man who appears to have been worn down and aged by the struggles of life. The cheering stops. The looks of joy from the crowd are replaced with looks of shock, disappointment, and pity as they watch this poor crippled man steadily get closer and closer. But then suddenly, at the last minute, Wonka falls forward, you would think to his harm, but then does a somersault, lands on both feet, and is revealed to be as youthful and spry as ever. It was all a stunt. The crowd roars with approval.

CineFix categorizes this “character introduction” as an example of “the reversal of expectation.” This reversal actually happens two times. First, in how he is described before he appears on screen, the audience is led to think that Willy Wonka will be a wonder to behold. Yet instead, we first see him as a crippled man. But then things are reversed again, and we see that Wonka is still a showman who deliberately tricks the crowd—and tricks the audience—about who he really is. What can we expect from Willy Wonka for the remainder of the story? Well, we do not really know what to expect from this character, and this is the point.

Consider now the arrival of Jesus in the story of the Gospel of Mark. What is Jesus’s advent? How is his character introduced?

“And it came to pass in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.”

So, Jesus shows up in the story when he is baptized by John in the Jordan River.

Now this might be surprising if you have been paying attention and have some sense of who Jesus is. John has come to bring what God promised in the Last Days, purification for Israel from the pollution of their sins. John’s baptism was for sinners. So why is Jesus getting baptized? Does Jesus need what John is offering—cleansing and purification from sin?

We might even say that in Mark 1:9, we find a “reversal of expectation.” Notice how in Mark 1:1-8 we learn things about Jesus. In 1:1 we learn that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. In Mark’s quote from the Old Testament, we learn that Jesus is messenger of the covenant promised in Malachi. What is more, Jesus must be divine, for the crier in the wilderness