

Second Sunday in Advent

WHAT ARE YOU LOOKIN' AT?

Mark 1:1-8

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Analysis by Stephan K. Turnbull

1The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

*"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;*

3the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

*'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,'"*

4John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5And 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. 6Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7He 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. 8I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Setting the Scene:

The opening eight verses of Mark's gospel are heavy on the fulfillment of prophecy and Messianic expectation. Jesus is already "the Christ" in Mark's opening non-sentence, and the next two verses draw together three Old Testament articulations

of Israel's hope for a second, ultimate Exodus (Ex 23:20 and Mal 3:1 in Mk 1:2; and Is 40:3 in Mk 1:3). In verse 4 John is offering a baptism, the results of which were in principle already available through the temple cult, making his baptismal ministry in itself an indictment of the sufficiency of the Temple. In verse 5 "all the region of Judea" and "all Jerusalem" (technically a subset of Judea and so probably added for pious emphasis) go out to meet this ascetic, prophetic Elijah figure in a symbolic representation of the comprehensive, eschatological in-gathering of all God's abrahamic children (though, again, the "in"-gathering is conspicuously outside of Zion). In verse 6 both John's clothes and his diet bespeak new creation. His leather belt echoes God's provision of leather garments to Adam and Eve (Gen 3:21 LXX: *chitonas dermatinous*), and his side dish of honey to go with the Torah-observant grasshoppers (Lev 11:22) is similar to the proselyte Aseneth's honeycomb meal, which is associated with God's spirit and Edenic paradise in Joseph and Aseneth 16:14. And in verses 7-8, when John finally opens his mouth the crowds hear reports of the Messianic "stronger one" who is yet to come and who, in a recollection of Ezekiel's eschatological hope (Ez 36:25-27), will baptize not only with water but also with God's Spirit.

DIAGNOSIS: A Victory Nobody Wants

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Hoping for a Hero*
The first problem, of course, with all this prophetic familiarity is the all too familiar shape of the expectation that goes with it. It's a truism by now that John's own audience had their expectations charged for a new David, a Judas Maccabee whose power would not wane with time. He would shake off the disgusting Romans, the half-breed Herods, and anyone else who stood in the way of God's purely restored Israel. And God's

people in the 21st century are no more immune to this problem of mistaken expectations than they were in the 1st century. Some of us hope and vote for political saviors who will make our nation godly (from either end of the political spectrum), and many of us persist in making tacit connections between the acquisition of comfort and wealth in our lives and the degree of God's blessing. So insidious and powerful is this connection that we come to worship these gifts as if they were the Giver, prostrating ourselves and our purses before the great god More. More money, more power, more respect, more reputation. We would have made excellent first-century Zealots.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Happy with the Status Quo*

But if that were our only problem, at least we'd have some zeal to redirect. More dangerous even than looking for God in all the wrong places is looking for nothing at all. The Jews in John's audience who had accommodated themselves to the Roman-Herodian power constellation were loathe to hear any such Messianic hope: "Dear God, don't come back now!" They were comfortable with their palaces, their compromised ethics, and their pagan bedfellows. So are we. We are about as eager for Jesus' second advent as Annas, Caiaphas, and the high priestly cartel were for his first advent. Why would we want the Kingdom of God when we're busy trying to establish our own. Perhaps we'd be better Sadducees than Zealots.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Hitched to the Wrong Train*

The damnable problem with all this satisfaction and accommodation is that it constitutes an active choice for the powers of evil and against God. We give our souls to the satanic and demonic powers that Jesus has come to vanquish (especially in the Gospel of Mark). We choose to remain on the side of defeat and RSVP our regrets to the victorious reign of God. It's

the stupidest choice we'll make for all eternity. Needless to say, the conditions of the losers in this cosmic battle are nothing to envy.

PROGNOSIS: A Victory Nobody Can Stop

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *God's Uninvited Victory*

Fortunately God wasn't waiting for a popularity vote to launch his victory invasion. In fact he comes completely without invitation. Suddenly John the Baptist is heralding and Jesus is healing and saving and bringing the reign of God right to the doorstep of especially those people who had not exactly prepared the roads and straightened the highways in their neck of the woods. And who could have expected such a Savior anyway? He invades by associating with the weak and sinful and then dying on a cross for and with them? "Nonsense!" you would have thought. But God's nonsense turns out to be earth-shakingly victorious. Who'da thunk it? Ready or not, worthy or not, God's forces are with them and they've been caught up in an eternal victory for no other reason than that Jesus came to dwell with them and they had the good sense to fall into the only hands open to them.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Repentant Road-Paving*

What we see coming to fruition in Jesus' John-heralded ministry helps us understand the character of John's proclamation to begin with. His call to repentant road-straightening is not so much a matter of "Prepare the way so that the King will come save us" as it is "Oh my gosh! The King is here. Let's pave the roads and clean the gutters! This is awesome!" Even the blessed saints who join with Jesus in his kingdom-march to Calvary have not exactly gotten their acts together, but they have been captured by a new vision. They go about preaching, bumbling,

failing, and loving with all the perfect grace of a newborn foal. But even so, their hearts are beating with new life, breathing fresh air for the very first time.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *The Beat Goes On*

And now these bumbling faithful become themselves God's unlikely invasion force, marching to the same drum corps rhythm that ordered the cruciform steps of the herald and the Messiah. Just as John preached and was given over (vv. 7, 14) and Jesus preached and was given over (1:14, 9:31, 10:33), so also Jesus' people preach and are given over (3:14, 13:9-13). After all, as verse 1 of this text tells us, this quasi-biography of Jesus' first thirty years is only "the beginning of the good news" of God's Messiah. Now the people of the Messiah are looking for the Kingdom neither in power nor in their complacent present but in the death and resurrection of Jesus-and their gaze is directing their step. Now the people of the Messiah march forth in the unexpected victory of God.