

November 13, 2022 Mark's Opening Words Mark 1:1-12

There was a moment back at the beginning of the last week, because this is the first day of the new week, when I was tempted to give this message the title, "The Nuts and Bolts." Nuts and Bolts are pieces of hardware, used to hold things together. They are better than nails as fasteners. I have a tendency to argue they are even better than screws. I have built most of the beds that Barbara and I have slept in...not all...but most. And I did so for one simple reason. The frames are bolted together. They don't come apart. And if they did come apart, I could make a repair that would restore the piece of furniture such that it would not come apart again. That is the connection between Mark 1:1-12 and the phrase nuts and bolts. Mark is building an account of who Jesus is, that holds together. It is a strong account, believed to be the first of the Gospel accounts and a backbone or a framework on which Matthew, Luke and John built their accounts. And it begins using fundamental fasteners to hold the account together.

The first bolt in this account is the first verse. You know that I have a great reverence for the King James Version of the Bible in English. So it will not surprise you if I point out that there is only one word that is translated differently in the New International Version of the first verse of Mark's Gospel. The NIV says, "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God." The KJV says, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." And

the Good News Bible says it in similar fashion... “This is the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

Nuts and bolts. If you are going to read the gospel of Mark, it begins telling us it is the good news of or about, Jesus the Son of God. The Oxford Dictionary reminds us that the word gospel literally means glad tidings. Good news. It is not about the disciples, or the people of Judea, it is about Jesus. And Mark wants us to know that the first thing you need to understand about Jesus is this: HE is the Son of God. For Mark, as for the other gospel writers there is no maybe about that claim. They heard Jesus teach and preach. They saw the miracles they mention in the accounts. They crashed emotionally when he was taken and beaten, crucified and died. And in the midst of their grief when they were convinced they had lost Jesus, on the 3rd day, Sunday morning, HE rose from the dead. HE came to them in the upper room...not limping and wounded...but alive! The resurrection is for Mark, and Matthew, and Luke and John the moment when they finally got it. Jesus is not just a holy man, or a prophet, HE is the Son of God. “Nuts and bolts.” This one insight, this one truth, causes the account to hang together, indestructible. It is a nut and bolt fastening something together with a lock washer. You can deny it. But you cannot destroy it. It is the revelation of God!

Mark announces he will tell us how the whole thing began. And then surprise! Mark does not tell us about the birth of Jesus. No Mary and Joseph saga, no journey to Bethlehem, no shepherds watching their flocks. Did you ever

sick washing their socks? I did. I thought it was funny. I thought it was more realistic. Because I was not a believer. When I came to faith, when I got the memo, was convinced God is real...in my life...with me, I no longer thought it was funny, and I stuck to the real details...watched their flocks by night. No wise men in Mark, Making the two year journey to Bethlehem to actually see the baby who is born to be King of the Jews. And that is an understatement isn't it. They did not just want to see HIM! They wanted to worship HIM. They wanted to recognize HIM. Gifts. Gold. Frankincense. Myrrh. None of that in Mark. Do you know there are scholars who think the Christmas story is an invention of the church, because Mark doesn't tell us any of that?

Actually Mark is just Mark. He does not start his account with anything about Jesus the child. He starts his account when Jesus makes his entry on the world stage as an adult. You could say Mark is only interested in telling us the important stuff. From his point of view. His account is about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And so he starts the account with the word of the prophet Isaiah. And this gets interesting. It is not about Jesus, the prophecy to which he introduces us, is about the one who prepares the way for the Messiah. A messenger. The voice of one crying in the wilderness. Preparing the way for the Lord.

And so John came. Not John the disciple of Jesus. John the Baptist. He baptized people out in the wilderness in the River Jordan. He baptized people who repented of their sin.

People who were eager to get God's forgiveness for their sins. And Mark describes in detail how crowds flocked to hear John preach. They experienced conviction that they were lost in their sins. They let him immerse them in the river as a symbol of dying and rising to new life. They let him wash them in the name of God because the fact is they found hope in the midst of that experience. John was not asking for money. Or anything else for that matter. What John did say is, "After me will come one more powerful than I. I'm not worthy to stoop down and untie his shoe laces. I baptize you in muddy water. He will baptize you in the very Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit!"

One day while John is doing this preaching, teaching, baptizing thing, he finds his cousin, Jesus in the line of those wanting to be baptized. Matthew tells us that John protested saying, "I need to be baptized by you, not the other way around." Jesus said, "Baptize me, it is he right thing to do." And John did it. And a voice from heaven confirmed that God was pleased with HIS son, and the spirit of God like a dove descended on Jesus.

I learned things about John the Baptist in Israel that I did not learn anywhere else. You have heard about Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. Qumran was the site of a group called The Essenes. They were very conservative Jewish men. A monastery if you will before the monastic movement occurred in Europe. They studied the Scriptures and they pursued holiness. John the Baptist joined that community for a time. He left it to begin preaching and

baptizing at the River Jordan. And then Jesus comes to him to be baptized. As Isaiah foretold John prepared the way for Jesus. Some of Jesus disciples had tried to be disciples of John the Baptist.

John the disciple of Jesus was with John the Baptist when Jesus came to the Baptist seeking baptism. John the disciple of Jesus says that John the Baptist said, “Look, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!....the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.” (John 1:29-31)

It is true that Mark’s gospel does not tell us the details of Jesus birth in Bethlehem. Mark’s account starts 30 years later. And it is also true that some of Jesus 12 disciples had spent time with John the Baptist. But the opening verses of Mark’s gospel literally glue his story of Jesus to those of the other disciples who in some ways write more complete and more detailed accounts of Jesus ministry, his death and resurrection.

But make no mistake. The object in reading the 4 Gospel accounts is not to try and figure out which one is best or a better account than one of the others. Mark tells us who he is writing about in that opening verse. He is telling us about Jesus. He announces that Jesus is the Christ....the Messiah for which Israel has been looking and longing. And he tells his readers that Jesus is the Son of God, divine, the Saviour. And he chooses to start his account where the faith journey started for him. Mark. John the Baptist prepared the ground. When John

the Baptist baptized Jesus he introduced some of his followers to the one he had said would come when he preached and taught. The nuts and bolts of the gospel are in Mark's account. And for that we must simply be thankful to God.

Let us pray

Lord we thank you for the way in which your servants wrote their accounts. We thank you for their testimony. We thank you for their faith. We thank you for the manner in which so many of the disciples suffered. Not because we wish them harm. But because their suffering underlines the claims they make as they tell us about YOU. Continue to bless the word with the power of Your Spirit. Continue to feed our faith. Be with us as we prepare for the celebration of Christmas 2022, and all that it means to us and to our world. Amen