

Sermon Growth Guide

December 6, 2020

Wonder – God Is On the Way

Mark 1:1-8

Key Verse: Mark 1:7-8 “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Big Idea: Hearts were opened up to the coming Messiah through the wonder-filled word of John the Baptist.

Foundations

2020 has given us plenty of reasons to be cynical. But cynicism makes life small. We need something better than cynicism. We need good news that is actually and lastingly ... good.

Our text this week sees a man, John the Baptist, wildly dressed and sternly proclaiming that the prophecies from centuries past are about to unfold. Could it be? John's message caught the ears of the entire region and they flocked to hear him. A full day's journey into the wilderness is no small commitment to hear the ramblings of a locust-eating, camelhair-wearing mouthpiece of God. And to top it off, the people were convicted of their sin and their need for a savior, so they were baptized.

John was careful to never pretend to be the center of the story: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 1:7-8).

Hearts were opened up to the coming Messiah through the wonder-filled word of John the Baptist. How about you? Is there room in your heart for wonder to lift your head up to the Messiah?

Gathered together with your circle, in-person or online, open your time of study in prayer. Ask the Spirit to guide and guard your thinking and growing.

Understanding God's Word

How does Mark open his Gospel? What catches your attention?

In what way is John a continuation of the prophetic pronouncements about the Messiah that have been proclaimed for centuries? What is unique about the timing of John's ministry?

In verses 7 and 8, John compares and contrasts the baptism he is offering with the baptism to come with the arrival of the Messiah. What are the similarities and differences?

Applying God's Word

Hearts were opened up to the coming Messiah through the wonder-filled word of John the Baptist. How can you fight to keep your heart open to the wonder of salvation in Christ? How can your Christian community help you guard your heart from cynicism that so quickly leads to hard-hearted pride?

Witnessing God's Word

Identify one wonderful thing you can do for someone in your life who does not yet know the Messiah. Ask your circle to challenge you to do it! Wrap up your time together by praying for one another, especially for the burdens you each carry this week.

It's December 6th. Are you sick of Christmas music yet? I hope not. Sometimes it feels like there are only about 10 songs played over and over. It doesn't take long to feel like you've heard them. The lights are going up. The decorations have busted out. As a church, we have made a commitment this year to light up our little part of downtown—just our way of saying to our city, "We love you and bless you with the joy of Jesus' birth." It's Christmas. That's big! Sometimes, though, a little cynicism can accompany those Christmas boxes as they come up from the basement. A little air of cynicism can settle in around those twinkle lights and well-known songs. That's what this series is about. 2020 has given us plenty of reasons to be cynical. But cynicism makes life small. We don't need that. I don't need my life to be any smaller or more confined than it already is. I need to find that new reality, that fresh insight, that might just make my life expand. I think it begins with **Wonder**.

The Gospel of Mark, which many say was the first one written, starts like this: "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). The beginning. This is a very important word, "beginning." The Greek is "arche," as in archetype or archeology. The first thing, the first form, the first principle. It's a beginning as large as the

beginning. Genesis 1 starts with "in the beginning." This is that big, just as big. A new thing, a new creation, a new start. It is cosmic and new. What is it? It is the "good news," the "gospel." Gospel means good news, a pronouncement. Caesar declares good news, the war with Gaul is over, or taxes have been suspended, or taxes have been raised (that's the thing with Caesar's good news, it only had to be good news to him to be called good news). But this proclamation is different. Mark says, here is "the beginning of the good news about Jesus." This good news proclamation isn't just a dispatch from the field. It's a story, a life, a biography. It's a person, Jesus. This person, Mark reveals from the start, this Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one, the Messiah who is also the Son of God. I want you to have the news, but the news is not a bulletin. I have to tell you the whole story. It's cosmic. It's new. It's Jesus.

"Cosmic and new? I don't know. Cosmic and new doesn't come along all that often." Cynicism sets in. Cynicism is that feeling that you know from the beginning how it's all going to turn out. A kid has easy wonder. Everything is new. Everything is fresh. Everything is huge! I asked our graphic designer Sallie Kidman to give us the view from a kid's eyes for this illustration—isn't it awesome by the way? To a kid, all Christmas trees are huge. To a parent they are all expensive and messy! After you've run a few laps, it's easy to grow cynical. It's easy. You just take the past and apply it to the future—the worst of the past, you know? It's a kind of know-it-all-ness (new word) that can predict how it will all turn

out. I know how that story ends. Like when a football team takes the field with no quarterback, I already know how that's going to turn out. You apply the past to the future and know how it's going to turn out. There's a little buzz in thinking you know, right? Cynicism. It pretends to be wisdom, but it isn't. It's what the Bible calls "wise in your own eyes." And it shrinks life.

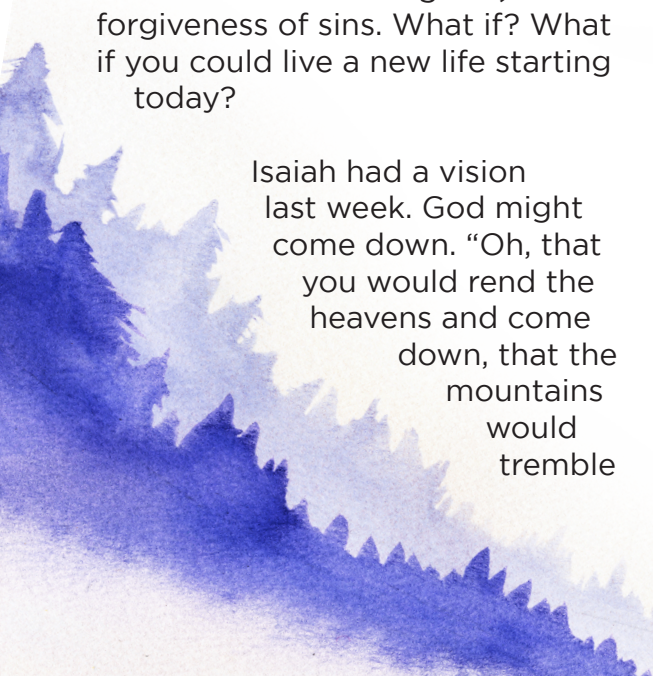
Pastor Carey Nieuwhof wrote a book a few years ago about when he burned out called *Didn't See It Coming*. There were a bunch of warning signs on his dashboard that he was headed for burnout, but he didn't pay attention to them until after he crashed. Looking back, one of the big ones was a rising cynicism. He was cynical, mocking and sarcastic. He didn't like the man he was. Nobody likes to be around a cynic. He writes, "Cynics never change the world. They just tell you why the world can't change. Ask them; they know all about it." Cynicism sets up barriers in every direction. I know how that will go. That's never going to work. That will only end badly. That's not the real reason that's happening. Glass walls in every direction. It's confining. It makes you feel a little more in control, but it actually shrinks all possibility, limits all potential and eventually snuffs out all hope. A glass box. What if God crashed into it? New and cosmic. Wonder.

"As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you,

who will prepare your way' — 'a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him'" (Mark 1:2-3). Mark, who was probably getting his direction for this gospel from Peter, points us back to the prophets. This is actually both Malachi 3 and Isaiah 40, but no mistake was made in mentioning only Isaiah. Rabbis taught these verses together in what's called a Scripture cluster, so it's perfectly appropriate to quote them together but emphasize the Isaiah portion which Mark does. The point is this: the new beginning, cosmic and new, was foretold. It is a new turn in a long story. As it is written, so it was. I love how verse 4 turns in our NIV translation. As it is written in the prophets a messenger will come, "And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4). It was promised, so it happened. $1 + 1 = 2$. God's promises, they get fulfilled. That's the underlying premise of Mark. John the Baptist is a prophet, a teacher, a preacher, but he is also preparing for something to happen. He is a forerunner. John is constantly aware that someone is coming right behind him. In fact, there might be no deeper or firmer conviction in all his life than that fact. Someone is on the way.

John is an unexpected figure. Prophets were more of a distant memory in Jerusalem than a constant presence. Malachi, the last one, was over

400 years ago. Now here's John, wrapped in camel's hair and a leather belt like Elijah. Eating locusts and honey. Teaching with authority. John the Baptist is a disruptor. Something new. Suddenly, crowds start to gather. John is 20 miles and 4,000 feet of elevation from Jerusalem, but people make the trek over and over again. "The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River" (Mark 1:5). Crowds of cynical Jerusalemites, city people, you know. They've seen it all. They've heard it before. They know the limits of things and where the glass walls sit. They find themselves captured by the promise of John the Baptist. The wonder of it was a refreshment to their spirits, and wonder opened them up to change. "Maybe I should change the direction I've been headed. This man says something new is possible, a new direction, a new way of life. I actually kind of believe him. It's not too late for me!" They knelt down in the water of the river and were baptized, for repentance (turning to a new way of life, away from evil and toward good) and forgiveness of sins. What if? What if you could live a new life starting today?



Isaiah had a vision
last week. God might
come down. "Oh, that
you would rend the
heavens and come
down, that the
mountains
would
tremble

before you!" (Isaiah 64:1) I know God can get to us, God can come down to us, God can crash in. God did it before. Mountains shook. Mt. Sinai ringed with fire. God does awesome and mighty things. I know He can. What if He did? Burning fire and wind and cloud and quaking and rumbling and power! Cosmic and new. And so John the Baptist appeared. God is on the way. What if God broke through and came down to us! John says, "Yeah, all that Isaiah stuff. Yeah, that's happening by the way." But the vision is a little different. "And this was his message: 'After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit'" (Mark 1:7-8). He. After me comes the one. A man. A person. Walking up behind me with sandals on. All the glory of God in the face of Jesus. Cosmic and new. Wonder.

What if God came down? What if God broke through my barriers? What if Jesus crashed my little box of cynicism? I would have to see that Christmas is bigger than I thought. Like a child at the foot of a tree—Christmas is bigger than I am. Bigger than what I have known. Christmas isn't something I check off on my sticky notes each year. It's much bigger than I. Bigger than my so-called wisdom, wise in my own eyes. If that's true, everything changes. Wonder wakes us up from the monotony and says more is possible, if we are open to change. "Look among the nations and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told" (Habakkuk 1:5). Look up with

Wonder.