

Week of December 7th – Mark 1:1-8

- Read each daily Devotional Reading using the SOAP method and Daily Devotional to help you reflect.
- Read the article below prior to group
- Think through the small group and accountability questions after the article

Devotional Readings

Sunday	Isaiah 40
Monday	Psalms 85
Tuesday	2 Peter 3
Wednesday	Mark 1
Thursday	Jeremiah 37
Friday	Psalms 130
Saturday	Joshua 3

Article: *The Preaching of John the Baptist - Mark 1:1-8*

by N.T. Wright from *Mark for everyone, Part 2* (England: London : SPCK, 2001.), 01-04.

You are sound asleep and dreaming, when suddenly the door bursts open and a bright light shines full in your face. A voice, breaking in on your dream-world, shouts, 'Wake up! Get up! You'll be late!' And without more ado, the speaker splashes your face with cold water to make the point. Time to stop dreaming and face the most important day of your life.

That's what the opening of Mark's gospel is like. It's a great way to start, because what Mark is telling us is that that's what John the Baptist was like to the Jewish people of his day. John's ministry burst in upon the surprised Jewish world. Many had been looking for a sign from God, but they hadn't expected it to look like this. Many had wanted a Messiah to lead them against the Romans, but they weren't anticipating a prophet telling them to repent.

John was a voice, shouting across the dreams, and perhaps the nightmares, of the Judaism of Herod and Caiaphas, the Judaism that told again and again the story of freedom but had no idea what freedom would look like when it came. Some thought John was mad, that it was him who was dreaming; but here he was, splashing cold water all over them and telling them to get ready for the greatest moment in Jewish history, in world history.

The bright light he was shining in their faces was the story they all knew very well, but with a new twist. Every year, at Passover-time, they recited the story of the Exodus from Egypt, telling over and over how God rescued Israel from Pharaoh, bringing them through the Red Sea and away across the wilderness to their promised land. Along with the creation story, it's the most important story in the whole Old Testament, and John's hearers would have known it well. But instead of simply hearing the words and remembering the story, John was turning it into a drama, a play, and telling his hearers that they were the cast. They were to come through the water and be free. They were to leave behind 'Egypt' — the world of sin in which they were living, the world of rebelling against the living God. They, the Israel of the day, were looking in the wrong direction and going in the wrong direction. It was time to turn round and go the right way (that's what 'repentance' means). It was time to stop dreaming and wake up to God's reality.

The challenge had a sharp edge to it. Someone was coming, coming very soon, and John was getting people ready. If someone came into your town and told you that the President, or the Princess, or some other great person, was on their way to pay you a visit, you'd quickly rush around smartening things up. In Britain it's a standard joke that wherever the Queen goes she smells fresh paint. John was like the messenger going ahead of royalty, getting everywhere ready for the 'stronger one' who was coming after him. Israel as a whole needed smartening up. Each individual within Israel needed to smarten up. Someone was coming who would put even John in the shade. Who did John think this 'someone' was? It's not clear, and perhaps it wasn't clear even to him. He may well have thought it would be YHWH himself, Israel's God in person. Or he may have thought it would be the Messiah. Or he may have thought it would somehow be both. But what this figure would do was quite clear. What John had done with water, the Coming One would do with Spirit — the Holy Spirit.

This promise — it's a warning, too, of course, but basically it's a promise — picks up some more of the Jewish freedom images from the Old Testament. Mark points in the same direction with the two biblical quotations, from Malachi and Isaiah that open the story. One of the great promises that Israel had cherished for centuries was that when YHWH finally made the Exodus story happen all over again, setting his people free once and for all, that would be the time when he would come to live personally with his people. He would be with them; he would be their God, and they would be his people. How would he do this? In the original Exodus story God's presence lived with Israel in the pillar of cloud and fire. This time it was to be similar but different. God's Spirit would live with people, in people, becoming the air they breathe, the fire in their hearts. This is the promise they had lived on. John says it's now going to come true. But are they ready for it?

They certainly weren't ready — and perhaps John wasn't either — for what they got. Mark's opening verse tells us what to expect; all this is the beginning of the good news of Jesus the Messiah, God's son ('God's son', in the Judaism of the day, was a title for the Messiah). But things weren't that clear at the time. What they had was the

voice and the water: they were now to get ready for the human figure who would make sense, but very disturbing sense, of it all.

The main thing Mark gets us to do in this opening passage is to sense the shock of the new thing God was doing. If you're sick, and unable to sleep much, sometimes the night seems to go on forever. But then, just when you're dozing a bit, suddenly the alarm clock goes off: it really is morning. That's the mood here. It raises the question for us too: where are we asleep today, in our churches, our communities, and our personal lives? What might it take to wake us up?

About the author: N.T. Wright is Bishop of Durham (Church of England) and was formerly Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey and dean of Lichfield Cathedral. A graduate of Oxford University, he previously taught at Cambridge, McGill, and Oxford Universities. Wright's *The New Testament and the People of God* (1992), *Jesus and the Victory of God* (1996), and *The Resurrection and the Son of God* (2003) are the first three volumes of his projected six-volume series entitled *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (SPCK/ Fortress Press). Among his many other published works are *The Original Jesus* (1996), *What Saint Paul Really Said* (1997), and *The Climax of the Covenant* (1992). He is the author of the For Everyone commentary series.

Small Group Questions

Accountability

Divine Living - Are you building an interactive relationship with God? In your private prayer and devotional time, what are you learning or experiencing? How are you Knowing Christ in worship? Are you reaching your group and individual goals in this area?

Open / Scripture

1. One of the greatest challenges in understanding scripture is overcoming our assumptions of what the scriptures are saying. In light of this challenge, read through Isaiah 40:1-11 and then read Mark 1:1-8.

Observation

1. In Isaiah 40:1-2, how is Isaiah instructed to comfort the people of Israel?
2. In light of the fact that Isaiah was speaking to the people of Israel in exile in Babylon, what would God pardoning their iniquity mean and look like to them?
3. In Isaiah 40:3, why would a voice cry out to prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness? What would the wilderness represent for the people of Israel? If a path was being made straight, where would that path be heading towards?
4. What did the people pass through when exiting their wilderness wandering after the Exodus? (Joshua 3:7-17)
5. Why does John choose this passage from Isaiah to communicate to the people of Israel his role and what he is doing?
6. What would being in the wilderness and baptizing the sons and daughters of Israel in the Jordan River symbolize to the people?
7. If the people are in the wilderness and passing through the waters of the Jordan, then where would the people expect the Lord to be heading them towards?
8. In Mark 1:6, we are told John was dressed in camel skins and ate locust and honey. Why was John dressed like he was? (See Zech 13:4 and 2 Kings 1:8) What would his dress and diet say about who he was?
9. In Mark 1:7, John tells his audience that "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie." Why would one untie another's sandals? What does Jesus do to his disciples' feet at the last supper?
10. In Mark 1:8, what is the main difference in the ministry of John than the ministry of the one that follows him?
11. Read Jeremiah 37:11-14. How might the resurrection of the people, the giving of God's Spirit to them, and the coming into the land have any connection with what John is doing or what the one who is to follow him is to do?

Apply

1. It is often thought by those outside of the 1st century mind that John the Baptist just came out of nowhere, doing a whole new practice of baptism, eating bugs and wearing a funky outfit, and preaching repentance like an inner city soapbox preacher. From all of these passages in the Old Testament scriptures, does his clothing, diet, actions, and message seem to be out of place or incomprehensible? If God lead John to this most important role through the study of the scriptures and through prayer, how might this encourage you in your study and prayer life?
2. It is often said that we are either being transformed by the real Jesus or we are inventing one that suits our own liking. John was proclaiming the coming arrival of the King, who was going to baptize all those who came to him with the Holy Spirit. In the language of Jeremiah 37, this would mean being empowered to actually be God's people. The mechanism for preparing oneself to receive this King was repentance. What might God be calling you to turn away from so that you could walk as he would direct?
3. This week, challenge yourself to spend time in prayerful reflection on your current life. Ask the Father to reveal for you the things in your life that continue to be in rebellion to him. Once he has revealed these things to you, challenge yourself to turn away from them while asking the Father for his power to do so. You can have joyful confidence that by doing so, you will be preparing yourself to receive more fully the Real Jesus, the King.