

THE REAL JESUS
A Series on the Book of Mark
“The Beginning of the Gospel”
Mark 1:1-8
New City Church of LA
Grand Opening
September 14, 2008

I. Vision of New City

Welcome to New City. Today marks the official Grand Opening of New City Church of Los Angeles.

This journey started when God called me out of practicing law and put me on a journey of serving the church in full-time pastoral ministry. My first pastoral position was at the church I went to for the last 15 years—Young Nak Celebration Church. One afternoon about 3-4 years ago, I got a call from a stranger. He read an article about downtown revitalization and asked me what Young Nak, as a church near downtown, was doing to reach out to the new residents of downtown LA. Well, I told him we haven't really thought much about it, particularly in light of the fact that Young Nak was a Korean-American church.

But, something about that conversation struck a chord in my soul. I started to research downtown, read every article about downtown, learn about downtown.

I was also serving as a pastor of Love LA, a skid row parking lot outreach ministry of Young Nak. They meet at the parking lot next Union Rescue Mission, at the heart of skid row. It attracts about 200-300 people every Sunday. Love LA is an awesome ministry but one thing that I was burdened by was that some people thought of it as their church; but, Love LA didn't offer any discipleships or small groups. I tried to change that but it was difficult. I felt like we've built a church without real community. It was great as an outreach, but it didn't feel right as a church.

So, one day, God placed a vision in my heart: what if we planted a multi-ethnic, multi-socioeconomic church in downtown LA, a church where anyone can come as they are. But, almost right after the vision came to me, I felt like it would never work. Multi-ethnic is one thing, but multi-socioeconomic? It would never work. It's one thing to be multi-class between blue collar and white collar but skid row residents and loft dwellers? They'll never get along.

But, everytime I shared this vision with people, I kept on crying. The more Grace and I prayed about this vision, the more we felt like it was something God wanted us to pursue.

Then, we came to realize that if this is what God wanted us to do, our responsibility is not to determine whether it was going to be successful. In fact, we came to change our definition of success: It's not moving up in the world. It's not having a big church. It's figuring out what God wants us to do and doing it. We knew from the beginning that this was a God thing, not my thing. We submitted to God on this.

So, our vision is to be an inclusive gospel-centered community of lovers of Jesus Christ who connect people to God, grow together, serve the city, and extend God's kingdom.

To be inclusive means to be a come-as-you-are church.

- Where blacks, whites, Latinos, Asians can come as we are;
- Where loft dwellers and skid row residents can come as we are;
- Where gays and straights can come as we are;
- Where people who are religious and irreligious can come as we are—NOT because of our common affinity but because of our common brokenness and need for redemption.

To be an inclusive church means we are not a church that pretends. It's a place where you can come and be real. It's a place where we can drop our masks not because everyone is okay (your okay and I'm okay) but because we are all messed up together, because neither of us are okay. We are all broken. Even if we look like we are all put together, we are as messed up inside as the next guy who looks like he's struggling. When we get to the depth of our hearts, there is darkness in everyone of us. There is emptiness in us. We are broken. But, we also come to the realization that God loves us more than we can ever imagine. He loves us unconditionally. He accepts us unconditionally through Jesus Christ. This is the bond that holds us. It's our common brokenness and common acceptance by God, despite our brokenness. It's the gospel of grace. That's why we are not just an inclusive church; we are an inclusive gospel-centered community.

I'll tell you, we've been doing life together for a few months since the beginning of the core team development for this church plant. We have come to realize that God has been bringing broken people together. None of us have it together. All of us are messed up. But God is bringing us together in a way we never experienced.

I want to let you know that God has started to do something here in downtown, and man, it's awesome. There is a movement of God going on. And I want to welcome you to what God is doing.

II. Introduction to the Series on Book of Mark

Today, we are going to start a series on the Book of Mark.

Mark is the first written account of Jesus that we have. At the beginning of the church for about the first 30 years, they didn't have a written account of Jesus because the accounts of Jesus were told orally. People just couldn't make up stories about Jesus because there were eye-witnesses alive who could tell you what they saw. But, after about a generation, there was a problem of people making up Jesus of their own. Some of them lost touch with the real Jesus. That's why Mark wrote the book.

This is important because there's been a lot of interest about Jesus lately. Just think about the Da Vinci Code (BTW, about 100-200 years after Jesus, people were making up all kinds of stuff about Jesus—that's what Da Vinci Code was based on and those other Gnostic gospels that you hear are about—they were all written 100-300 years after Jesus, and are thus not written by witnesses of Jesus). It shows that people are interested in Jesus. I think there is an explosion of interest in spirituality and a lot of people are interested in Jesus BUT on their own terms. Dan Brown has his version of Jesus. Oprah has her version of Jesus. Madonna has her version of Jesus. Everyone has their version of Jesus.

[Tell the Joke about Jesus' Race]

Everyone has their version of Jesus. The irony is that the Jesus you make up can't change you. He can't challenge you because you made him up—it's really just you or a projection of what you want. If you want the real Jesus, you have to see the REAL JESUS. And I think Mark is arguably the best places to go for the real Jesus, the raw, unadulterated, unfiltered, straight-up Jesus.

We are going to look at Mark for a few months.

III. Scripture Reading

So, let's read Mark 1:1-8

[Read]

This passage introduces us three things: (1) who Jesus is; (2) what he came to do; and (3) where and how we can receive him.

IV. Who Jesus is (Incarnation).

He starts out very boldly with the statement: "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God." This is not a sentence; there is no verb. So, it's a title.

He starts out by saying that the subject of this book is world changing news (that's what the gospel means—it's good news that changes the foundation of the world) and this good news is about Jesus, and the first thing Mark says about Jesus is that he is the Christ. That's not his last name. Christ means the anointed one, the messiah, who was to come into the world to save us, the messiah that the people of Israel have been waiting for hundreds of years. Then, Mark says that this Jesus is the Son of God. What does he mean by saying that Jesus is the Son of God? Does he mean that Jesus is the son of God like sometimes the angels are called sons of God? Does it mean that Jesus is God? Well, Mark clarifies himself by quoting Old Testament prophecies:

2It is written in Isaiah the prophet:

**"I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way"—**

3"a voice of one calling in the desert,

**'Prepare the way for the LORD,
make straight paths for him.' "**

This is a bombshell. It's huge. In these passages, it says that the LORD himself will come, and that there will be a messenger before the LORD comes. Mark says that the messenger is John the Baptist, and the LORD is Jesus. What's the big deal? The word translated into LORD (in our Bible, it is translated as LORD in caps) is YHWH, the holiest name of God revealed to Moses in the burning bush. The name that is so holy that

Jews didn't even say it. This means that the creator of the earth, God himself, has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ. It's not like the guy upstairs came down, like someone of higher rank came down. It's more like Shakespeare writing himself into Hamlet. This is the only way Hamlet will ever know Shakespeare.

The transcendent God who is omnipotent, omni-present, omniscient has taken on a body. God moved into our neighborhood. The invulnerable has become vulnerable. The ideal has become material. God loved us so much that he became a human.

But you say: I don't believe it. You say that we're modern people and can't believe this kind of stuff that primitive people believed. There are too many barriers. But, keep in mind that all of the original believers were Jews and they had far more barriers to believing that God would become human than you. This was absolutely counter to their worldview. They thought of God as so transcendent that they didn't even say His name. Jews were the only monotheist in the world at the time. I think it'd easier to believe that God became a human being if you come from a polytheistic background, but for Jews, it was absolutely antithetical to their worldview. **Yet, they did believe it.** Something shattered the barriers to their world view. What was it? Mark says I am going to show it to you. Something broke through, and I am going to give it to you so read on.

Why is the divinity of Jesus so important that Mark starts out his gospel with it? If you believe that God become human being in Jesus Christ, if you take this truth into the center of your being, it will change you.

First, there is a reversal of values. The world is turned upside down. We immediately reject the hierarchical view of the world. It's no longer about moving up in the world because the incarnation of God.

Second, we don't believe in a God who is way out there who either does not care about us or cares just enough to judge us and whip us when we mess up, but we believe in a God who humbled himself and became human. In incarnation is the demonstration of God's amazing love towards us!

When we realize who this God is, it transforms us from inside-out. It changes the motivational drive of our life—what drives our lives. I think most of us are driven by

fear. Fear of missing out. Fear of defeat. Fear of rejection. Fear of punishment. Fear of not getting promoted. Fear of hunger and cold. Fear of not proving our worth. Fear of never finding love. And I think religion pretty much aggravates it. Religion says God is way out there and we have to do this and that to get to Him: Buddhism says: 8-fold path; Hinduism says: 5 pillars; Judaism says: 10 Commandments; but only Christianity says that God has come to us. If God has come to us, we can come to Him as we are. And when we realize that God is not out there to condemn us or to make us work or to get us to redeem ourselves, but that he has come to us to redeem us, to rescue us from the pit that we are in----when we come to the realization of his love for us, our hearts start to change and our lives start to change, NOT because of fear but because of love and gratitude.

Third, knowing that God has taken on humanity also helps us in our difficulties. We don't believe in a God that is estranged from our suffering; we believe in a God that suffered. That knows our temptations. That knows our pain. When you are going through a difficult time and you're wondering where God is or whether he really understands what you are going through, you need to know that God loved us so much that he abandoned heaven to come here to be with you.

V. What he came to do (to unleash the baptism of the Holy Spirit)

It says that John came preaching the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, but John says that compared to Jesus, he's nothing compared to Jesus, compared to the power of Jesus. He said, I baptize you with water, but Jesus will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. That's what Jesus came to do, to unleash the power of the Holy Spirit upon us.

We have to read this in the context of the expectation of the people at the time.

There were many OT prophecies where God promised the unleashing of the Holy Spirit. For example, Joel 2: 28-29 says:

28 "And afterward,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
your young men will see visions.
29 Even on my servants, both men and women,

I will pour out my Spirit in those days.

Joel said, God would pour out His Spirit on all people

- regardless of sex—sons and daughters,
- regardless of age—old men and young men, and
- regardless of background, race, color, or rank—even on my servants.

It will be awesome—they would dream dreams and see visions and they would prophesy.

There is a sense that God would pour out something awesome into all of us.

But, this prophecy remained unfulfilled for hundreds of years. And here's John the Baptist announcing that Jesus is here to unleash the power of the Holy Spirit into our lives.

Jesus, not only came to wipe the slate clean, but also to give us the power to live our lives.

There was an Italian man who decided to sell everything he had to immigrate to the United States during the turn of the 20th Century. He barely had enough money to buy a ticket to a ship to the U.S. Because he didn't have much money left, he went and bought some cheese and crackers to eat during the journey to the U.S. So everyday, for breakfast, lunch and dinner, he ate his cheese and cracker. While he was eating this, everybody else was eating in the ship's dining hall. He could smell the aroma of lobster, filet mignon, cabernet sauvignon. He was getting sick and tired of eating just cheese and crackers. On the 6th day of the journey, he went to the captain and said, "I'll do anything you want. I'll do the dishes. Clean the bathroom. Sweep the floor. Anything! Just let me have one meal in the dining room." Then, the captain look perplexed and said to him, "But sir, the meals are included with the ticket."

God did not call us to live cheese and cracker lives. Meals are included with the ticket. God does not just forgive our sins and load us with bunch of dos and don'ts and ship us into a life of misery.

This gospel of Jesus Christ is more than just a ticket to heaven. A lot of us think that the gospel is only about how God forgives us of our sins; but John is here declaring to us that the mission of Jesus is more than forgiveness of sin. It is to unleash the power of the Holy Spirit. To live in the Spirit is to be so saturated with the presence of God in

our lives that we no longer live by duty or law or dos and don'ts, but in the hedonistic pleasure of his company. It's about an inside-out transformation of our lives, and the life of humility and service that comes from our heart.

Our culture so misunderstands this that when people are called to Jesus, they automatically assume that we are calling them into moralism—into rules and laws and dos and don'ts. However, according to John, the gospel calls us into saturation (that's what baptism means) of God's presence through his Spirit. It's not a cheese and cracker life. It's a life of liberty, power, and love.

Are you tired of living a cheese and cracker life? Do you feel a sense of emptiness in your life? Do you sense that there is more to life than this?

Here, Mark starts off the Book by saying that Jesus came to give you a life a lot more than the life you know.

I grew up religious. I grew up going to church and following the 10 Commandments and trying to do the right thing. Things I focused on were rules. Where the line was. It says do not get drunk with wine. Didn't say anything about beer or smoking. I always thought that life would be so much more fun if I wasn't a Christian. I equated being a Christian to trying to live righteously. Doing the right thing. Getting my life in order. The problem was that even though I knew I was going to heaven, the ride felt like a cheese and cracker life.

It was when I discovered the power, the joy, and pleasure of God's presence in my life that I came to realize a whole new dimension to my life.

V. How and Where can we receive him (in the desert)

John the Baptist goes out to the desert. Desert is a place where life can't be sustained. Nothing grows. A place of thirst. No bread. Thorns. A terrible loneliness. Can't support life. There is a significance to the fact that John called people to the desert. Generally speaking in the OT, the desert was identified with meeting God. Where did Moses meet God? Where was the burning bush? In the desert. Where did Jacob wrestle with God? In the desert. Where did Israel meet God? In Egypt? No, in Sinai, which is in the desert. They met God there in principle, and after 40 years of roaming in the desert, they become God's people in practice.

In the desert, God is not just an add-on, because without God, there is no way to survive. So, it is in the desert that he meets us. We go through a desert when the real thing that keeps us alive, our real savior, real lord, real bread and drink, runs out or when we find that it is inadequate in our lives.

When our health fails, when we lose our job that we worked so hard for, when relationships fail, when our marriage fails, when you confront financial difficulties. When the things you used to rely on run dry, you are in the desert of your life.

Or you come to realize that even success leaves you empty. Even after I made partner at a decent law firm, the thing that I was working so hard for, I was left with a sense of emptiness. Is this all there is? That's when God called me to the desert.

It is in the desert that you realize that only God can save you.

- If you are going through a difficult time in your life, if you feel like things are running dry, I want to tell you that Jesus has come to saturate you, to baptize you in his presence, with the Holy Spirit.

You see, God did not come to judge us or to condemn us or to enslave us and demand more out of us. NO, he came to go to the ultimate desert, a place of desolation and death, thorns on his head, and lost God on the cross, taking the punishment that you and I deserved to take, so that when we go into our desert, we can find God, so that we can be baptized, saturated in the presence of God. So, that we can have an intimate relationship with God.

Let's pray.