

John the Baptist, Forerunner to Jesus (Mark 1:1-8)

- 1) Take his prophesied message to heart
- 2) Imitate his servant-like attitude

The way you introduce a topic has an immediate impact on how your audience will hear and remember it. You see this emphasis on introductions in TV shows or action-packed movies. They start off with a recap or a gripping scene to get you hooked for the rest of the program.ⁱ They do this because they know that if they don't get your attention within the first few minutes, they've probably lost you altogether. This is not a new idea. Back in 1791, composer Joseph Haydn released Symphony number 94 which was revolutionary for its time. In the 2nd movement after 30 some seconds of quiet intro is a loud *forte* chord that surprises you awake. The crowds loved it and nicknamed it the *Surprise Symphony*.ⁱⁱ Introductions have always played a big part in focusing the audience's attention on what the author wants.

What's interesting in the Gospel of Mark is what you don't find in his introduction. There is no mention of Jesus' birth. Whereas Matthew and Luke write chapters about the baby Jesus and John links Jesus with creation, Mark is silent.ⁱⁱⁱ Instead he introduces his biography on Jesus with these words, **"The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God."**^{iv} Then he right away focuses us on John the Baptist, the forerunner to Jesus. It may seem like Mark is short changing us. But there is much to be learned from this forerunner to Jesus. For his prophesied message has relevance today and his servant-like attitude is to be imitated.

In one of Mark's few Old Testament quotations,^v he shows two key prophecies about John the Baptist. First that he's out in the wilderness and second that he will prepare the way for Jesus' coming in the flesh. And that's where we find him – in the wilderness and speaking a message of repentance and forgiveness.^{vi} John the Baptist must have been a strange sight to see. So strange that people from miles around came to see him.^{vii} But what brings our attention to John the Baptist today is not the sight he was to see. It is his purpose as Jesus' forerunner – to **"prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him."**^{viii} How can a person make a straight path for the Lord in their heart? Well, what did John the Baptist say? He **"appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."**^{ix} The call of repentance and forgiveness, the message of sins committed and sins forgiven, is the prophesied message we are to take to heart today.

But people don't like to hear the call to repentance. Especially in this time of year – the season of giving. But I ask, why are people giving? Christians know the answer should be – as God freely gave us Jesus, so we freely give to others in love and thanks to God. But is that the reason why you are giving your gifts this coming Christmas? As we look over our lists of people to give gifts to, we see our call to repentance in the midst of this joyous season. Spouses we have not loved as we should. Loved ones we've neglected this past year because we

selfishly got too busy for them. Friends, coworkers, or neighbors we mistreated or spoke against and now we try to buy our way back to their good graces. With each person we see on our lists we hear the call to repentance. With each person on our lists we see the crooked paths in our hearts and guilt lying in our conscience.

It's at this moment we need to take John's message of repentance and forgiveness to heart because repentance and forgiveness go hand-in-hand. You can't have one without the other. While the world may think repentance is a negative idea, it is actually a blessed thing! There are 3 parts to repentance. It starts off with the hardest one that nobody likes – a contrite confession. You first need to recognize your sins against God and be genuinely sorry for them. And since God knows all things, we can't fake our remorse. After confessing we get to step number 2 – trusting in God's promise to forgive. There are no hidden catches you have to do to prove you deserve forgiveness.^x We don't deserve it and never will! Yet our Lord freely shares his forgiveness with those who repent. This is what makes repentance such a joy. For we receive the guarantee that we are at peace with God and loved by him as his dear children. Now we get to the last step of repentance – living a changed life that more closely follows Christ. The sins that we confessed we now try to live without. This whole idea of repentance is what John the Baptist taught in the wilderness. For this is how we make straight the paths in our heart for our Savior's coming – confess, trust, and rejoice.

Yet as popular John the Baptist was, he was no more than a forerunner for Jesus. He knew his role was to prepare the way for Jesus' coming in the flesh and once Jesus came, to get out of the way. And what motivated him to do step aside so willingly? The servant-like attitude he had. John knew he was nothing compared to Jesus. He said to the crowds, **“After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.”**^{xi} John did not even consider himself worthy enough to do the menial work of a slave like untying Jesus' sandals! He knew how great Jesus is. He's our Savior that people repent to and receive forgiveness from. And John the Baptist continually pointed people to him with his servant-like attitude.

Do you know how you can imitate John's servant-like attitude? It comes from taking his message of repentance and forgiveness to heart. You and I have plenty of sins for which to repent. You and I have the same promise of forgiveness from God himself that the baptized crowds received in the wilderness. You and I can rejoice that we are God's children who walk in the light of his love. But we do more than take John's message of repentance and forgiveness to heart. We also can point others to Jesus as act as his forerunners today.

As you think where to begin, start with the introductory verse of Mark's Gospel. To refresh your memory, Mark writes **“The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.”**^{xii} He packs a lot of details in a few words. He calls him the

Messiah, the promised Savior from the Old Testament. God's people had been looking forward to the Messiah's coming since the Garden of Eden. All the people knew he would be something else even if they didn't agree what that would be.^{xiii} And in Jesus they now had the fulfillment of the prophecies made to Adam and Eve, Abraham, David, and other figures in the Old Testament. Mark calls him the Son of God, perfect and holy and all-knowing in every way as God himself is. Jesus took on human flesh at the first Christmas so that he could keep the law in our place and be our substitute on the cross. It's this Jesus, Messiah and Son of God, who is the embodiment of the good news for all the ages.

Take every opportunity you have to imitate John's servant-like attitude and point others to Jesus. As you finish your Christmas shopping and send gifts of love to all those on your list, let your offerings flow from a thankful heart as well. Not for the purpose of lowering your tax liability, but to happily join in the work of spreading God's Word in Sahuarita and throughout the whole world. We're coming up on one of the few times of the year when the unbelieving world remotely thinks about our God. At the very least they know that there's a baby involved in the Christmas celebrations. Let's make use of these opportunities and let them know who that baby is and why we have a whole celebration centered on him. He is the good news – the Messiah and the Son of God. And be on the watch that your attitude remains as a servant's – to point to Christ and to make sure we don't get in the way.

How you introduce something will have an immediate impact on how it is heard and remembered. Mark begins his Gospel with a succinct summary of Jesus' importance before focusing his attention on Jesus' forerunner – John the Baptist. As prophesied in the Old Testament, John the Baptist was the voice crying in the wilderness to prepare the people for Jesus' coming in the flesh. He did this with his prophesied message of repentance and forgiveness. That call to repentance for the forgiveness of sins is what God speaks to us today. First we confess, then we trust in God's promise to forgive, and finally we thankfully walk in light of our Savior with attitudes set on serving our Savior. May the Lord help us make use of every opportunity we have these coming weeks to show that Christmas is more than a season of giving to one another. It is the season of our Savior who has given us life and salvation. Amen.

End Notes

ⁱ My wife and I have slowly been making our way through the TV show *NCIS* which is a classic example of this. By and large they start every episode with a 1-2 minute clip where they discover the body of a Navy sailor. It leaves you wondering, “*How did this happen? Who’s responsible for it?*” Having gotten our attention, the subsequent episode then answers those questions.

ⁱⁱ To listen to the *Surprise Symphony’s* 2nd movement online, you can find it at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOLy6JxEDLw> (Accessed December 8, 2017).

ⁱⁱⁱ This is an example of what scholars called *The Synoptic Problem* – when the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) have different accounts of the same events. The differences in eyewitness testimonies is not a cause for concern. In court trials today, eyewitnesses will recount the same event with different details. The same premise applies to understanding the so-called *Synoptic Problem*.

^{iv} Mark 1:1. All biblical quotations are from the 2011 edition of the New International Version unless otherwise stated.

^v Mark’s Old Testament quotations are from two sources – Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 – even though he only mentions Isaiah. While there is some debate among commentators about the importance of omitting mention of Malachi. But this does not change the fact that John the Baptist is the prophesied forerunner to Christ.

^{vi} 2 Kings 1:8. Although not mentioned above, John the Baptist is the promised Elijah of Malachi 4:5-6. Jesus substantiates this in Matthew 11:13-14. There are many striking similarities between Elijah and John the Baptist including, but not limited to, his message, his role, his dress, and his diet.

^{vii} Mark 1:5a.

^{viii} Mark 1:3b.

^{ix} Mark 1:4.

^x There are many unanswered questions about the specifics of John’s baptism in comparison with the sacrament of Holy Baptism today. But the blessings are the same. Both used water and Word to give forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. John’s practice of having people first confess their sins before receiving baptism is also consistent how the WELS baptizes adult converts. For more information on Holy Baptism, feel free to contact the Grace Lutheran pastors (www.GraceLutheranSAZ.org) or the WELS website such as <https://wels.net/about-wels/what-we-believe/>.

^{xi} Mark 1:7.

^{xii} Mark 1:1.

^{xiii} Many of the Jews of Jesus’ time falsely thought the Messiah was supposed to be a revolutionary king who would take Jerusalem back from the Romans and reinstate the nation of Israel.