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Jesus First Appears – Mark 1:9-13

A Jesus you make up won't challenge you, disturb you, or contradict you. That also means that a Jesus of your own making can't change you. Jesus' first followers struggled with this to the very end of his earthly ministry. Convinced that their fundamental problem was the Roman occupation, they were certain their real problems were political and "out there." That the controlling problem resided within the human heart—not to mention their own—was inconceivable. However, Jesus' lessons almost always focused on the status of the human heart. He said whoever wants to be greatest of all must become the "servant of all." He who "loses his life" for my sake and the gospel will gain his life. Jesus said, "Deny yourself and take up your cross." But changing the world, a marriage, a church, or a friendship by becoming a servant was simply off the radar screen. Everyone knows that's not how to get things done. The gospel writers said, "We had our own ideas of who we wanted Jesus to be. We designed a Jesus to fit our political and personal ambitions. And we were wrong to the very end." When Jesus' was crucified, not one of the disciples went to the tomb to see if Jesus would indeed rise from the dead. When he died, their personal and political dream died and so did their faith in Jesus. It was unthinkable that the way to be free was to deny oneself and follow Jesus by becoming a servant of all. I wonder if we are in the same boat. Are Jesus and the gospel being shaped into a message compatible with our personal and political ambitions? Is it now about gaining power, status, control, and personal success or is it about sacrificing these things in the service of others?

I can't remember anywhere in the Scriptures where the gospel was announced as "Believe in Jesus." The gospel is a call to believe in Jesus *as He is and as He claims to be*. The Scriptures put it this way, "Believe in the *Lord Jesus Christ* and you will be saved." Mark understands our tendency to make a Jesus in our own image and so he goes out of his way to tell us who Jesus is. In 1:1 he writes, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus, Christ, the Son of God." Mark's first lesson is, "Look, to follow and believe in the *real* Jesus, you must acknowledge that you can't save yourself, you can't be your own anointed King (your own Christ) and you can't be your own God." And, beloved, the weight of that claim means something when we hear the call to follow or believe in Jesus.

So, we have begun to take a serious look at the Jesus of the Scriptures to ask ourselves, "Does what I think about Jesus match up with what the Scriptures say about him? Is the gospel that I believe in the same as that which the first Christians believed in? Mark knows that we all we create our own Jesus, so he says, "Here's the real Jesus and here's the real gospel. Believe and follow this Jesus."

And no one got the real Jesus better than John the Baptist. Because of his faith in the real Jesus, John seemed to have no limits on love, courage, and humility—even unto death. You'll have to get last week's message for that lesson.¹

¹John's gospel wasn't about protecting his own prosperity, position, status, upward mobility, or even his life. Loving the real Jesus freed John to love with a humble courage. By the way, if you want to

The first Appearance of Jesus in Mark: This morning we come to the first appearance of Jesus in Mark's gospel. Our passage recounts the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. With broad strokes Mark introduces three inaugurating events in Jesus' ministry: His baptism, his affirmation by the Father and the Spirit, and his temptation in the desert. The more I study this, the more struck I am by the great love that saturated the onset of Jesus' public ministry. John writes, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son..." and Mark shows us how love controlled the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Jesus was baptized in an act of infinite and selfless love; the words of His Father and ministry of the Spirit affirmed Jesus in eternal Triune love. In the wilderness temptation, Jesus' love for God and us was forged out in an agonizing season of testing. There is much here about real love. So, this is where I want us to linger the next two Sundays.

1. The love of Jesus displayed in his baptism.

2. The loving affirmation of the triune God

and the next Sunday we will look at:

3. The love that was forged out in his wilderness temptation.

First, the love of Jesus displayed in his baptism. Jesus was baptized in an act of infinite and selfless love (1:9)

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

Jesus began his public ministry by standing in line with sinners like us to be baptized. I'm often asked why Jesus was baptized. And he answered that question in Mtt. 3:15 telling John, "*Let's do this because it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.*" The phrase *to fulfill all righteousness* is a general way of referring to doing the will of God. John didn't want to baptize Jesus. Baptism was a sign of repentance and forgiveness and John knew that Jesus had nothing for which he needed to repent or to be forgiven. So, John said, "No, I need to be baptized by you!" Jesus said, "No, the fitting or the righteous thing to do is for you to baptize me." The love and will of the Triune God is that Jesus would come to stand in the place of sinners—to take on the sin of humanity, and to be identified with sinners. By being baptized by John, Jesus stood in the place of sinners as a sign that he would become sin on their behalf.

Dr. John White: One of my favorite stories, which I repeat often, is that of Dr. John White, who during his medical internship in England, was required to work a rotation in a downtown venereal disease clinic. On his first day he overslept and by the time he arrived the doctors' entrance that door was locked. So, he went to the front where there was a huge line of people standing waiting for free medical treatment. He pushed

know how to address the culture war, look to John. He was bold to declare the standard of God's righteousness and at the same time publicly declares his own unworthiness to represent Jesus. He could say that we must repent and at the same time he could say, I'm not even worthy to untie Jesus' shoelaces. Harsh judgment or passive withdrawal seems to characterize much of what we do in the political realm. I can't say that I have read one blog or heard any advocate of moral change in America that holds forth both things simultaneously. Harsh judgment or withdrawal seems to be the only options. Can we find a way to communicate with humility and courage?

himself up to the front of the line and asked the receptionist if he could get in. She said, "I'm sorry you'll have to go to the back of the line like everyone else." He said, "You don't understand, I'm a doctor." She said, "I'm sorry sir, but it can happen to any of us. You'll have to go to the back of the line and wait like all the rest." At that moment, everything inside of him wanted her to know that he was not a sinner like these people in line. He did not want to be identified with that group. He considered himself to be too righteous. He wanted to explain that his life deserved more respect than theirs. Then he remembered Jesus' baptism and how Jesus, who was absolutely sinless, without a word of defense, willingly and voluntarily stood in line with sinners and chose to be counted among them *as one of them*.

Paul said, 'He who knew no sin became sin so that we might become the righteousness of God.' Beloved, by taking on the sin of the world, (not any sin he had committed), Jesus became the most notorious sinner in human history bearing the sin and shame of the world. By being baptized Jesus was saying,

I will live the life humanity should have lived and I will die the death they should have died. I will stand in your place. I will be your righteousness and your judgment. I will absorb all your offences. I will die a death so that those who trust me will never have to die. I will be taking your place as a sinner.

At the outset of his ministry, Jesus is defining love for us. Look, ***love happens when the well-being, safety, satisfaction, and security of another becomes more important to you than your own***. When Jesus was baptized, in a powerful vivid way, he was demonstrating that he loves us by standing in line and taking our place as sinners who need God's forgiveness. At Jesus' baptism, he stood in your place. If you trust the Lord Jesus Christ Jesus, there is no sin that you have ever committed or ever will commit that He has not borne, experienced, and paid for. Jesus stood in line in the place of sinners and was baptized. And God is just, and will not require two payments for the one sin. Because he died in our place, we will never have to face an ounce of condemnation and judgment for sin. At his baptism Jesus loved us with an infinite love by demonstrating that he would become sin so that we could become the righteousness of God. And he did so without an ounce of self-defense or complaint. For the joy set before him, he endured the cross. He moved toward us in real love and put his own self-protection aside, put our well being before his own, and took the injustice of all of that so that we could be free from our sin. Beloved, no one has ever loved you like this. No one ever could love you like that. I hope you can feel some of the joy of this. The love of Jesus and the love inherent in the gospel were first demonstrated in his baptism.

Second: The Fountainhead of this wondrous love is nothing less than The Love of the triune God. And that love was demonstrated by the affirmations of the love of Father and the Holy Spirit. (1:10-11)

When he came out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens separated and opened to him and the Spirit of God descended on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven and said, 'You are my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased (1:10-11).

Next Sunday we plan to look at the two verses the Father quoted in depth. The first, from Psalm 2, teaches the divine identity of the Messiah and the second from Isaiah 42 speaks of the Divine LORD taking on the role of a humble servant. The Father affirms the Son's divinity and He praises His humble service. Such a picture of God has never been offered by any other religion. But what struck me this time through was that the Father called him "My *beloved* son". In other words, the first words from God the Father at the inauguration of Jesus' public ministry are words of the love between the Father and the Son. Then the Spirit affirms *His* love for the son by enveloping or resting on Jesus. The Father and the Spirit would not let Jesus do this alone.

Let me tell you what I think is going on here. John is telling us about the real Jesus and the real gospel. The love of Jesus and the gospel originates and flows out of the love that has always been exploding in the interior of the Triune God. So, Mark is calling us back to an eternal love and alluding to the first creation, which was also the project of the God the Father, the Word, and the Spirit. We know from John that Jesus is the Word of God through which all things were made. Mark is telling us that the new creation, the new humanity, the real gospel is also the project of love that fills and defines the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.

One of the reasons I think Mark is alluding to the first creation is because there is only one place in all of Judaism where the Spirit of God is likened to a dove. And that's in the first century Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible called the Targums. In Jesus' day Aramaic and Greek were the predominant languages; most could not speak or read Hebrew. So the rabbis provided Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Scriptures and inserted them after the Scripture in synagogue worship so that everyone that could understand what was being read. The rabbis also added a bit of commentary in this translation. Genesis 1:2 reads that, "The Spirit hovered over the face of the waters." The Hebrew word for *hovered* means to "flutter." Here's how the rabbis translated Gen.1:2 in the Targums, and what someone who worshipped in the synagogue would have heard from Gen. 1:2: "The earth was without form and empty and darkness was on the face of the deep, the Spirit of God fluttered above the face of the waters *like a dove* and God spoke, 'Let there be light.'" These first century rabbis were persuaded that the word for "flutter" or "to hover" referred to the way a dove flies. Mark is calling us back to the original creation event where there were three parties involved in the creation of the world: the Father, the Spirit, and the Word. And just as the original creation was a project of the Father, His Word and the Spirit, so the re-creation of the world and its salvation and renewal is a project of the Triune God. Mark is teaching us that although God is one essence, *God is not a singularity*. A musical chord is one chord but it's not a singularity. A musical chord has unity, diversity, and complexity. Of course it goes beyond what we can bend our minds around. This is God we are talking about.

God: The Triune God: There are a thousand implications. Let me mention one or two. Mark reveals the beginning of the gospel as the project of three persons who love, honor, prize, defer to, and cherish each other completely. The One responsible for our salvation exists in an eternal relationship of perfect love, humility, and harmony.

In other words, when we read about the love of Christ and the gospel, we are reading about the very interior of God from all eternity that is absolutely exploding with love, honor, humility, and selfless service. And this triune God, the fountainhead of perfect love, has determined to put in motion that which will draw us into the circle of that love forever and ever. This is why CS Lewis says that ultimate reality is a dance. Because God has never been alone, he has never been without love. When Jesus comes out of the water, the heavens open and the Spirit of God rests on Jesus; the Father covers Jesus with words of love saying, "You are my son in whom I am well pleased." The Father speaks words of love and the Spirit anoints Jesus with his power and direction. When we see this, beloved, we are looking into the very heart of ultimate reality. And that ultimate reality is God and His infinite love. He is teeming and exploding with love, sacrifice, humility, service, and a saving purpose for the reconciliation of humanity. He was determined to pull us in to the wonder and the beauty of the love between them. In John, Jesus said, "Father I want them to be one just as you and I are one. I pray that the love you have for me will be in them." Alvin Plantinga writes this about God,

The persons within the Godhead, exalt each other, commune with each other, and defer to each other. Each harbors the others' at the center of God's being in constant movement and overture and full acceptance each person envelops and encircles the other.

God's interior life therefore overflows with self-giving love for others. Each person of the triune God serves one another. They put the interest of the others over their own. Each one pours love and adoration into the other. Each one defers and serves the other. The Son is the exact representation of the Father and the radiance of his being. The Son is fullness of God in bodily form and he is the humble servant who lays aside the prerogatives of his divinity for our well-being. By virtue of his perfect representation of the Father, He tells us what the Father is like and what the Spirit is like. God is very God and God is humble and loving, putting the well-being and satisfaction and security of others before his own. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son..." God laid aside his divine prerogatives for our well-being. The grief and joy of that decision is incalculable. You will read nothing like this in any other religion or philosophy.

Beloved, if God was a singularity, before the world was, there would be no love. Because love happens when the well-being and security of another means more to you or as much to you as your own. If God were a singularity, there would be no love prior to the creation. Neglect of the Trinity will produce a sterile and loveless individualism. If the triune God made the world, then relationships of love (with God and each other) are what your life is really about.

If the secularists are right, then you are here only by blind chance and natural selection. If that's true, then love is merely a chemical condition of the brain. I recently read an article titled ***The Biochemistry of Love*** in the National Geographic. It showed a picture of a newly married couple coming out of a church building and the caption read,

Embraced by every culture marriage sweeps up another couple...newly weds may gush about perfect love but pair-bonding is ultimately driven by the mating instinct wired into

the most primitive part of our brain. Look at the joy of this man....He has just one the most important thing in his life—the opportunity to pass along his DNA.

Isn't that heart warming? What will Berry White do for a living? Can you imagine me asking Debby's parents for her hand in marriage saying, "The reason I want to marry your daughter is because she is a suitable candidate to pass on my DNA."? They would have probably said, " We're not so sure your DNA is worthy to be passed on." If there is no God, then all love really is chemistry and Berry White is out of a job. But Mark offers us a different vision of love. His vision is that love has been for all eternity the ultimate reality of a community of persons knowing each other and exploding with selfless humble service. And that means that ultimate reality is the God who exists in love and relationship. It means that God is love.

When Jesus speaks of losing your life in order to find it, when he says that the one who wants to be greatest must become the servant of all, when he speaks of denying yourself, he is only telling you what the Father, Son, and Spirit have been doing in all eternity. You'll never get a proper view of self if you insist that others dance around you and make you the center of life. Why do you think people don't get along? People don't get along because they're saying, "I'm committed to this dance as long as you dance around me." The moment you challenge that premise, relationships breakdown. Unless you are willing to experience the loss of options, the surrender of your ambition, the limitations that comes from being in a loving and committed relationship, the loss of money, time and energy; unless you are willing to put your relationship with God and others at the center, you are out of touch with reality and you will come up empty and in ashes. You were not created by a uni-personal God or by accidental collision of random molecules and forces. We have been created by a God who is in community of persons who know and love each other for eternity.

Let me ask you this. If you find someone who you adore and you think more of this person than anyone else in the world and you would do anything for that person and you discover that person feels the same way about you. How would that feel? Would that feel good? That would be heaven right? It is heavenly because real love originates in heaven. That is what heaven is like. I'm just talking about what God feels all the time in God's self.

Now you might say. OK Jim but doesn't the Bible say that we should glorify God? Doesn't God seek his own glory? Isn't God really a selfish in this way? No! and here's why. God only seeks us to glorify God's self as God is. And God exists by making the well being of others more important to Him than Himself. God is glorified as the God who gives, sacrifices His own Son and serves up love to others. To glorify God is to glorify God as He is. To put God at the center is to put at the center the One—who above all has sacrificially made our well being more important to him than his very own. In other words, the One at the center, whom we worship, exists as one who orbits his interests around the greatest needs of others.

The call to become a Christian is a call to be folded into the circle of the triune God, which is exploding with sacrificial and covenant love. If by his Spirit, we love others,

wives, husbands, children, neighbors as He has loved us, then we will make any sacrifice that is righteous to secure the well-being, satisfaction and security of the other and become the servant of all. If it is God's love, it will be the most painful and joyful thing you will ever do. It will cost you more than you ever imagined and it will give you more than you could ever ask for.

Let me make two applications.

First, Hear the love of the Father, Son, and Spirit being given to us in the gospel. Let this eternal love sink deep into your bones. Pull your chair up to this banquet table and eat and be satisfied. This love demonstrated in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is more than your heart could ever hope for. Jesus stood in your place. He lived the life you should have lived and offers that to God on your behalf as your record of righteousness if you will receive and believe this gospel. This is a gift to be received by faith. You can't merit this by your record. In it, He cast our sins as far as the east is from the west to be remembered no more. He calls us his children. And commits more promises to you than you can imagine. In love, God has made your wellbeing and security and joy more important than His very own. Listen to this good news and receive it into your heart.

Second, and by His grace, learn to love God and others by taking yourself out of the center around which everything must orbit. Learn to make the well-being of another more important to you than your own. To follow the real Jesus is to follow Him in loving God and others. To love like this will be the most painful thing you will ever do. Because to love like this means to lay aside what you perceive to be your prerogatives for the well-being of another. By nature it is the most terrifying prospect we can imagine. Yet this love will bring the greatest amount of joy possible. Jesus, the Father, and the Spirit sacrificed and experienced the greatest grief imaginable when Jesus became sin for us. Yet, the triune God also knew the greatest joy possible in the outcome of that sacrifice. For the joy set before him Jesus endured the cross. Find your joy in serving up good joy by learning to love God and others, through Christ our Lord.