



## *Texts in Context*

# The Beginning of the Good News: The Epiphany Gospels in Mark and John

PAUL S. BERGE

*Luther Seminary  
St. Paul, Minnesota*

**A**N EARLY EASTER RESULTS IN ONLY FIVE SUNDAYS IN THIS YEAR'S EPIPHANY season. The gospel texts for these Sundays take us from the opening verses of Mark and the story of Jesus' baptism to his transfiguration at the mid-point of the gospel. One text from the Gospel of John is also included.

The opening words of the Gospel of Mark are thematic: "The beginning of the good news [the gospel] of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1: 1). As each story, teaching, parable, or miracle event takes place in the narrative of the gospel, it is, in turn, the gospel, *the beginning of the good news*.

*The Baptism of our Lord and First Sunday after the Epiphany: Mark 1:4-11*

The inaugural proclamation of this good news is present in the words of the prophets Malachi and Isaiah (Mal 3:1 and Isa 40:3) who announce that God will appoint a messenger to proclaim the presence of one who comes in the name of the Lord (Mark 1:2-3). The one identified as this forerunner is John, who lives in the Judean wilderness near the Jordan river, far from the city center of Jerusalem, and who proclaims a baptism "of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4).

*PAUL S. BERGE is professor of New Testament.*

*The Epiphany Gospels continue to call us with the words "Follow me." In this invitation we are transformed into the image of God's beloved Son.*

There is response to John's ministry and both the rural people from Judea and the urban dwellers from Jerusalem are coming to him to be baptized in the Jordan river "confessing their sins" (Mark 1:5). John's appearance and diet reflect that of Elijah and one who lives "naturally" in the wilderness setting (Mark 1:6).

John's role as forerunner, noted in the words of Malachi and Isaiah, is the focus of his identity: "After me comes one who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:7-8). John's words are simple and clear; they focus not on himself but on the one who comes in the Spirit of the Lord and whose ministry will be an *epiphany* of the work of God's Spirit—healing, teaching, exorcising—a ministry that will lead to his death and resurrection.

From his hometown, the Galilean village of Nazareth, Jesus appears at the Jordan river to be baptized by John, an event that inaugurates his identity and ministry. Coming up from the waters of the Jordan, "immediately" Jesus sees "the heavens being torn asunder and the Spirit descending on him like a dove" (Mark 1:9-10). (This is the first of forty-two occurrences of the adverb "immediately" [εὐθὺς] in the Gospel of Mark, a word which indicates both a temporal immediacy and a theological urgency in the narrative.) What Jesus experiences is an *epiphany*, a revelation that breaches the curtains of heaven. The "tearing asunder" that takes place now, in the inaugural event of Jesus' life, will be echoed in the final event of Jesus' life. Jesus' last cry and breath from the cross will signal the "tearing asunder" of the temple curtain, an event which inaugurates God's presence among us in Jesus Christ, a presence no longer confined to the temple (Mark 15:37-39). (The verb, "to tear asunder" [σχίσειν in Mark 1:10; 15:38], appears only twice in the Gospel of Mark, thus serving to frame an epiphany theology that continues throughout the gospel.)

Mark's Gospel presents the story of Jesus' baptism as an event that takes place between the Father and the Son. Jesus alone is the one who sees the heavens "being torn asunder" and likewise the one who hears the voice: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). The words echo themes from Gen 22:2; Ps 2:7; Isa 42:1, texts that express the relationship, love, and identity of a father and son (Abraham and Isaac); of God and the messianic king; and of God and the servant of the Lord. These words from heaven will also be heard at the midpoint of the gospel, in the story of the transfiguration (Mark 9:7). This text from Mark 1:4-11 and the text from Mark 9:2-9 frame the gospel texts of the season of Epiphany. In this season we move from the baptism of Jesus to his transfiguration; it is a season of epiphany in the revelation of the one whose life and ministry foreshadow his death and resurrection in Jerusalem.

#### *Second Sunday after the Epiphany: John 1:43-51*

We leave the immediacy of the unfolding story in the Gospel of Mark and turn to the unfolding epiphany drama in the Gospel of John. Following the magnificent prologue to the gospel (John 1:1-18), a portion of which was the gospel text

for Christmas Day (John 1:1-14), we are drawn into the intertwining story of John and Jesus (John 1:19-36). John's witness to those who come from Jerusalem asking about his identity also takes up the words of the prophet Isaiah: "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said" (John 1:23). In reference to his baptism, John says: "I baptize with water; but among you stands one whom you do not know, even he who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie" (John 1:26-27).

In the first chapter of the Gospel of John, there are three texts that begin with the words, "the next day" (John 1:29, 36, 43). The text for our consideration is the third in this series, and thus we need to look briefly at the events that unfold during the first two days. The first "next day" text begins with John's identification of Jesus, which is unique in all the gospels: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). John bears witness to what took place: "I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven and it remained on him" (John 1:32). John's vision is the fulfillment of God's promise to him: "'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit'" (John 1:33). The first day concludes with John's epiphany confession: "I have seen and have borne witness, 'This is the Son of God'" (John 1:34). (We noted above that the opening words of the Gospel of Mark identify Jesus as the Son of God [Mark 1:1], but it is not until the words of the centurion, following the death of Jesus, that we hear this confession of Jesus on the lips of a human witness [Mark 15:39]. Prior to this in the Gospel of Mark it is the unclean spirits who voice this confession of Jesus: "And whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, 'You are the Son of God'" [Mark 3:11].)

The second "next day" text once again begins with John's identification of Jesus, "Look, the Lamb of God" (John 1:35-36), to which John's disciples respond by following Jesus. Jesus' first words in the gospel are in the form of a question to these first followers, "What are you looking for?" to which they respond, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" (John 1:38). Jesus' response is an invitation to them and to us into the promise and epiphany of the gospel: "Come and you will see" (John 1:39). One of the two disciples, Andrew, invites his brother, Simon Peter, with the epiphany confession: "We have found the Messiah (which means the anointed one of God)" (John 1:40-41).

The third "next day" text is the assigned text and continues the unfolding epiphany invitations and confessions. Jesus is the actor, inviting Philip with the words: "Follow me" (John 1:43). Philip in turn finds Nathanael and confesses: "We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (John 1:45). Philip bears witness to the coming of an anointed one from God throughout the first two portions of Israel's scriptures—the writings of Moses and the prophets. Jesus comes as the fulfillment of scripture. Secondly, Jesus is the one identified with a family from Nazareth, of whom Joseph is father. Nathanael scoffs at how this Galilean hillside village could produce anything significant: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip is undaunted and invites him to "come and see" for himself (John 1:46).

As Nathanael approaches, Jesus portrays him as a true Israelite, one for whom all the promises of God's Messiah were intended. He is also one from whose lips nothing deceitful is heard: "Look, a true Israelite, in whom there is no deceit" (John 1:47). Nathanael's perplexity at Jesus' knowledge of him is understandable: "How do you know me?" Jesus' response continues: "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you" (John 1:48). Jesus' knowledge of who and where Nathanael is reflects the identity of one who is indeed a true Israelite, one who, in rabbinic thought and practice, studies the Torah under the fig tree. Without any further details of their relationship, we are drawn to Nathanael's climactic confession: "Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (John 1:49).

Nathanael's identification of Jesus as a rabbi ("teacher") is significant. Nicodemus, another rabbinic figure in the Gospel of John, will also place Jesus in this role: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him" (John 3:2). Jesus' rabbinic identity as a teacher from God draws us into the instructive ministry of Jesus that takes place throughout the Gospel of John. As John identified Jesus through his baptismal witness as "the Son of God" (John 1:34), so Nathanael continues this confessional identity of Jesus, adding to it the title "King of Israel." Only once again in the Gospel of John will Jesus be so acclaimed, and that will be as he rides into Jerusalem to his death: "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" (John 12:13). Nathanael's epiphany confession of Jesus is indeed the confession of a true Israelite, one who confesses that God is present in Jesus of Nazareth, the one who is the true king of God's people.

Jesus responds to Nathanael with a further promise: "You shall see greater things than these" (John 1:50). As Jesus' words continue, not only is Nathanael included in the promise, but all who hear the word of witness present in the Gospel of John are included in the plural *you*: "Truly, truly, I say to you [plural]; you [plural] will see the heavens open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (John 1:51). In Jesus Christ, God has come among us as the "Word became flesh" (John 1:14). In this one the heavens are open that greater things may be seen. In the unfolding of the signs and words of Jesus in the Gospel of John this promise is fulfilled in all who hear the gospel. God's angels or messengers, those who bear witness to the Word of God, make known the one in whom God is present—the Son of Man. In this final identity of Jesus in our text, we will see him in the gospel as the Son of Man who is lifted up (exalted) on the cross of crucifixion (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32-34). The text also invites us into this epiphany.

### *Third Sunday after the Epiphany: Mark 1:14-20*

Following the baptism of Jesus and the words of acclamation and identification of Jesus from heaven, the Spirit has "immediately" (εὐθύς) driven Jesus out into the wilderness for forty days, there to be "tested" by Satan, the adversary (Mark 1: 12-13). It is important to note the placement of the temptation story before our text, for it is within the context of Jesus' identification by the Father (Mark 1:11)

and testing by Satan that we hear Jesus' words proclaiming the inbreaking of God's reign and rule. As our text begins, we note that the powers of evil are already at work in the arrest of John (Mark 1:14). Later in the gospel we will hear the sordid story that John was beheaded by King Herod who is pleased by the dancing of Herodias' daughter and offers her any wish (Mark 6:14-29).

In contrast to the power of Satan, Jesus' words proclaim the good news of God's reign: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom [or reign] of God is at hand; repent and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). Jesus' words and deeds throughout the gospel will demonstrate God's presence among us. In Jesus Christ God's reign has begun. Because of this the response called for is twofold—repent and believe. Jesus' hearers then and now are called to turn from living under the power of the adversary and enslavement to self and to live in the reign of God's gift of faith, believing in Jesus Christ as the beloved Son of God in whom all the powers of the adversary are conquered. Jesus' words are programmatic for what takes place in the Gospel of Mark.

Demonstrating how his words change the direction of our lives, Jesus calls two unlikely people engaged in fishing: "Follow me and I will make you fish for people" (Mark 1:16-17). To this invitation, two brothers, Simon and Andrew, "immediately" (εὐθὺς) leave their nets and livelihood and follow him (Mark 1:18). Is this a demonstration of the inbreaking of the reign and rule of God? These are unlearned people, rough and rugged people of the sea, untrained in the Torah. These are the first followers? As if this isn't enough of a paradox, Jesus continues the pattern by "immediately" (εὐθὺς) calling two more fishermen, James and John, sons of Zebedee, who likewise respond by leaving their father and other co-workers and following Jesus (Mark 1:19-20).

This is the inbreaking and the immediacy of the reign of God present in Jesus' words of invitation. These four fishermen, like us, are invited to turn what they are doing into a vocation at God's direction. In this there is great risk. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's famous words in the twentieth century, when Satan's power is all too real in our world, echo the words by the Galilean lake for our time: "When Christ calls a person, he bids her/him come and die." To understand the truth of this calling, I encourage you to read the Gospel of Mark through in one sitting; it will take you no longer than ninety minutes. In this short span of time you will see how quickly the powers of evil are mounted against Jesus and how soon come the final events of Jesus' life which lead to his death. Even in this church year, the forty days of Lent are fast approaching as we move toward Ash Wednesday.

The call to discipleship, to follow Jesus, still comes to us—the most unlikely candidates in our own eyes and perhaps the eyes of the world. This is God's doing and not our own. Through the Holy Spirit, God continues to call and gather a community centered in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our story is likewise an epiphany story, as we are called to make known in our world God's living presence in Jesus Christ.

*Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany: Mark 1:21-28*

If the previous text was a demonstration of the inbreaking presence of God in Jesus' words of proclamation and invitation, this text is a demonstration of the inbreaking presence of God in Jesus' words that exorcize the unclean spirits who stand in opposition to God's reign in Jesus Christ. The setting for the confrontation is the synagogue in the Galilean seaport town of Capernaum. This is where God's people gather together or "synagogue" (συναγωγή) to be taught by the rabbi. On this day the people gathered are "astonished at his teaching." This is no ordinary rabbi, for Jesus teaches with "authority, and not as the scribes." The Greek word for authority or power is ἐξουσία, from which we derive the word "exorcize" as in Jesus' exorcizing the unclean spirits (Mark 1:21-22).

If Jesus' words of instruction are spoken with authority, what now takes place demonstrates the inbreaking of God's reign and rule in Jesus. "Immediately" (εὐθύς) there is in the synagogue one who recognizes Jesus' power: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God" (Mark 1:23-24). The two questions and the confession of the man with an "unclean spirit" continue to astonish us! The recognition of Jesus by the unclean spirits and demon-possessed people in the Gospel of Mark will be heard again, but this first confrontation in the synagogue, the place of instruction and worship of God, is dramatic. Not only do they know who Jesus is, but they know that Jesus is the stronger one and will destroy them. The battle has been engaged, and the powers of this world are up against "the Holy One of God."

Jesus' response to the engagement is one of authority: "Be silent, and come out of him!" (Mark 1:25). Jesus will use this same response of direct speech in calming an angry sea: "Peace! Be still!" (Mark 4:39). In demonstration that the unclean spirit has been overcome, its exit from the man is likewise dramatic: "And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and screaming with a loud voice, came out of him" (Mark 1:26). Once again the response of the synagogue people is one of amazement: "What is this? A new teaching! With authority (ἐξουσία) he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him" (Mark 1:27). This is not only a new teaching, but it is a demonstration of the radical newness of Jesus' authority or power. This is not Torah study as usual, this is the inbreaking of God's reign with its power over the powers of this world that possess God's people.

The text concludes on the same note of immediacy: "And immediately (εὐθύς) his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee" (Mark 1:28). And it is with immediacy that we hear this text today. In our hearing the truth of Jesus' authority is made known. This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Mark 1:1). The Gospel of Mark is true to its intended purpose! This is our epiphany word in a world of unclean spirits. Jesus Christ has sole authority to cleanse and make whole whatever unclean spirits possess and control our lives. This is the gospel! Thanks be to God!

*The Transfiguration of our Lord: Mark 9:2-9*

We have noted that the Epiphany Sundays are framed by the baptism of

Jesus and his transfiguration. Jesus' baptismal identity in the words of his Father ushers us into the season of Epiphany, just as Jesus' transfiguration identity concludes these Sundays and ushers us into the season of Lent. At the midpoint of the Gospel of Mark, we again have a vision of Jesus' identity in the midst of his journey to Jerusalem and death.

The transfiguration story follows the Caesarea Philippi confession of Peter to Jesus' question, "Who do the people say that I am?" (Mark 8:27). Peter's confession, "You are the Christ" (Mark 8:29), is followed by Jesus' injunction to silence (Mark 8:30) and the first teaching on his forthcoming death and resurrection (Mark 8:31-33). The discipleship sayings that precede our text (Mark 8:34-9:1) indicate the radical nature of what it means to be a follower of one who is on his way to death, for this is our identity as well. In the midst of Jesus' threefold teaching on his forthcoming death and resurrection and words on discipleship (Mark 8:31-9:1; 9:30-34; 10:32-45), the transfiguration story anchors our lives once again in the one whose identity is spoken to us by the Father: "This is my beloved Son; listen to him" (Mark 9:7). This word of identity reassures us for our journey, even to our death. In this journey we are instructed by the Father to "listen to him." Jesus' journey to the cross during the season of Lent will also be our journey. But just as death awaits us, as it did Jesus, so too do we walk in the hope of his resurrection. Jesus' death and resurrection are paradigmatic of our death and resurrection; this is our identity as people of faith.

Three of the closest disciples, Peter and James and John, accompany Jesus to a high mountain. We have met these disciples in their initial calls by Jesus in the gospel texts that have been our readings during the season of Epiphany. These disciples represent us as we too have been called by the living Lord through the gospel words, "Follow me" (Mark 1:17; John 1:43). In this invitation we too are called to see the crucified and risen Lord transfigured before our eyes. The verb, which is in the passive voice, "to be transformed or to be transfigured" (from μεταμορφώω), indicates that Jesus' visible presence has been transformed to reflect his heavenly glory.

The language used to describe the transformation of Jesus' garments is expressive of a vision of heaven itself: "And his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them" (Mark 9:3). The transformation almost defies description. In this scene appear two prophetic figures of God's people, Elijah and Moses. Elijah's appearance was anticipated as a foreshadowing of the coming Messiah. The ministry of John the baptist is identified with Elijah's role as one who announces and prepares the way for Jesus (Mark 6:15; John 1:21). Moses' appearance on the mountain recalls his receiving of the law and the pentateuchal traditions which give witness to the coming Messiah (John 1:45).

Around these three figures Peter requests of Jesus that three "tents/booths" (σκηνή) be built (Mark 9:5). The booths that Peter requests recall the temporary shelters that were erected by the people of Israel in the wilderness years. These shelters symbolized how God "encamped/pitched a tent" (σκηνώω) with the peo-

ple in the wilderness experience; God's glory was present with them. It is this presence of God that Peter wishes to experience once again in this moment of heavenly glory. The Gospel of John, which does not have a transfiguration story, captures this meaning in its prologue: "The Word became flesh and encamped/pitched a tent (σκηνώω) among us" (John 1:14).

The event of transfiguration or transformation is a theophany, a vision of God's presence. The evangelist's note concerning Peter's response to this heavenly presence reflects the awesome reality of the moment: "He did not know what to say, for they were exceedingly afraid" (Mark 9:6). Only Peter has spoken, James and John are silent. All three are witnesses to the event and their collective response to God's presence is noted: "They were exceedingly afraid." The moment and the place is holy; God is here.

The cloud that overshadows them once again recalls the wilderness experience of God's people when God was present in the pillar of fire by night and the cloud by day (Exod 13:21-22). Now from the cloud a voice is heard: "This is my beloved Son; listen to him" (Mark 9:7). Jesus heard this voice and word of identity at his baptism as he came up from the Jordan waters: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). Now the voice is also heard by the witnesses, Peter and James and John, and it is both a word of identity for the journey ahead into Jerusalem and a word of instruction to listen to the one who goes before them.

The event of Jesus' transformation is "suddenly" over and Jesus alone is with the three disciples (Mark 9:8). Following this vision of God's presence with his Son, the journey ahead must be undertaken. The event is an epiphany moment, an unveiling of the presence of the one who will suffer and die on a cruel instrument of torture—a cross. It will be in this inglorious mode of human desertion, pain, and suffering that God's glory or presence will be made known. In this light, Jesus' instruction to his disciples is understood: "He charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man should have risen from the dead" (Mark 9:9).

Just as Jesus' journey now leads to Jerusalem in the Gospel of Mark, so too our journey leads us from these epiphany texts into the season of Lent and the way of discipleship. Just as the disciples are led from the mountain, so too have we been invited and called to walk the walk of discipleship. We follow in faith knowing the Jesus who suffered and died lives and reigns among us as the crucified and risen Lord. This is the one who continues to call us with the words "Follow me." In this invitation we too are transformed into the image of God's beloved Son. ⊕