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Instagram Jesus: Call, Crisis, Confirmation

Mark 1:9-13

It's too bad there weren't smart phones in Jesus' time. Wouldn't you love to watch a YouTube clip of the Sermon on the Mount or of Jesus walking on the water or healing a leper or raising Jairus' daughter from the dead? An iPhone in the hands of one of Jesus' disciples ... THAT would have been cool. Maybe (...it would look like this 9:00.)

Alas, no such luck. BUT...we have the next best thing. The Gospel of Mark. Mark is the closest thing to an Instagram account of the life of Christ that we have. Of the four gospels, Mark is the shortest and the fastest moving. He is the gospel of action; quick snapshots of Jesus, one after another after another.

So, a little background. Mark...John Mark was his full name... was the son of one of a bazillion Marys in the New Testament. As a young man he joined the first missionary journey with Paul and Barnabas but, for reasons unknown, abandoned them. Barnabas wanted to give the kid another chance but Paul wouldn't have it...which led to Paul and Barnabas splitting up permanently. But it turns out Barnabas was right. Near the end of his life, Paul asks Mark to come to him because he is "...very useful to my ministry."

Turns out he was useful to all of us! Mark was the first guy in the Bible to write down the story of Jesus. Matthew and Luke both borrowed chunks of Mark when they wrote their gospels. **But really...these weren't Mark's words at all.** Do you know the voice behind Mark's gospel? Peter! We could call this the Gospel according to Peter because, according to ancient historians, Mark simply wrote down the stories Peter told him.

Mark moves at breakneck pace. His favorite word is "immediately" which he uses 41 times, 11 of them in the first chapter alone! Remember the roadrunner cartoon where the bird dashed from here to there and back again? Mark uses "immediately" to dash breathlessly from this scene to that scene to the next.

I once got in trouble for screwing around in class in college. In fact, the professor asked me if I had Attention Deficit Disorder. Who knows; maybe I did. Which might explain why I love this gospel. **It is perfect if you have a short attention span.** So...buckle up! For the next few months, we are going to blast our way through the good news of Jesus...as told by Peter...to his young friend, John Mark.

Mark starts with John the Baptist...the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Crowds came to hear "The Voice" preach a message of repentance. But today, John gets a visit from a carpenter from Podunk Nazareth...who is about to set the world on fire.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

I believe that God takes every person through a repeatable cycle... a cycle he uses to **call** us, **prepare** us and launch us toward our destiny. I believe it because I've experienced it in my own life...and more importantly, because Jesus modelled it for us. This cycle can be summed up in three words: Call...Crisis...Confirmation. And we find that cycle in our text.

Years ago, when Rachel was about 4, we read this story at the dinner table. I decided to quiz her. "Rachel, who was the guy in the desert?" "John," she said. "What did he do?" "He baptized people." "What happened with Jesus came to him?" Rachel replied, "John threw him in the river." Actually, according to Mark, that's about how it happened! The other three gospels give us longer versions with John preaching and talking with Jesus. But not Mark. Jesus came and John threw him in the water.

But Mark DOES mention something that happens next. Jesus "saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove." Imagine that! "Heavens torn open!" Not a gentle break in the weather—God violently rips of the skies apart. This same verb is used later at the end of the gospel when Jesus dies on the cross and in that moment, the curtain in the temple is torn from top to bottom. I think this is cool: Jesus Christ's earthly ministry begins and ends with God ripping apart the barriers which separate Him from his people.

And if that and the dramatic appearance of a dove isn't enough, God's voice speaks from heaven, one of only three times this happens in the New Testament. Listen to what Jesus heard: "You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased." Dads...pay attention here. There is something powerful about the blessing of a father over his children. The words, "I love you... I am proud of you." Do you speak those words? Out loud? Every day? Your children cannot get enough of this. And you have no idea the power you possess...the power to cause your children to swell and grow...when they hear these words from their father's lips. If Jesus, the Son of God, needed those words of blessing from HIS father, how much more do our children? I love you...and I'm so proud of you!

This moment is the Call of Jesus. FINALLY! Jesus had been preparing for this all his life. As a young man, he had a growing sense of his destiny, but for 30 years he waited. But when John appeared in the wilderness, Jesus knew his time had come. And as he came up out of the waters...as the sky was ripped apart...as the Holy Spirit dove descended...as the voice spoke blessing...there was no question: His moment had come.

Shakespeare once wrote about such moment. He wrote, "There is a tide in the affairs of men which," if taken, leads to fortune. But if you miss that moment...if you miss the high tide, the ship of your life will be stuck in the mud; "bound in shallows and in miseries." This was Jesus' moment of call. The tide was in and he was ready to go.

There's not a soul in Christendom...not a soul here today... who has not received a call from God. First, an invitation to accept His gift of Jesus. But beyond that, to take your God-given gifts and commit them to a grander cause...the cause of Christ's kingdom. How many men and women falter at the moment that call comes---fearful, uncertain, timid, stingy---and miss the voyage of their lives? Do you believe that God has a call upon your life? To what great purpose does God want to consecrate you this day?

After 30 years, Jesus gets his call. In a POWERFUL way. So, what's next? A mini-tour around Galilee to warm up his preaching chops? A jumpstart on healings? There were enough lepers to go around. It wouldn't hurt to start his ministry with a bang. We can almost sense Jesus chomping at the bit: "OK, Spirit. You've called me. You've filled me with your power. I'm ready. So...what's next? Where do we go?" Well...listen:

“The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.” “Wait...what? You’re sending me into the wilderness?” This is the first appearance of “immediately.” And it is noteworthy. Couldn’t Jesus relish the baptismal moment a little while? Bask in it? After all, he’d been waiting a long time for this. Nope. Immediately... the scene changes. Jesus is now in the wilderness. And how did he get there? “The Spirit drove him...” That doesn’t sound polite. It doesn’t say, “The Spirit invited him” or “The spirit led him” or “The Spirit drew him”? No: The Spirit DROVE Jesus into the wilderness. Why? To be tempted by Satan!

Typical Mark; he doesn’t give us many details. He just tells us that, after a powerful, holy moment...when Jesus is called by God, blessed by God, honored by God in front of the crowds...on the heels of THAT...Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil for 40 days. 40 always means a long time in the Bible. Noah’s rain fell 40 days. Elijah hid from Jezebel 40 days. The children of Israel wandered 40 years. A long time. From a moment of Call...to 40 days of Crisis. Boom.

So what’s going on? Did God cause this crisis? After all, the Spirit DROVE Jesus into the wilderness. He didn’t seem to have any choice. Or was it Satan trying to sabotage Jesus’ before he starts? The answer is... yes. Both. One of Satan’s favorite tricks is to steal the joy of your call. I have experienced this most of the Easter Mondays of my life. God brings thousands of people to hear about the resurrection of Jesus...I preach my heart out...the gospel is proclaimed ...and Monday morning I can be so discouraged ...depressed even...second-guessing myself, wondering if the message got through, doubting the power of God’s Spirit in that moment.

Satan loves to swoop in on a person after a significant spiritual experience... a calling...and shake that person loose. Remember the parable where the sower sows seed and, before it can even take root, the birds swoop down to snatch it up? Who are the birds in that parable? Satan! The last thing Satan wants is to allow gospel seed to take root. The last thing our enemy wants is for you to hear God’s call, believe in your consecration... and move in a way that will advance the Kingdom’s work.

So, was this temptation the work of Satan? Yes. And no. The Spirit DROVE Jesus into the wilderness. God wanted this to occur. Why? Because, it is in times of temptation and testing that kingdom-workers are trained and toughened for their call. Take Moses. 40 years in Pharaoh’s court...and THEN 40 more years herding sheep in the wilderness. Only then was ready for his greatest hour. Or Paul. After his dramatic call on the road to Damascus, he barely escaped a murder plot, none of the Christians really trusted him and he ended up hiding out for more than 14 years. Wilderness.

This has been true in my life. I still remember the day I was ordained to the gospel ministry. A high point in every young pastor’s life. But shortly after, I left for Scotland; and that was the loneliest season of my life. But I don’t know if I’ve ever felt closer to God. Because he was all I had. And God used that experience to prepare me for Chapel Hill. I was so young, so arrogant, so stupid...there’s no way I would have been ready for this church were it not for those two years in my beautiful Scottish wilderness.

We just had a weekend where nearly 30 people were baptized. It was THEIR moment of call. It is often the case that after a person makes a public profession of faith, they find themselves under incredible attack. If that is you, don’t be surprised. The Devil HATES losing you...and would love to strangle your new Christian witness in its crib!

Mark doesn’t tell us how Satan tempted Jesus, but we know it was only after this season of Crisis that Jesus was CONFIRMED in his call. When he emerges from the wilderness, we hear his first words: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” And this is different! John’s message was, “Repent and be baptized.” Stop, turn around, go the other way. It was a good start. But it wasn’t the gospel. Jesus adds something: “Repent and believe in the good news.” For the first time, people

not only have something to turn from...to repent from...now, they have something to turn TO...someONE to believe in. And with that, Jesus is launched.

Call...Crisis...Confirmation. This is a universal rhythm. The exhilaration of our call is often followed by the pain of crisis. It is in that crucible where the metal of one's call is really tested. And as you learn to trust God's Spirit to bring you through crisis, the stage is set. God confirms your call and invites you to renew your ministry in a deeper, more powerful way than ever would have been possible if you had not faced the fires of temptation.

I haven't shared this with you before because it didn't seem appropriate, but there is a sense in which these last ten years of ministry here at Chapel Hill have been a bit of a wilderness for me. I'm not saying there weren't wonderful things going on. There were. But in many ways, it was a hard season for me. Partly because of a seven-year law suit that sucked the life out of me. And partly because of a slow decline in attendance that made me wonder if my time here was done. But in this last year, it feels like I have stepped out of wilderness and into Galilee. It is a season of fruitfulness and growth when we are reaching new people for the gospel. I'm not sure all the ways that God used these ten years to prepare me...and prepare us...for this season. But it does remind me to remember God's call upon my life...to remember he has set me apart of his use...and to trust him in those times when that call seems less clear.

So...where are you right now? Are you excited about God's call in your life? Excited to realize he has called you and blessed you for his purposes? That's wonderful...but keep your head! The wilderness may be coming and you need to be ready...when the devil puts you to the test. Or maybe you are in a crisis moment right now; struggling with temptation or discouragement or attack? Keep your faith. God's Spirit ... God's angels are right there with you, protecting you. Or maybe you are enjoying the confirmation of God's call in your life? A season of fruitfulness. Wonderful! Keep it up! Now is the time to reap the harvest for which you've longed, waited and suffered!

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."