

Title: Spill the Beans for Jesus

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, you sent us prophets, giving us measuring lines leading to you: telling us where we follow and where we stray; help us keep your son in our hearts and minds, keeping us in your paths, through him who baptizes us with the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Gregory Jones shares this observation, “Each year, in the weeks leading up to Christmas, a great number of people find delight in the marvelous story written by Charles Dickens: A Christmas Carol. There is something in the story that lures us back to it year after year; we never seem to grow tired of hearing its message.

“The main character in the story is a surly old man named Scrooge, who lives a miserly existence. He sees no benefit in being generous with the poor, or even providing a living wage to dedicated workers. He clutches onto his money and despises the thought of parting with any of it. But it is not only his money that Scrooge withholds from others, it is his entire being. He withholds love and kindness, he withholds warmth and friendship.

“Then, one night, Scrooge undergoes a profound crisis. He sees himself through the eyes of others. He has a vivid vision of his past; and then his present. But what is most frightful to him – what shakes him to the core of his being – is when he is granted the opportunity of a lifetime. He is allowed to witness his future. But his future proves to be so dark and frightening, that it prompts within him a dramatic change.

“He undergoes a radical transformation and becomes an entirely new person. Rather than being cold and indifferent to people, he becomes generous and compassionate.

“It is a heart-warming story. But more than that, it is a hopeful story. It provides us with the hope that we too can make needed changes in our lives. We can break free from the ruts we have burrowed, and the negative behaviors we have cultivated. We can become kind and compassionate, humble and hospitable, joyful and generous.

“I have never read anything which suggests this, but I wonder if the story of John the Baptist influenced Dickens and served as an impetus in his creation of A Christmas Carol?”<sup>1</sup>

Just as what happened to Scrooge, through repentance, we can prepare ourselves for Christ. John the Baptist points us to the way.

For Mark, the beginning of the good news, or the gospel, of Jesus Christ is found in the prophets. Mark also makes a point with the word “beginning” to link his gospel with the opening of Genesis. Jesus, the Son of God, is the new beginning for the world.

Mark then links Isaiah to John the Baptist. The beginning of the good news is found in prophecy, both an Old Testament prophecy and a New Testament prophecy. (Although, Mark had no concept of a New Testament like we have.)

As with any prophecy, it is the words of the prophet that are important. We might say that actions are just as important, but history only judges legitimate prophets as ones whose actions match their words. The words of the prophet live on for centuries after the prophet proclaims them.

For Mark, Isaiah’s prophesy is not about Jesus. It is about John the Baptist. Mark introduces John the Baptist so that John the Baptist can introduce Jesus. That is the whole summary of the first eight verses of Mark.

The first Old Testament quote in this passage is not from Isaiah, but from the prophet Malachi. Malachi provides much of the context for John the Baptist’s ministry. It is Malachi who says a messenger will prepare the way. Malachi anticipates that the great prophet Elijah will return to earth and proclaim the coming of the Messiah.

Before I continue with Mark, further examination of our Isaiah passage bears investigation, because Mark thought it important enough to quote. Isaiah 40:1-11, our Old Testament lesson, is famous for being part of Handel’s Messiah. This is part of what scholar’s call Second Isaiah. Isaiah

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Knox Jones, An Alternative Future

40-55 was written by Isaiah's disciples during the Babylonian exile. Jerusalem and Solomon's temple are in ruins. Anybody who was anybody was exiled to Babylon. This is a message of hope to a hopeless situation, to a people with no hope.

The message is clear: the desert between Babylon and Jerusalem is to be prepared, because God is going home to Jerusalem. Jews believed that God lived in the temple. With the temple gone, God was gone. God had abandoned them. But this godless time has come to an end. God will return to Jerusalem and God will gather God's people together. Like sheep, the people will be fed and loved.

Those exiles who wanted to return to the homes of their ancestors did so under Persian rule. Their descendants are the Jews of Jesus' time. Now Mark says that the way of God will be prepared again. Only this time there is not an exodus from Babylon. It is a reverse exodus of people from Judea and Jerusalem to the wilderness, because there is a voice in the wilderness preparing the way of the Lord.

What is Mark saying? The temple was rebuilt and then remodeled by Herod the Great. So, God must be back in the temple. Why would people leave Jerusalem and the temple to go looking in the wilderness? The only logical answer can be that God is not in the temple. God has once again abandoned the people. There must have been some spiritual anxiety among at least some Jews to also abandon the temple for a wild man in the wilderness.

There must have been a strong sense of sin to go to John and have sins washed away. People abandoned the temple rites forgiving sins and going out of their way to go to John. This means that there were people who abandoned the priests of the temple to be baptized by John.

A few notes about baptism. First, the Greek word *baptismo* literally means a bath or to bathe. It is washing, which makes sense with water being involved. Jews engage in ritual washing. The ancient, Jewish, Qumran community performed ritual washing or baptisms as purification rites, daily.



John was baptizing to wash away sins. John seems to require people to publicly confess their sins first. Please

keep in mind that if someone was there with people from her or his village, that person's sins were pretty much already public knowledge. Of course not even people who know us well know all of our sins.

Once one's sins were confessed, then John washed them away with water. This seems to be a once only act. Any sins that occur after this baptism may not matter. This is because this baptism is a preparation for the coming judgment. Once one was baptized for this judgment, that person was prepared and no further preparation was necessary.

People are going into the wilderness, baptized by John in the River Jordan, and crossing the water going back to the Promised Land. Mark is also describing another Mosaic exodus. God is bringing the people back through a baptism. John is providing a spiritual renewal for the world.

Why is John's appearance worth mentioning? Mark describes John the Baptist the same way that Elijah is described in 2 Kings 1:8. John represents the return of Elijah.

In addition to baptizing, John had a proclamation, a sermon. As much as John was creating a stir in Judea, there was still one who is much more powerful than John coming. John can't hold a candle to this one. The Mighty One who is coming will baptize people with the Holy Spirit.

The exodus of the people back to God through John the Baptist is only made complete when the messiah comes to baptize with the Holy Spirit. Through repentance, we can prepare ourselves for Christ.

What we hear in this passage is a call to humility. We never enter a job, a task, a function, whether it is in the church or in the world when someone, or more appropriately, some people prepare the way for us. There are always others who prepare our way. There is only one saviour in the world and in Advent we still wait. Waiting for a saviour is also an act of humility.

On this Second Sunday of Advent our anticipation of the coming messiah, the Christ, the Mighty One is heightened. At the same time, we are anticipating a baby in a manger. Our preparations include parties, shopping, and decorating. But how much of our busyness includes getting ready for the Mighty One who will come and baptize with the Holy Spirit?

Text: **Mark 1:1–8** (NRSV)

**1** The beginning of the good news<sup>a</sup> of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.<sup>b</sup>

<sup>2</sup> As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,<sup>c</sup>

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,<sup>d</sup>  
who will prepare your way;

<sup>3</sup> the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.’”

<sup>4</sup> John the baptizer appeared<sup>e</sup> in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup> Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup> I have baptized you with<sup>f</sup> water; but he will baptize you with<sup>g</sup> the Holy Spirit.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>a</sup> Or *gospel*

<sup>b</sup> Other ancient authorities lack *the Son of God*

<sup>c</sup> Other ancient authorities read *in the prophets*

<sup>d</sup> Gk *before your face*

<sup>e</sup> Other ancient authorities read *John was baptizing*

<sup>f</sup> Or *in*

<sup>g</sup> Or *in*

<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mk 1:1–8). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.