

## “Watchman, Tell Us Of The Night”

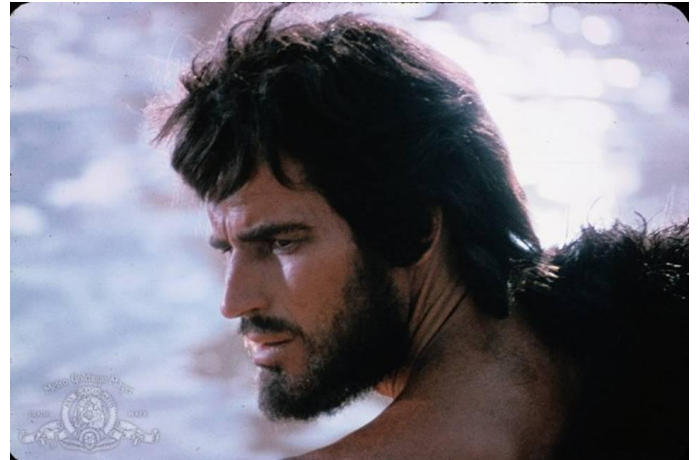
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Mark 1:1-8 + anticipation

**T**he very first words of the very first verse of the very first chapter of the very first Gospel to be written down – this is how Mark starts out. Revel in Mark’s simple, straightforward language:

**“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”**

Then an odd thing happens. It goes straight to John – not to Jesus!? So as to say: “In the beginning there was....John!?”

**C**harlton Heston in his *Autobiography*<sup>1</sup> tells about the time he first heard that George Stevens wanted him to be in the movie *“The Greatest Story Ever Told.”* Heston’s agent said: “This is a big picture, Chuck, really big – *“The Greatest Story Ever Told.”* George wants you to play John the Baptizer. It’s the lead.!”



Heston thought a bit and replied: “Tell Mr. Stevens I’ll be glad to talk to him about the part, but trust me, John the Baptizer in not the lead in any movie called *“The Greatest Story Ever Told.”*”

Charlton Heston may be faulted for many things – his ego was legendary – but here his Biblical knowledge is accurate: John is not the lead. All four gospels begin with John’s story, but John is not the lead.

**J**ohn is the perennial second fiddle – forever Ed McMahon to Jesus’ Johnny Carson – eternally relegated to saying “heeeeere’s Jesus.”



Second fiddle – the straight man who cannot ever, ever outshine the star. Always the bridesmaid, never the bride. Always the groomsman, never the groom. You get the point – John.

Always the forerunner – the watchman is the one who peers into the night trying to pierce the night with his gaze to discern the events about to happen and warn if there is any danger.

“Watchman, tell us of the night, what its signs of promise are.  
Traveler, o’er yon mountain’s height, see that glory beaming star.  
Watchman, does its beauteous ray aught of joy or hope foretell?  
Traveler, yes – it brings the day, promised day of Israel.

Our translation of Mark 1:1 is not entirely accurate. We read:

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

Three points where the original language is more accurately translated:

“The beginning of the <sup>1)</sup> victory news of Jesus, <sup>2)</sup> the Messiah, <sup>3)</sup> a Son of God.”

There is no article “the” in the original Greek before “son of God” rather “a son of God” or simply “son of God.” A Greek of the day hearing this would think “a son of God” meant Jesus was among the mythological children of the gods like the mythical hero Hercules believed to be son of Zeus and a human mother. On the other hand, a Jew of the day would think “a son of God” meant a king, an anointed one, a messiah as in Psalm 2.

**I**n the beginning was – John. Although only two Gospels, Matthew and Luke, include the birth of Jesus, in contrast all four Gospels begin the

ministry of Jesus with John. John is clearly an important figure but a passing one. Wild-eyed, radical John. In the guise of a prophet, garments reminiscent of Elijah – ascetic.

You don't think he was an ascetic. Someone has compiled a David Letterman type list of the Top Ten Complaints from Biblical Mothers. Cut to the #1:

- The #1 complaint from a Biblical mother: Elizabeth to John: "I cook you a nice meal and all you want to eat is locust, locust, locust."



Last week we asked of each of us: "Are you ready?" Are you ready for Jesus' coming. Today we look to John and ask of him:

"Watchman, tell us of the night." And his answer, back at us, is "Are you ready?" Again with the "ready!?" His answer involves two parts, both forms of anticipation:

**1** The first is: John proclaims "**a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.**"<sup>2</sup>

This is a command to "get yourselves ready:"

"Get ready for the coming big event, the main event."

"Get ready for God's realm?"

How do we get ready? John is absolutely clear what it takes to enter God's realm:

"Repent your sins!"

What do we have to do to repent our sins? John goes on to explain in more detail in Matthew and Luke than he does in the Gospel of Mark:

*"Be forgiven – and forgive!"*

Forgiveness is a critical part, if not the critical part of God's story – forgiveness all around. We tend to rush past it. We tend to diminish its significance. This forgiveness and repentance piece is not anywhere near as easy or as facile as we make it out to be.

Clara Barton, the “battlefield angel” of our Civil War was founder of the American Red Cross. One time she was conversing with an old friend who had shared the horrors of trying to save lives in the midst of carnage. The friend reminded the famous nurse of a time years earlier when Clara Barton had been the victim of a vicious attack and act of hatred. When Clara acted surprised and unaware that such an incident had ever happened, the friend said, “Don’t you remember that?” Clara replied, “No, I distinctly remember forgetting it!”



John is spot on – becoming a part of God’s realm and reign demands a particularly difficult kind of forgiveness. John asks of us:

“Are you ready to enter God’s realm?”

“Have you repented your sins?”

“Have you received forgiveness?”

More to the point: “Have you offered forgiveness?”

“Have you offered forgiveness to those who have wronged you?”

“Are you able to forgive and really forget?”

Those among us who do accomplish great things like Clara Barton, Mother Teresa and other saints of the faith are those who can actually forgive and forget. This is very hard for us. To accomplish this we must like Clara Barton consciously make it happen – we must cultivate a habit of grace-filled forgetfulness toward wrongs done to us.

It is a critical path for every one of us who desires to be a part of God’s plan. One of the reasons we do not accomplish great things, do not enter God’s realm, is not so much because of our lack of receiving forgiveness, but because of our lack of giving it.



John is spot on. One of the clearest signs of spiritual maturity is the ability to give and receive forgiveness – to not hold grudges – to not rejoice even in the justified suffering of others. Conversely the inability to practice forgiveness is a cardinal sign of spiritual immaturity. We think in holding grudges that we are somehow punishing the other person, but in reality we are just destroying our own soul's chance for entering God's realm. In order to fully experience God's grace we need to practice that grace in ourselves. That's what repentance, true repentance, full repentance means.



“Are you ready to enter God's realm?”

“Are you really able to forgive and forget?”

“Have you changed your life and your ways?”

“Are you ready?”

**2** John's second answer to our query “Watchman tell us” also involves anticipation. John proclaims that “**a greater one**” comes after him.

While the Gospels of Mark and John stress the *discontinuity* between John and Jesus, Matthew and Luke emphasize the continuity between them. In Matthew and Luke, John's pronouncement and Jesus' preaching are word for word the same: “**Repent, for the kingdom of God is near.**”



Both John and Jesus are commanding “Be ready!” Both are voices in the wilderness crying “prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert, a highway for our God.” Both are saying “get your life straightened out.” Both prepare the way for God's realm.

At Charlton College, they teach a course on journeys called “*From Homer to Hobbits*.” It moves through literature about living on “the way.” Stories of journeys are part and parcel of our collective consciousness –

from Homer's *Odyssey* – plagiarized without attribution by Virgil in the *Aeneid* – plagiarized with attribution and gratitude by the Coen brothers in the movie "*O Brother Where Art Thou.*" From Homer to Chaucer's pilgrims to Tolstoy's *War and Peace* to Melville's Ishmael in *Moby Dick* to Robert Frost's poem "*The Road Not Taken*" to Tolkien's Frodo, in literature the metaphor of the journey is a description of life.

“**T**he journey” is also an apt description of the faith. The Bible describes the faith-filled in terms of being “people of the Way.” We are to be people ready for God’s kingdom – on the way, the straightway in the desert, a highway for our God.

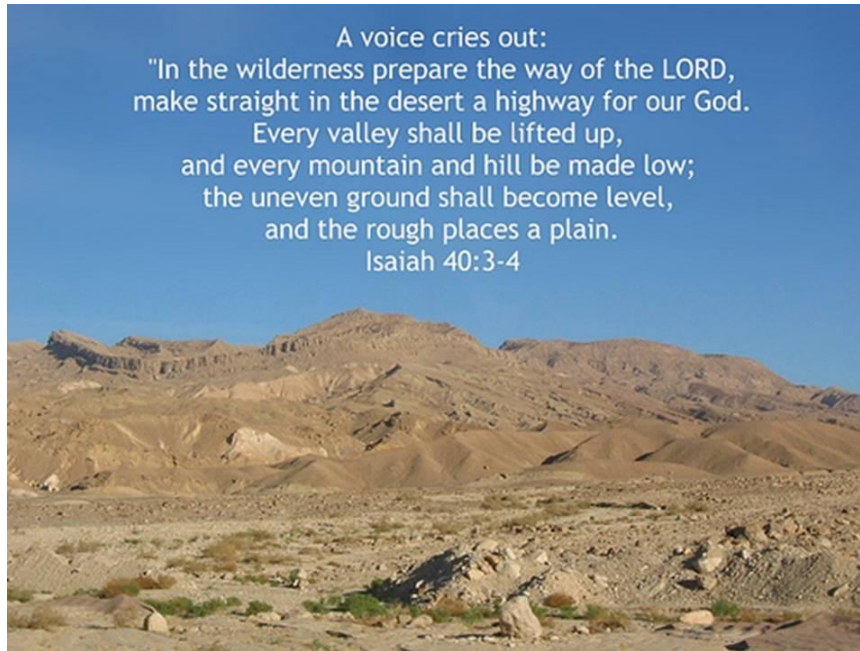
Followers of the Way are people on a journey – like Abraham and Sarah never settled, always moving towards God’s goal. But unlike them we are often distracted from God’s goal by the disruptions travel brings. Presbyterians have been described as “people of the middle way,” but the middle way implies “neither hot nor cold” as the Laodiceans were condemned for being in the Book of Revelation.

John the Baptizer invites us on a journey. Jesus, the “one greater than” John coming after John, invites us on a journey. Neither invites us to a middle way, a broad and well-travelled way, but the “way of the LORD” which has a “**narrow gate and a hard road which leads to life.**”<sup>3</sup> A human journey always involves at least one crossroads – at least one choice – turn right or turn left somewhere along the path. The journey of faith always involves multiple crossroads, multiple choices.

We very much want to be “the people of God’s way.” The road we seek is the hard road by the narrow gate – not the easy choice but the only choice which leads to life abundant, life for the ages, eternal life. We relish that journey.

“**W**atchman, tell us” we ask of John. His answer: “Be ready for an even greater one, even greater things are coming now.”

As the prophet Isaiah is quoted in Mark’s first words:



Then what comes after? What is our watchman John preparing us for?



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<sup>1</sup> *In The Arena* (1995)

<sup>2</sup> Mark 1:4

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 7:14