

“Proclaim the Way”

Mark 1:1-8

December 5, 1999

A few weeks ago, Jessica and I took a trip down to Universal Studios' new theme park in Orlando, the Islands of Adventure. It was a fun-filled day, as we rode on roller coasters and saw some neat shows. I must tell you that the highlight of our day for me was walking through the part of the park called “Seuss Landing” -- a wonderful fantasy world filled with characters and stories from the books of Dr. Seuss, come to vivid, colorful life. Like many of you, I grew up reading many of Dr. Seuss' children's tales, enjoying them for their comical stories, their fun-to-pronounce words, and their brilliant illustrations. But it wasn't until later in life that I realized that many of Dr. Seuss' children's tales had quite a variety of serious, thoughtful morals. The “Sneetches” were about racial reconciliation. The Lorax was about Nuclear Proliferation. And so, as I returned back to Tallahassee, I thought, “Well, what if Dr. Seuss wrote about the greatest story ever told?”

And so, this past week, I entered a fantasy world myself, and fashioned a sermon that is in the style of one of my favorite authors, Theodore Geisel, Dr. Seuss. What if Dr. Seuss were to preach on today's passage, Mark 1:1-8? It might sound something like this...

Let us take a quick trip to a land far away
And meet a strange group, let us meet them today

They came in all shapes, in all lengths, in all heights
They called themselves Prophets, and were they quite a sight!

Alone did they work and alone did they live
No love and no honor to them did most give

Hated by kings for their stubborn, strange words
Words of Great Yahweh, the God whom they served.

And hear now the names that these prophets did bear
Do you think that you've heard of these names anywhere?

Isaiah, the great one, and Amos and Micah
Haggai, and Habakkuk, and the sad Jeremiah.

Hosea, Joel, Nahum and, yes, Zephaniah,
Obadiah and Jonah, and even Zechariah

Their work was their words, and in speaking, their chore.
To warn of God's wrath so there's sinning no more.

Some would speak before kings, some would speak to the crowds
Some spoke softly, with signs, some would shout words out loud

Some would speak in the palace, some would speak in the fields
One would speak with a plumbline, one would tell of a wheel.

Some would give words of hope, words of love, words of grace
Some would use words of wrath, words of anger, disgrace

Now two of the prophets, Malachi and Isaiah
Had something to say about proclaiming the waya

Chapter three and verse one of the Malachi book
Chapter forty, verse three of Isaiah's, now look --

Their words once again are contained in Mark's work
Chapter one and verse two and verse three, what a quirk!

"As it's written," Mark says, "In the prophet's old days
I'm sending a messenger, you'll see with your face.

He'll prepare, and he'll work, he'll proclaim a sure way
He will cry in the desert, he will make the path straight."

"What does this mean?" You might say, you might ask.
"Who is the one who is called to this task?"

Who is the one who will make the path straight?
Who is the one who'll "prepare ye the way?"

Is his name Zephaniah, or Charlie, or Steve?
Is his name Diffendorfer, or Adam, or Eve?

Who will prepare ye the way of the Lord?
Who will be crying a wilderness word?

Could his name be She-al-ti-el-Je-ho-sa-phat?
Could his name be Mark, Russell, Joe, Carlos, or Pat?

No! Mark will tell us, it is Mark who will say
Tell us Mark, end this now, and so now save the day.

Read chapter one and verse four, before long,
You'll hear of his name, the name Baptizin' John.

Now what is this baptism, and who is this John?
And why do we read it in Mark chapter one?

Let us ask John ourselves, let us ask him right now.
Of baptism's what, when, it's why, where and how.

We come to a river so pretty so clean
We come to the water, like living a dream

We walk to its shore and then see -- what a crowd!
Some big ones, some small ones, some quiet, some loud!

The one they call John, he is one of the loudest
The one they call John, he is one of the stoutest

He's waste high in water, and what is it he's saying?
What is this strange ritual, this game that they're playing?

One by one they come in, people into the river
With tears in their eyes, and not one with a shiver

John asks them a question -- what is it, we wonder?
John takes them by hand and then down they go under.

Into the water, down into the sea
Into the river, what is it we see?

So we take some steps forward, and we join in the throng
To wait for our moment with this Baptizin' John

We step in the water, and we make not a sploosh
The water's not cold, and the ground doesn't squoosh

We look down, at our toes, and we see them get cold
But forward we move, every step is so bold.

And then, face to face, we look into John's eyes
What a strange looking man, we then soon realize.

He is wearing a coat that is furry and hairy
It is made of the skin of an animal - Quite scary!

What was this coat once, was it rhino or eel?
Is it made of giraffe, pig, or buffalo heel?

What ever it is, it makes John look quite funny
Like a one-humped or two-hump-ed dromedary bunny.

But Mark says it's camel, so in that we will trust
And then move to his diet, and then speak with disgust.

What do you think that he eats, sir and ma'am?
Is it P, B, and J, is it Green Eggs and Ham?

So we ask him, he tells us, we think it quite funny:
What's yummy in his tummy is wild locusts and honey.

But now to the question that we ask altogether
To Baptizin' John, to his waist belt of leather

We ask, "Please kind sir, what's this baptism thing?
That you do in this river, that you do in this stream?"

Is it like Temple washing that we do with the priests?
Is it so to get ready for the festival feasts?

Is it like when we sacrifice lambs at the altar?
Is it like when we read from the Torah or Psalter?

Who told you to do this, Elijah or Moses?
Please answer us sir, and the questions we poses.

Do we do this to cover our mistakes and our sins?
Do we have to keep washing again and again?

Why do this in this place, in this Jordan River?
Why not in the Temple, lest everyone shiver?

Is it like in the synagogue, where we learn of God's ways?
Do you baptize to teach us a lesson today?

Oh tell us, please tell us what baptism's for
Oh tell us, please tell us - we'll wonder no more.

Then John the Baptizer, waste high in the creek
Took us by the hand, and then started to speak:

“When you want to be baptized you must ask for forgiveness”
For times when you sinned, for when you were mischievous.

For here, in the river, between you and the Lord,
You experience God, and God gives you a word,

A word of forgiveness, a word of new life
A word that your life need not muddle in strife.

Forgiveness is here, in the depths of these waters
Forgiveness is here, for all sons and all daughters.

And you need not be perfect, you need not be clean
When you come to be washed in this baptism scene.

No, this is God’s doing, not mine, not your own
It is God’s perfect grace through this water is shown.

Just as long, long ago, through the Red Sea they passed
We can enter new hope through these waters - at last!

So all you must do, to be washed in this way
Is offer repentance, ask forgiveness today.

But yes, one more thing. I must tell you to see
I am not the great Savior you might think me to be.

No, I’m just John, the forerunner of One
Who will come after me, who is God’s only Son.

I baptize today with these waters, this sea,
But baptism by fire will soon come after me.

So all I am doing is just blazing the trail
For the entrance of one whom the world will soon hail.

So what you must do is help prepare the great way
By repenting of sins, by proclaiming the way.

For soon, very soon, we will all see the king
What a glorious day, it will make us all sing.”

And then with a gesture, a smile, and a nod,
John offered a baptismal path to know God.

Each person in turn, each one us, went
Down into the water with this man, heaven sent.

* And we came up from the water and peeked open our eyes.
Now made pure with water, we then soon realized

That a new thing had happened, we have now been made new.
By the waters of baptism, and a promise made true.

Deep in our hearts, we still wonder, we pray,
Who is this one John said's coming our way?

Who is this Great Savior, Redeemer, and Friend?
How long will we wait for this Promised Godsend?

Maybe this one coming will be meek and be mild.
Maybe this one that we wait for is some great, special child.

But until he does come, we must each do our parts,
To keep clear the path of God into our hearts.

Through regular prayers, and through hearing God's voice
Through drowning out all of this secular noise

Let's not be distracted or commercially driven
Let's focus on God, and the gifts God has given

Of peace and goodwill, and of hope and of joy
And a soon to be, specially, swaddling wrapped boy.

Like the days of the prophets, like Baptizin' John
We wait, oh we wait, for the birth of God's Son.

Who will cleanse us from sins and from all our defections
Through the blessed Christ's life, his death, and resurrection.

And so, as we come back to now, and today,
Let us take up the call of proclaiming the way.

In the name of our God who created the heavens,
And redeems us, sustains us, we all say, Amen.