

Hello, my name is McKenna. I am the Community Life Pastor at New North Church in San Francisco, and it is so good to be with you. While it's obvious New North as a church has roots with CPC because we were once CPC North, it's worth saying here that I still feel very much like CPC is home. I grew up here; Mark was my pastor. I had Pioneer girls in the blue room in 3rd grade, and I played right here when there wasn't a building here—just a grassy area. I interned here at the same time as Ryan Hodges, and Sandy Hughes taught me more than I can possibly say about ministry and hard work and the Lord. CPC has grown me up into who I am now, and for that, I will always be grateful.

How many seconds does it take to make a first impression?

I googled that question this week because I have heard all kinds of stats about people making up their minds about each other quickly, and research actually has some contrasting opinions. What used to be thought of as about a 20-second window to either give off or develop a first impression has become smaller. *Forbes*, in an article released in 2019, said we take about seven seconds to come up with a first impression. *Psychology Today* actually goes so far as to say we develop first impressions in 1/10 of a second. The article I read said that it takes just that long for us to start to determine a person's trustworthiness. Based on my own experience with Tik Tok, I think we determine our interest in people, even more so than their trustworthiness in that short span of time.

That is not a long time. And while both articles went on to list ways each of us can manufacture other's first impressions of us—whether it's hygiene or clothing choice or posture, or whether you smile when you first meet someone—the obvious takeaway for me was that making a good first impression requires intentionality. Sure there are some natural charmers in the world, but for most of us plebeians in the world, we have to try.

The past few weeks, you all have been starting a sermon series on the Book of Mark, and both Kevin and Dan, over the past few Sundays, have asked the question, "Who is Jesus?" and posed that our impression of Jesus is the most important one we could come up with. How trustworthy we deem him to be and how interested we are in knowing more about him determines a whole lot about the kinds of people we end up becoming, whether we are a follower of Jesus or not.

The gospel writer, Mark, knew this. Who we determine Jesus to be, determines the reality we live in. And in this passage, he

gives us our first impression of this Jesus, and with intentionality, he challenges all of the categories we may have previously held Jesus in. Mark challenges our expectations of Jesus and invites us to reimagine our own reality. How does he invite us into this reimagination?

Jesus' entrance invites us to reimagine royalty.

"At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan" (Mark 1:9). A few weeks ago, Kevin talked about how Mark sets up his entire account of Jesus' life by using the word gospel in the very first verse. Kevin talked about how what seems like a very Christian word to us would not have been religious at all to the first hearers of this message.

The word "gospel" or good news was a political word, a declaration brought into a place about a king. It was associated with emperors and heralds and news of battle victories. So in just a few words, Mark sets up this Jesus the Messiah as more than just a man or even a prophet, but as a ruler king. And then we meet John the Baptist, who is the herald in this gospel preparing the way for that king to come. John the Baptist carries this gospel out, telling everyone, "You all need to get ready because the king is coming!" This message drew crowds.

Last week, Dan mentioned in his sermon that some scholars estimate hundreds of thousands of people went to see John the Baptist in the wilderness. This dude knew how to attract attention! In my head, he was the perfect blend of charismatic and "I-don't-care-what-you-think-of-me," so people wanted to hear what he had to say. And to the Jews, the news he was declaring was welcome. They wanted this king to come. They had wanted him to come for hundreds of years. They wanted an end to Roman rule over them. They wanted someone to come to lead them again. They wanted a new king as David had been long before. Mark is setting up the entrance of this king. But just as soon as the first readers of this gospel would have harkened back to all of their own expectations of what their Messiah was supposed to be, Mark almost bait and switches.

"At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan" (v. 9). Rather than pomp and circumstance, Jesus just slips into view. Unlike all of the urban sophisticates that came from Jerusalem to be baptized, this Jesus came from Nazareth, a nowhere place. Nazareth would have been the equivalent of a bunch of people from LA and San Francisco reading about the president coming from Los Banos. You know

the city you drive through and stop at the Starbucks to go to the bathroom but stay as little as possible? That's Nazareth. Mark doesn't introduce Jesus here with another title or his lineage or his accolades. He doesn't announce his battle plan to take back Israel for God's people. There is no epic speech or even a sermon meant to ready people to his side. In fact, here, Jesus seems to almost blend into the crowds himself. What kind of a first impression is that?

Imagine standing in a crowd at a royal ball—think of literally any Masterpiece show—waiting for the giant doors to open and the footman to announce the great arrival of the king. But instead, as everyone's eyes are on the big doors full of expectations, the real king slips in from the side and stands dressed like one of the servants—no trumpets, no grand declaration, no crown jewels, no one really even noticing that he has actually entered the room. Though Jesus was most certainly king, Mark wants to make that very clear that he was not the king anyone expected.

And then, no sooner has he entered, he gets baptized by the man who was calling Israel to repent, and also had just said he himself would not be worthy to untie the sandals of the king when he came.

We read in the Gospel of Matthew, which records a bit more detail, that John the Baptist initially protested baptizing Jesus because it felt so strange to him. He says in Matthew 3:13, *"I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"* Even John was startled by this entrance. The king, the Messiah, who had come to save Israel was identifying with his people even in their sin, even now.

While most people point to the cross as evidence of Jesus' identification with the sin of humanity, it starts here, right at the very beginning of his ministry. Rather than remain distant and un-touchable with an image of grandeur floating about him, this king identifies with his people in their weakness.

Now, we don't have kings here in the United States—monarchy or dictatorships are generally frowned upon in the US. Americans generally don't like the thought of being controlled at all, but we have royal expectations, let me assure you. You see it in the qualities and lifestyles and achievements we want most for ourselves.

I heard a quote years ago about Princess Diana and Mother Teresa, who both died in 1997, about a week apart from each other. As sad as both of their passings were, the shocking thing about the contrast between both women is that everyone wanted to live a lifestyle like Diana, but no one could. Everyone could live a life like Mother Teresa, and yet no one really wants to. And while this is not a knock on Princess Diana at all, Mother Teresa spent her life serving the least of these kinds of people in places no one else wanted to be. She emulated her king, Jesus. Mark, even here in this first impression, is checking what we value. Do we value what is obviously powerful, influential, popular, beautiful, and

intelligent, or do we see power, influence, and beauty in the way Jesus embodied it?

Mark introduces Jesus as the direct contrast to all of the qualities we naturally find enticing and worth emulating. Our first impression of him is not him performing a miracle but getting baptized. He's humble, not proud. He's on a quest of obedience through submission and servanthood, not of proving himself. When he does perform a miracle that could dazzle, he tells people to keep quiet about it.

Jesus engages in a very real battle we'll get to later but does so with methods that no general in human history would thrust on his troops. Jesus' whole ministry on earth was a stumbling block to people who had expectations of who he was supposed to be. Men and women waiting at the doors of a great hall had a king in their midst who wouldn't shout his authority but would instead whisper, *"So the last will be first, and the first will be last"* (Matthew 20:16). And if we're honest, this is just as countercultural today as it was back then.

This Kingdom of God we are beckoned into with the entrance of this king invites us to reimagine what, or should I say who, ends up being royalty in our lives. What qualities do we long for in ourselves and in the people around us? What kind of lives do we see others leading that inspire in us awe or even envy? Who are we willing to follow? What kind of character are we set on cultivating in ourselves?

Jesus' entrance invites us to reimagine relationship

Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Mark 1:10-11

These are quite possibly the two best verses in the whole book of Mark, and to be honest; I feel like I cheated in getting to preach on them. Because in this one scene, we are invited to reimagine who God is and what it means that we are in relationship with him.

When Jesus comes up from his baptism, unlike everyone else who had been baptized before him, something critical happens, and Jesus himself sees it. Mark tells us the heavens tore open. And this is a lot more significant than seeing a little doorway opening in the distant sky. In the greater biblical narrative, often when heaven is mentioned, it refers to God's dimension or space behind ordinary, human reality. This wasn't simply God pulling a curtain back and Jesus getting a quick glimpse of what was up there; the tearing actually illustrates to us that this was more than a pulling back of a veil but an entrance into a new kind of reality. One where the separation between God's reality—ultimate reality—and us is destroyed.

Mark also tells us that the Spirit of the Lord descended on Jesus "like a dove," which does not mean the Holy Spirit looks like a dove but fluttered and rested on Jesus. In this scene, we see the presence of God the Father with the ripping of Heaven, God the Son in Jesus, and the Holy Spirit connecting them. The whole Trinity was present at the baptism of Jesus.

We (us 21st-century readers of the New Testament) might not be able to see what Mark is actually pointing to, but the men and women who originally read this would have recognized what Mark was alluding to like we might recognize an allusion to our favorite film series with just a bar of the theme song.

Mark is pointing us back all the way to the creation account where the Spirit of God hovered over the formless deep, and God spoke light into existence. By his Word, creation came into being. At creation, we also see God the Father, the Word of God—the Son, and the Spirit present and active together.

And while trinitarian theology is really hard to wrap our minds around, what is most important to understand is that God himself is a relationship. And it is not one marked by hierarchy or force but of mutual submission and communal satisfaction in the other. The reason the Trinity is so important to our understanding of ourselves and our impression of Jesus is that in the Trinity, we see perfect love.

And that's why this moment is so breathtakingly beautiful because we see, as heaven tears, evidence of this perfect loving relationship. Before Jesus' ministry had even begun or he had achieved something, we see the Father affirming him and reminding him of his identity: "You are my son, whom I love. With you I am well pleased." And the Holy Spirit rested on him with power. Each part of the Trinity is mutually glorifying the others.

We glorify the things we find beautiful and awe-inspiring for their own sake, not because of what they can do for us. Have you ever looked at a person and just been overwhelmed with fascination or awe, not because of what they've done, but because they just are? Maybe it's a baby you've held or someone you've fallen in love with, or a friend who delights you. Or maybe an easier example could be if you've heard a song or seen a view that just emits a kind of beauty that doesn't demand anything of you, but you admire it simply because it is? When I hiked Half Dome last September, there was a distinct and profound glory watching the sunrise from the top in silence. This is the relationship of the Trinity, and it's the relationship we are invited into because of this new reality of the Kingdom of God.

Mark wants our first impression of Jesus to invite us to reimagine relationship. Miroslav Volf, who is one of my favorite theologians, defines it this way, "Because the Christian God is not a lonely God, but rather a communion of three persons, faith leads human beings into the divine communion." If this mutual glorification we see in the Trinity is perfect love, and this is how

God wants us to know him, then it changes everything for us, as much as it did for the Jews back then. Jesus' contemporaries knew God to be loving and faithful, but they also knew there were expectations that came along with being Jewish; expectations of following the rules and behaving according to what God had asked. In many ways, obedience was their earning. It's almost like God is telling his people here, "No! You guys have got it backward."

Now, let me ask you, have you ever felt someone else loving you the way we just talked about? Where they simply look at you, and you feel their approval and pleasure, whether it's a friend or a parent or a spouse?

I hope beyond hope you have had people in your life tell you about their pleasure in you just being, but there is a greater one who looks at you with the perfect, eternal version of those eyes. The journey of faith in Jesus is truly a lifelong process of learning that those same words the Father spoke to Jesus at his baptism, he now speaks over each one of us.

While our world begs us to earn our place, earn our value, earn our merit, the reality that broke through that day with Jesus' baptism is the greater reality we get to live into. One where our value isn't determined by our behavior; our behavior is determined by the value we already know we have. Henri Nouwen says it this way,

Based on our baptism, all are called to a mystical life, to communion with God. We need to claim that, to taste it and feel it, to trust that the deeper we live this communion, the more our behavior will witness to the truth.

Jesus' entrance invites us to reimagine resistance.

"At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him" (Mark 1:12-13). In his typical fashion, Mark doesn't linger anywhere long, which is why Jesus moves from his baptism to the wilderness so quickly in this narrative. Because we have just been given a glimpse of this profoundly intimate picture of the trinitarian relationship, and then what happens? We realize our king, the Messiah Jesus, is in a very real battle. You see, Jesus wasn't the warrior king the Jews expected, the battleground wasn't Jerusalem, and the enemy wasn't Rome.

John Milton, who wrote *Paradise Lost*, wrote a sequel, and he made this scene, the temptation of Jesus (not the crucifixion), the beginning of the world's reversal and redemption. Thousands of years before this scene, a man and a woman stood in a garden and were tempted by Satan, asking them, "Can you be like God?" And while we don't read in Mark how Satan tempted Jesus, we do read in the other gospels that the same nemesis from

the garden was tempting Jesus to question his identity just like Adam and Eve questioned theirs.

A battle that started all the way back from creation was coming to its head here. Mark, in the first impression we get of Jesus, is making it clear that this king has come to save his people from something much bigger than even the Roman empire. He has come to save his people from evil itself.

Satan is kind of odd, right? I mean, when we think of “Satan” now, oftentimes with our western perspective, we have a phony image of a little red devil with horns or a little scepter thing, or we think Satan is some kind of personified representation of evil that exists in the world. When people say the word “Satan” or things like “Satan has his hand in that,” we think that’s just a passing of responsibility. But Mark, along with the other gospel writers and really all of the scriptures, affirms that “the Satan” is a real personal being that desires our destruction. Jesus talks consistently about Satan, the devil, and makes it clear he is a liar whose mission it is to steal, kill and destroy. His primary way of doing that is by taking our attention and affection off of God and tempting us to place it elsewhere, usually on ourselves.

It’s clear that this showdown between Jesus and Satan wasn’t the kind of showdown the Jews were expecting. It was more. Philip Yancey explains it this way: “Like single combat warriors, two giants of the cosmos converged on a scene of desolation. One, just beginning his mission in enemy territory, arrived in a badly weakened state. The other, confident and on home turf, seized the initiative.”

When Satan’s initiative against Adam and Eve proved to be too much, they failed to remember that God is actually the one to be glorified, not them. Jesus did not fail. And with his victory, we, too, can reimagine what resistance looks like. Here are just two real ways.

We need to acknowledge that we, too, have a very real enemy.

John Mark Comer says, “The devil is an immaterial but real intelligence at work in the world, with more power or influence than any other creature in the universe after God. He is the evil behind so much of the evil in our souls and society.” And while the excuse “The Devil made me do it” actually doesn’t fly because the devil can’t make you do anything. The reality is that we are personally tempted away from God, away from deeper communion with the one who has given us our truest identity. Do you know you have a real enemy that is out to destroy you? Resistance looks first and foremost like being able to identify the places in your life Satan is tempting you to question God’s goodness and pleasure in you.

Resistance is about submission to the right authority.

All of us, whether we like it or not, submit to some authority. Even if it’s not God, it may be social pressures, the people around us, or just ourselves. The question isn’t whether or not we will submit, but rather whether we submit to the right authority. Jesus, who had every right and every power to do whatever he wanted, submitted to the Holy Spirit’s call into the wilderness and, despite the temptations thrown at him, continued submitting himself. It’s easy to submit to God when you can see exactly what he’s doing. You are full of confidence and faith in him when you have your own heavens-torn-open moments in your life; when you see him and agree with him.

But what about when you are in your own kind of wilderness? Maybe a place where you know you were led by God, and the struggle you feel in that place makes you doubt whether you ever heard him to begin with? Maybe you took a job you felt he was asking you to. Maybe you sacrificed something you knew he was asking you to give up. Maybe you started a project or a family or a company with this deep sense of calling—but now it’s hard. And you have these nagging thoughts that you made a mistake, or you misheard, or maybe you never really had the affection from God you thought you did. I’d imagine there are plenty of us in this room who feel like our lives are far enough out of control that being in the desert doesn’t even begin to explain it.

I just want to say you’re not alone in feeling this way. We could go through the scriptures and lay out story after story of men and women who did remarkable things for God and still ended up in their own deserts, wondering if they had misheard. Immediately, John the Baptist comes to mind. Even after he had spent his life preparing the way for Jesus and had baptized him, when he himself was in prison waiting for execution, he sent one of his followers to Jesus to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” In other words, was it real, Jesus? Was it worth something?

Places like this are lonely. They’re confusing. They put us in a place where we question not just ourselves but, more painfully, we question God’s goodness. God, how did this relationship end like this? Lord, how did you let that person walk away from you? Are you going to let me walk away from you too? Lord, why did you let that person die or suffer that way? Father, why can’t this season end? God, you call me your child, and yet I am here? Why didn’t you protect me from this? How is this good?

I think the reason Mark makes it so painfully obvious to us that this wilderness in Jesus’ life happens immediately after his affirmation is because Mark knew we, too, would face wilderness times just like Jesus. And we can actually look not just to each other for comfort, not just to people in scriptures, but to God himself and say, “Lord, you know what this is like. You know what these personal temptations feel like. You know the battle I am facing. All because you were here, doing it for me, before me. And while I do not understand my circumstances, I am going to

choose to trust you because you are God, and I submit to your authority, not my own." This is our resistance.

My favorite part of this passage is that immediately after, angels attend to Jesus. God didn't leave him alone in the desert, just like he never left his prophets alone. Just like he never left John the Baptist, just like he never leaves us. Mark, with this entrance of Jesus, invites us to reimagine resistance and remember we are not alone in this battle. The one who spoke over Jesus those words in his baptism speaks those same words over us, even in the thick of our resistance.

"You are my child. Whom I love. With you I am well pleased."

So what's your impression of Jesus? Because your impression of him ends up determining the reality you live in. I have to confess, this past week, this passage has felt like chicken soup for my soul. I am rather performance-oriented, much like, I'd imagine, many of you, because performance is the culture that we swim in here in the Bay Area. Whenever I am about to enter into a new phase of my life, I wish my natural posture was one of trust and submission. But typically, it's one of control, where I try to do enough to make myself confident about God's affection for me.

But that reality doesn't actually exist in the Kingdom of God. Mark wanted our first impression of Jesus in his gospel to be one of grace. The true walk of faith in the reality of this new kingdom, the one that Jesus brought about with the tearing of the heavens, is how do we respond in faith when God speaks his pleasure over us. Not because we've earned it, but because he just does? What do we do when we are confronted with his eyes on us saying, "You are my son. You are my daughter. Whom I love. With you I am well pleased." Do we look around us at that moment and try to justify his affection? Lord, look at all that I have done! Look at this kingdom I have built! Look at how much good I have participated in! Or do we enter what Tim Keller calls the divine dance, where we look back at him and say, To you Lord be glory and honor and power forever. My life circles around you. I want to live in your kingdom, not my own.

Jesus' entrance invites us into the new reality of his kingship. He invites us to reimagine royalty; who in our life demands our ultimate affection and why. He invites us to reimagine relationship. Where does our value come from? He invites us to reimagine resistance. Are we willing to submit to the Lord, even in the wilderness?

That was a lot longer than seven seconds, but that is the first impression Mark wants you to have of your king.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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