

*Feasting on the Gospels*  
*Mark*

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A Feasting on the Word® Commentary

# *Feasting on the Gospels*

Mark

CYNTHIA A. JARVIS and E. ELIZABETH JOHNSON

*General Editors*

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## Publisher's Note

*Feasting on the Gospels* is a seven-volume series that follows in the proud tradition of *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Whereas *Feasting on the Word* provided commentary on only the texts in the lectionary, *Feasting on the Gospels* will cover every passage of the four Gospels. *Feasting on the Gospels* retains the popular approach of *Feasting on the Word* by providing four perspectives on each passage— theological, pastoral, exegetical, and homiletical—to stimulate and inspire preaching, teaching, and discipleship.

Westminster John Knox Press is grateful to the members of the large *Feasting* family who have given so much of themselves to bring this new series to life. General editors Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson stepped from their service on the editorial board of *Feasting on the Word* to the editorship of *Feasting on the Gospels* without missing a beat. Their commitment, energy, and unflagging enthusiasm made this work possible. The project manager, Joan Murchison, and project compiler, Mary Lynn Darden, continued their remarkable

work, bringing thousands of pieces and hundreds of authors together seamlessly.

The editorial board did enormous work under grueling deadlines and did it with excellence and good humor. The hundreds of writers who participated—scholars, preachers, and teachers—gave much of themselves to help create this bountiful feast. David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor took the time and care to help conceive this new project even as they were finishing their excellent work as general editors of *Feasting on the Word*.

Finally, we are again indebted to Columbia Theological Seminary for their partnership. As they did with *Feasting on the Word*, they provided many resources and personnel to help make this series possible. We are grateful in particular to seminary President Stephen Hayner and Dean of Faculty and Executive Vice President Deborah Mullen.

It is with joy that we welcome you to this feast, in hopes that it will nourish you as you proclaim the Word to all of God's people.

Westminster John Knox Press



# Series Introduction

At their best, people who write about Scripture are conversation partners. They enter the dialogue between the biblical text and the preacher or teacher or interested Christian and add perspectives gained from experience and disciplined attention. They contribute literary, historical, linguistic, and theological insights gathered over the millennia to the reader's first impressions of what is going on in a text. This conversation is essential if the reading of Scripture is to be fruitful in the church. It keeps reading the Bible from being an exercise in individual projection or uncritical assumption. That said, people who comment on the Bible should never become authorities. While a writer may indeed know more about the text than the reader does, he or she nevertheless writes from a particular perspective shaped by culture, ethnicity, gender, education, and theological tradition. In this regard, the writer of a commentary is no different from the writers and readers of Scripture.

The model for this series on the Gospels is the lectionary-based resource *Feasting on the Word* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008–2011), now widely used by ministers as they prepare to preach. As central as the task of preaching is to the health of congregations, Scripture is the Word that calls the whole community of faith into being and sends out those addressed as witnesses to the Word in the world. Whether read devotionally by those gathered to pray or critically by others gathered to study, the Bible functions in a myriad of ways to undergird, support, and nurture the Christian life of individuals and communities. Those are the reasons that Westminster John Knox Press has taken the next step in the *Feasting* project to offer *Feasting on the Gospels*, a series in the style of *Feasting on the Word* with two major differences. First, all four Gospels are considered in their entirety, a *lectio continua* of sorts that leaves nothing out. Second, while *Feasting on the Word* is addressed specifically to preachers, *Feasting on the Gospels* is addressed to all who want to deepen their understanding of the Gospels—Bible study leaders and class members, seasoned preachers and seminarians, believers and skeptics.

The advantage of *Feasting on the Gospels* is that the reader encounters multiple perspectives on each

text—not only the theological, exegetical, pastoral, and homiletical emphases that shape the essays, but also the ecumenical, social, ethnic, and cultural perspectives of the authors. Unlike a single-author commentary, which sustains a particular view of a given interpreter throughout, *Feasting on the Gospels* offers readers a broad conversation that engages the text from many angles. In a church as diverse as the twenty-first-century church is, such deliberate engagement with many voices is imperative and, we hope, provocative.

A few observations about the particular challenges posed by the Gospels are in order here. The Gospels were written in a time when fledgling Christian communities—probably in their second generation—were just beginning to negotiate their relationships with Judaism (within which they were conceived and born), a community that was itself in the process of redefinition after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. Some of that negotiation was marked by great tension and sometimes outright hostility. The temptation for Christian readers to read anti-Semitism into texts that portray intra-Jewish conflict has beset the church almost from its beginnings. Our editors have been particularly mindful of this when dealing with essays on texts where the temptation to speak contemptuously of Jews and Judaism might threaten faithful interpretation.

A second observation involves the New Testament manuscript tradition. In *Feasting on the Gospels* we identify and comment on significant manuscript variants such as Mark 16:9–20 and John 7:53–8:11, something we did not have to contend with in *Feasting on the Word*. We identify those variant readings the way the NRSV does, except that we talk about “other ancient manuscripts” rather than the “other ancient authorities” of the NRSV notes.

The twelve members of our editorial board come from a broad swath of American Christianity: they are members or ministers of Presbyterian, Baptist, United Church of Christ, Roman Catholic, and Disciples of Christ churches. Some of them are academics who serve on the faculties of theological schools; others are clergy serving congregations. All of them are extraordinarily hardworking, thoughtful,

and perceptive readers of Scripture, of the church, and of the world. The writers whose work comprises these volumes represent an even wider cross section of the church, most of them from North America, but a significant number from around the world, particularly the global South.

We could not have undertaken this work without the imagination, advice, and support of David Dobson, Editorial Director at Westminster John Knox Press, and his colleagues Don McKim, Marianne Blickenstaff, Michele Blum, and Julie Tonini. We are deeply grateful to David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, our mentors in the *Feasting on the Word* project, who continued to offer hands-on assistance with *Feasting on the Gospels*. We thank President Stephen A. Hayner

and Dean Deborah F. Mullen of Columbia Theological Seminary and the congregation of The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, who made possible our participation in the project. Joan Murchison, who as Project Manager kept all of us and our thousands of essays in order and enforced deadlines with great good humor, is once again the beloved Hammer. Mary Lynn Darden, our compiler, who corralled not only the essays but also information about their authors and editors, brought all the bits and pieces together into the books you see now.

To the preachers, teachers, Bible study leaders, and church members who will read the Gospels with us, we wish you happy feasting.

Cynthia A. Jarvis  
E. Elizabeth Johnson

*Feasting on the Gospels*  
*Mark*

# Mark 1:1–8

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

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

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;

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

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

<sup>4</sup>John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>And people from the whole Judean country-

## Theological Perspective

Most stories in the Bible begin with a human being—Abram and Sarai, Naomi and Ruth, James and John. Yes, there are exceptions—the creation story most especially. Two of the four Gospels begin from the human side—with a genealogy in Matthew, and Zechariah and Elizabeth in Luke. Even John, which begins with the creation through the Word, includes “all people” in the opening verses of its Prologue (John 1:4). Mark simply begins with “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (v. 1). Yes, Jesus is human as well as divine, but the human side of Jesus’ advent (his birth, his childhood, his call) gets no space in Mark.

Mark is the story of an invasion, an invasion of this world by God and God’s reign. Most human invasions involve some preparation—planning out the route, softening up the resistance, spreading some propaganda regarding the invaders. In some very basic way, John the Baptist serves this purpose. However, in Mark, even John’s work seems perfunctory, and rushed, and orchestrated somewhere offstage (“John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness,” v. 4). This is an invasion that is going forward without any invitation. This is an invasion that neither expects nor requires any real receptivity on the part of those for whom the invasion is planned (as the whole Gospel will make clear; nobody “gets” it,

## Pastoral Perspective

The Gospel according to Mark begins with one of the finest opening lines in biblical literature. This grand sentence introduces the story of Jesus as good news.

Today there is a heart hunger for good news. One unofficial means of documenting this hunger is through church prayer chains. Nearly every congregation has one, and it is almost always fully occupied with the concerns of parishioners, their family members, and friends. Meanwhile, every congregation is full of concerns that never make it to the prayer chain because people keep their thoughts stored in their hearts until they utter them to God. Someone has cancer. Another is looking for work. Here a heart is heavy with grief, and a dreadful worry weighs upon another soul. There is no end to the list of concerns. Tennyson’s line still obtains: “Never morning wore / To evening, but some heart did break.”<sup>1</sup> The pastoral task is to speak to these broken hearts, offering the strength and help to be found in God’s good news in Jesus Christ.

Today there is a particular hunger for good news from religion. Religion has become associated with bad news, harsh attitudes, and caustic spirits. The treatment of women, of children, of gays and

1. In *Memoriam A.H.H.*, 6, lines 7–8, in *Tennyson’s Poetry*, ed. Robert W. Hill, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 209.

side 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 water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

## Exegetical Perspective

Mark's introduction to his narrative anchors the church's gospel in continuity with Jesus, Scripture, and John the Baptist.

### *The Church's Gospel Is in Continuity with Jesus*

(v. 1). The discussion here presented understands 1:1 to be Mark's title for his narrative as a whole (as in the NRSV). The word "gospel" (*euangelion*), "good news," refers to the church's message of God's saving act in Jesus, the message proclaimed by the church of Mark's day and ours. It does not here refer to a book representing the life and teaching of Jesus, a meaning the word did not attain until the middle of the second century. Thus Mark 1:1 does not mean "the Gospel begins here" (a gratuitous comment in any case).

Mark's first word, *archē*, can mean "beginning, source, and/or norm." English has no single word with all three connotations; here it has overtones of all three English words. There were many versions of the Christian message in Mark's day, as in ours. Not all were equally valid, and some were dangerously perverse. The author wants to provide direction for how the gospel can be authentically proclaimed. He does this not by stating a creed or list of principles to which the Christian message should conform, but by claiming that the narrative to follow is the beginning, source, and norm for the church's proclamation of the gospel.

## Homiletical Perspective

With its collection of powerful, world-changing stories, Mark's Gospel provides rich fodder for the preacher. Even the very first line offers fertile material: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God." Most scholars understand this brief sentence to be a title summarizing Mark's purpose for writing the book, to tell the story of God's "good news" made present in the advent of Jesus Christ. Unlike the later Gospel writers, Mark does not say he intends to give a full and final account of things. In fact, most scholars believe that Mark does not offer a conventional conclusion to his narrative, where things are wrapped up neatly, as we find in the other Gospels. Instead, his Gospel actually ends in 16:8 with an empty tomb.

The unfinished nature of his testimony, juxtaposed to this strong, affirmative opening statement, suggests that for Mark, the life, ministry, death, and even the resurrection of Jesus Christ are not the end of the story. They are, instead, the events that set the gospel in motion. The "good news" story of Jesus Christ, Son of God, is an ongoing one, continuing into the story of the church's birth and expansion, and into the lives of those who meet the living Christ today.

Most of the time, however, modern Christians experience the story of Jesus as ancient history, far

# Mark 1:1–8

## Theological Perspective

with the exception of the demons and the centurion, 15:39). This is an invasion that only *begins* in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (the last of which gets almost no coverage in Mark), because it is an invasion that is still going on.

To say that the Gospel of Mark emphasizes *God's* initiative in salvation is a gross understatement. This is not a story of a people crying out and God coming down (as in Exodus). This is not a story of God infiltrating the world through the righteousness of Joseph (Matthew) or the obedience of Mary (Luke). No, this is the story of a God who will bring in his reign, come hell or high water. Ready or not, here God comes!

One way to think about this is to focus on *Mark's* hearers, a mostly Gentile community of believers under persecution in the 70s CE. They would prefer a Messiah who would appreciate their willingness to work with him toward the overthrow of the empire that has them in its grip. He could nurture a group of dedicated disciples, train them in the disciplines required for his service, then lead them on to victory. "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and his faithful minions." However, this Gospel ends with the death of a suffering Messiah, and the women running away in fear. Take that, you revolutionary zealots!

Another, and perhaps more productive, way to think about this is in relationship to *us*. It is not just that we would prefer a victorious Messiah to a suffering Messiah. That is relatively easy to swallow. What is a tad more difficult to accept and give thanks for is a God who is coming regardless. No asking or preparing or cooperation on our part at all. You call that "good news"?

Yes, by all means, yes. Is that not what this beginning, theologically, is all about?

This then would be a good occasion to review some basic theology, like "prevenient grace." We thank God not only for coming to us, but for preparing our receptivity to God's approach, no thanks to us. "This effectual call is of God's free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man, who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it."<sup>1</sup> Yes, this is an invasion.

This would be a good occasion to think a little, theologically, about how we share this news with

## Pastoral Perspective

lesbians, of different races, and even of visitors to our church pews has led to the idea that religion, not only Christianity, is something that comes down hard on people. The more negatively religion is perceived, the less appealing the life of faith appears. We have before us a golden opportunity and responsibility to do what Mark did for the world, when he opened his book the way he did. We can present the Christian message as good news.

Today there is a heart hunger for good news rooted in something historic. Many of us moderns suffer from a kind of tyranny of the latest. Under this tyranny we tend to think the times in which we live are unprecedented in terms of their difficulty and complexity. David McCullough had this tyranny in mind when he wrote *1776*. His book about that crucial year in American history was his response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Without denying the severity of those attacks or their impact upon the nation, he reacted against those who stated that our country had never before faced an ordeal that severe. McCullough wrote *1776* to say we had faced such a time before and had survived.<sup>2</sup>

Some such word can be helpful today. Think only of issues facing the church. There is no question that life in twenty-first-century North America poses strong challenges to the church. A people faced with these difficulties can think them unprecedented, and so strong that congregations have impossible odds against them.

Pastoral help can come from digging down into history, particularly in Scripture, to discover the resources to be found there. Mark anchors the story he is about to tell in the Scriptures, particularly in the prophets. The material from Isaiah was more than six hundred years old when Mark put it to use. He realized he was writing for the present, but he drew upon the past. Like Mark we can find yesterday full of profound help for today. Stability can come when we see that the faith we profess has seen people through all manner of circumstances, and there is no reason to believe it will be undone by those that we face.

Moving to something more specific than the general need for good news, think about the present-day need for a word about guilt. John the Baptist's message and work turned people toward the forgiveness of sin. People flocked into the wilderness to hear him. Even taking the hyperbole of Mark 1:5 ("all the

1. The Westminster Confession of Faith (6.065), in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, Part 1, *Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2002), 134.

2. Justin Ravitz, "Author Interview: David McCullough," [www.bomc.com](http://www.bomc.com), May 21, 2005.

## Exegetical Perspective

The church does not merely continue the message of Jesus, but proclaims its faith that, in Jesus, God has acted definitively to reveal and make real God's own character and saving action. The church does not replicate Jesus' own message. In the light of Easter, the church proclaims God's saving act in the Christ event, but can do this legitimately only if the church's message is inseparably bound to the story of the crucified and risen Jesus.

*The Church's Gospel Is in Continuity with the Scripture* (vv. 2–3). In Mark, Jesus appears on the stage of history for the first time in 1:9, when he comes to be baptized by John. Prior to any action on the narrative stage, the audience hears an off-stage, transcendent voice speaking in the words of Scripture (actually a mélange of three different texts [Exod. 23:20; Mal. 3:1; Isa. 40:3]). Mark claims, as does the New Testament in general, that the plan of God revealed in the Jewish Scriptures finds its goal and fulfillment in the event of Jesus Christ. Mark is distinctive in presenting these Scripture texts as a transcendent scene in which the “I” that speaks represents the voice of God, speaking to “you,” a second transcendent figure, “the Lord” (the text of Malachi has been adjusted to get this effect). It is not until Mark 12:36, in a similar use of Scripture, that Jesus the Messiah is explicitly identified with the transcendent Lord. The Lord has a “way,” and God is sending a messenger before the Lord to prepare his way.

Thus, before the narrative curtain opens, the audience has a transcendent framework within which to interpret the figures in the story. God is the actor, who sends both John and Jesus. There is no explicit doctrine of preexistence here, as in the letters of Paul and the Gospel of John. However, when Jesus appears in 1:9, the audience already knows his transcendent identity as the church's Lord, sent by God. The figures in the narrative will not know this until after the cross and resurrection. The messianic secret is already adumbrated in the opening words of the Gospel; the later adoptionist heresy is already implicitly rejected. The meaning of Mark's story, like the Scripture texts with which he begins, becomes clear only in retrospect, in the light of the resurrection.

*The Church's Gospel Is in Continuity with John the Baptist* (vv. 4–8). The historical John was a Jewish eschatological prophet calling Israel to repentance in view of the impending advent of God's judgment. John baptized those who responded as the nucleus of a renewed and purified Israel. He was

## Homiletical Perspective

removed from our own. They may acknowledge it to be their most essential identity-shaping story, offering powerful insights into who God is and who we are in relation to God. That said, do they or we fully comprehend the implications of a story whose central figure, Jesus, is not simply a historical role model, but is instead the risen and living Lord?

What could it mean for congregations to believe that we, here today, are part of this ongoing story of good news, that the end of the story has not yet been written? Can we imagine ourselves as players in God's drama of redemption? What role might we discover God calling us to assume in God's unfinished story of grace and reconciliation and love? Where might we discover we have failed to take up that responsibility? Most importantly, where do we see Jesus, the “good news” made flesh, inviting us to join him in the ongoing work of reconciliation in the life of our world today?

In this first sentence, Mark uses language that echoes that of the creation stories. “In the beginning,” says Genesis, God created all that is, on earth and in the heavens. Here Mark declares another “beginning,” a *new* creation—the beginning of the “good news.” In Mark's day, followers of the still-new Christian faith were experiencing significant persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire. The Greek word Mark uses for this new thing that is happening because of the coming of Jesus is *euangelion*, “gospel.” This term was often used in his time to refer to the peace, prosperity, and good life that came from a grand military victory by the empire.

It is a bold move for Mark to dare to suggest that it is the Son of God, Jesus Christ, rather than Caesar, who makes this hope- and peace-filled kind of new life possible. In our present day, where military ventures across the world have produced hollow victories at best, it is a good reminder for us as well that our true security and redemption come from the hands of God and not from human might. Moreover, in a time when there is a plethora of bad news, we hear from Mark the life-giving good news that all is not finished, that God is still in the process of making all things new.

Mark's story of good news begins with a look back to the prophets. “As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way’” (v. 2). In this new beginning, God's long-standing promises are being fulfilled. These very first words connect the new story of Jesus, which was foretold by the prophets of old, with the ongoing story of God. The messenger

# Mark 1:1–8

## Theological Perspective

others. Do we wait until we see signs of approachability and receptivity and cooperation on the part of others? No, we start living out the reality of the kingdom now, come hell or high water. “The mission of God in Christ gives shape and substance to the life and work of the Church. In Christ, the Church participates in God’s mission for the transformation of creation and humanity by proclaiming to all people the good news of God’s love, offering to all people the grace of God at font and table, and calling all people to discipleship in Christ.”<sup>2</sup> Again, this is an invasion.

This might be a good occasion to think a little about how we go about worship. Do we make it more accessible, more user friendly, more intelligible and adaptable to the norms of our communities and cultures? Not if it gets in the way of an invasion, the invasion of God’s presence and reign made manifest in Jesus Christ. In that great paraphrase of Psalm 98, we might join in singing Isaac Watts’s words: “Joy to the world! The Lord is come. Let earth receive her King. Let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing; and heaven and nature sing, and heaven, and heaven and nature sing.”<sup>3</sup> Every Lord’s Day is an invasion.

Yes, it is true that much of Mark’s Gospel will deal with how this invasion upends our expectations, revealing a Messiah who rules from a cross, not a throne. It thus will demand a deep and sacrificial response on our part. Now, at the beginning, let us note how this good news *begins*. With an invasion. At God’s initiative. The bus has left the station. Get *out of the way*, or get *on the way*. Yes, get ready. Good news is coming—*like fire*.

RICHARD N. BOYCE

## Pastoral Perspective

people”) into account, and so lowering our estimates of the crowd, it must have been at least large enough to attract attention. John must have gained this hearing because his message about forgiveness spoke to a real need that was troubling souls.

Look out upon any congregation. The presence of guilt, though carefully hidden, is not difficult to see. A middle-aged daughter is torn between the time she would like to spend with her husband, children, and grandchildren, and the attention she feels she has to give to her elderly and increasingly frail mother. A father in his seventies is estranged from his son, and he feels much of it is his fault for failing to be a better father. Sitting nearby is a couple whose marriage survived the infidelity of one of them, but that one still lives with the guilt of having been untrue. Not far away is a youth who has the fresh memory of one of those fights adolescents have with parents; hurtful words were spoken, and they cannot be taken back. All this is present on a single Sunday, considering only one side of the sanctuary. The whole church hungers for some good news concerning the guilt they feel. Speak about this helpfully, and people will come out to hear, even as they came to John.

The idea of the wilderness presents another pastoral theme. Mark must want us to notice the wilderness, for he mentions it twice. The pastoral task is not necessarily one of helping people see that their lives can be likened to a wilderness; important as diagnosis is, diagnosis is not yet treatment; much less is it cure. The larger pastoral task is helping people hear the word of God in their wildernesses.

Mark provides clues as to what the resources in the wilderness are today. He points to Isaiah, and to John’s ministry of proclamation and baptism. He heralds the coming Christ. Effective pastoral care and preaching and teaching today, speaking to persons who experience some expression of wilderness in their lives, picks up on these clues and points people to the strengthening help of God found in Scripture, assembly, preaching, sacrament, and, above all, in Christ himself.

MARK E. YURS

2. *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, Part 2, *Book of Order* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2011), 1.

3. *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 40.

## Exegetical Perspective

an independent figure with his own message, his own disciples, and a considerable following who continued alongside those of Jesus as a parallel community, and sometimes as a competing group (see Matt. 3:7–12; Luke 3:1–9, 16–17; 11:1; John 3:25; 4:1; Acts 19:1–7). The historical reality—that some members of the early Christian community had earlier belonged to the Baptist movement, that John never became a disciple of Jesus, and that Jesus himself had been baptized by John—was problematic for some early Christian teachers.

Each of the Gospel writers deals with this in his own way, each showing that Jesus, not John, was the true savior sent from God. In Mark, John has no independent message; all he has to say has been concentrated on one figure, the Mighty One to come. For Mark, this is Messiah Jesus, so that John is no longer a rival preacher of a competing movement, but has been incorporated into the saving Christian message as the forerunner of the Messiah. The point of Mark's brief paragraph about John, however, is not merely to neutralize the competition, but to frame the significance of Jesus in the story he is about to tell.

Although Mark's narrative Gospel begins without birth and childhood stories, when Jesus appears for baptism at 1:9, he is not a transcendent visitor from the heavenly world without antecedents in the nitty-gritty of historical reality. He emerges from the history in which God has been active through the ages, the history of hope and promise documented in the Scripture, the same history in which John the Baptist plays his own appointed role in God's plan. John had promised the "Mighty One" to come. Mark understands Jesus to be this Mighty One. The first thing said of Jesus is that he has a "way" (v. 3). By Mark's time, the Gospel's readers know that this way leads to the cross (though the characters in the story have a devil of a time accepting this). How can the one "crucified in weakness" (2 Cor. 13:4) be the Mighty One of divine power? This tense question drives the plot of Mark's Gospel.

M. EUGENE BORING

## Homiletical Perspective

John prepares the way for Jesus through his proclamation of baptism, repentance, confession, and forgiveness. In a twist peculiar to him, Mark does not begin with a call to repentance. Instead, he says that John called people to come and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance and confession are necessary pieces of the forgiveness God bestows, but the first act is God's gracious, cleansing gift of the waters of baptism.

Mark does not begin his narrative in the "churches" of Jesus' day or even among the religious people of the time. Instead, it is John, a man living on the fringes of society, far from the halls of power, who first points to God's coming grace. From the wilderness, he calls out to the people, offering forgiveness for their sins. They come, says Mark, "people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem" (v. 5).

Something about the message from this outsider draws them. This man who lived on locusts and wore the clothes of a beggar, who took no credit for himself but pointed always beyond himself to the "more powerful" one who is to come, attracted a crowd. Unlike the religious institutions of Jesus' day, whose laws and requirements for sacrifices placed heavy burdens on those who desired to make their lives right with their God, John, the outsider, offered something new. Baptism and forgiveness were God's gift to those who confessed and repented of their sins. No longer were the poor and marginalized excluded by their lack of resources or access to the traditional means of restitution.

Could it be that then—and perhaps now as well—God's message of good news can be heard most clearly outside the trappings of institutions? Do our churches unintentionally exclude the very people who most need to hear God's good news? From what "wilderness" places may God be speaking a fresh new word to us today, if we only have ears to hear?

LEAH MCKELL HORTON