

A Longer Look at the Lessons

January 10 to
February 17, 2021

Series B, The Season after
Epiphany

The Holy Gospel: Mark 1:4–11

The First Sunday after Epiphany

January 10, 2021

John the Baptist carried out his ministry in the desert region of the Jordan River. The stream's sources are springs supplied by Mount Hermon to the north, which rises to more than 9,000 feet. The river winds a torturous path for 104 miles down to 1,292 feet below sea level at the Dead Sea. It is appropriately named *Jordan*, "The Descender."

John's appearance in a rough tunic woven of camel's hair, cinched at the waist with a leather belt, combined with the wilderness setting to mark him as a prophet (see Zechariah 13:4). That he subsisted on what the desert provided completed the image of this man of God. Some suggest that the "locusts" were pods of a desert plant, but it was not uncommon for the poor of Palestine to eat locusts. They were allowed in the Levitical code (see Leviticus 11:20–22). Legs and wings were removed, and the bodies were dried or roasted, or ground up and baked. Palestine's wilderness country was known for its wild bees, and their hives supplied some of John's nourishment.

145. Why did the evangelists include such details about John's appearance and lifestyle in their Gospel accounts?

John came "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." The Jews were familiar with proselyte baptism for Gentiles, required of those who converted to Judaism. But they were unfamiliar with the need for baptism among Jews.

146. What was the outward action that qualified people for John's Baptism?

147. In his preaching, John was true to the purpose of his ministry as the Way-Preparer for the Messiah. How did John contrast himself with the importance of the One coming after him? How did he contrast their ministries?

148. How would Jesus' baptizing with the Holy Spirit be different from John's Baptism? (See Matthew 28:18–20; Titus 3:4–7; Acts 1:5, 8.)

When Jesus came to John to be baptized, it was not as an act of repentance for His own sins, but it was the right way for Him to begin His ministry. Thus He put Himself in the place of all sinners—“to fulfill all righteousness,” as Matthew’s Gospel puts it. His saving work ultimately would involve Him in the same stance when He would carry our sins in His body and give Himself in suffering and death as God’s atoning sacrifice.

149. Why was the Spirit given to Jesus at His Baptism? (See Isaiah 61:1.) Why did the Spirit descend in visible form like a dove? (See John 1:32–34.) What significance is there in the fact that the Father spoke His affirming words at this time?

150. How does this event underscore the Christian doctrine of God’s revelation of Himself as the Holy Trinity?

“When He came up out of the water” cannot be used exclusively to argue for baptizing by immersion. Jewish tradition included many “baptisms,” religious applications of water. The probability is that John stood in a shallow eddy and baptized by scooping up water and pouring it on those who came down into the water to him. In that case, “came up out of the water” simply means Jesus returned to the river’s bank.

The Holy Gospel: John 1:43–51

The Second Sunday after Epiphany

January 17, 2021

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are the synoptic Gospels. They have the same narrative style as they view the life and ministry of Jesus. John wrote his Gospel much later. He included some basic narratives and added others, but focused especially on the longer discourses of Jesus. Only John tells of the first contacts between Jesus and those who had been disciples of John the Baptist. He tells how he and Andrew were with Jesus for part of a day after they had been directed to Him as “the Lamb of God” by their master. Andrew then found his brother Simon and brought him to Jesus. Then Jesus called Philip, who invited Nathanael to come and see Jesus for himself.

Philip, from Bethsaida, “The House of Fish,” was probably involved in the fishing industry, as were Peter and Andrew and James and John. His name is of Greek origin, possibly suggesting that he grew up in a Jewish home with more liberal views, although, because of centuries of Greek influence, it really was not an unusual name among the Jews. We’re told Jesus *found* Philip to say to him, “Follow me.”

159. What does this say to us about Christian discipleship? (See John 15:16.)

Philip extended the Lord’s finding by going to his friend Nathanael. Philip’s approach to Nathanael indicates that he and Nathanael were serious students of the Scriptures. Pious Jews practiced a daily discipline of reading and meditating in a quiet place. Nathanael’s sitting in the shade of a fig tree might well refer to his time for such devotion.

160. Why did Nathanael react when Philip identified Jesus as “Jesus of Nazareth”? What can we learn for our own witnessing from Philip’s “Come and see”? How can we and our friends see Jesus?

161. Jesus approached Nathanael with some complimentary words that would be sure to gain his attention. What is the significance of His calling

Nathanael “an Israelite indeed”? What does His adding “in whom there is no deceit” say about Nathanael’s character and personality?

162. In His reference to Nathanael being under the fig tree, what might Jesus have keyed on that would make His remark especially pointed for Nathanael? What “greater things” did Nathanael come to see as a disciple of Jesus?

163. With His allusion to Jacob’s experience at Bethel, what point was Jesus making about Himself and His ministry?

Nathanael called Jesus “the Son of God,” but Jesus referred to Himself as “the Son of Man.” When pressed at the time of His trial, Jesus did openly acknowledge that He is the Son of God, but He usually used the title “Son of Man” as He referred to Himself (see Matthew 26:63–64). His use of “Son of Man” was drawn from Daniel 7:13–14 and had messianic overtones, but was not popularly used in speaking of the promised Messiah.

164. Why did Jesus avoid referring to Himself as the “Messiah” or “Christ” during the course of His ministry and even tell His disciples not to do so?

The Holy Gospel: Mark 1:14–20

The Third Sunday after Epiphany

January 24, 2021

Mark, in his hurried, “newspaper” style, did not devote much time to background. In the first 13 verses of his Gospel, he quickly told of the ministry of John the Baptist, the Baptism of Jesus, and Jesus’ testing by the devil in the desert. Then he moved immediately into an account of the ministry of Jesus, an account that emphasizes what Jesus did more than what He said. A favorite word of Mark was *euthus*, translated “immediately” or “at once” or “without delay.” In one sentence, Mark told of the end of John’s ministry and the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, and even gave a summary of Jesus’ proclamation.

174. What three elements do you find in this summary of Jesus’ proclamation?

The Greek word *kairos* speaks of “an appropriate time” or “an opportune time.” The kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed is not a place. It is His rule in the lives of men and women. When that rule confronts us at the appropriate time in God’s plan, it becomes the opportune time for us. *Metanoiete*, “repent,” called for a change of heart and mind that influences one’s whole direction in life. *Pisteuete*, “believe,” involves more than intellectual acceptance of a fact; it calls for a relationship of confidence and trust. Both are imperatives in the present tense, which in Greek calls for continuing action—“keep on repenting and keep on believing”—in the *kairos* that God gives us.

175. What did Jesus’ “The time is fulfilled” say to people to whom He was preaching? What does it say to you for your life?

176. What did Jesus’ “The kingdom of God is at hand” say to people to whom He was preaching? What does it say to you for your life?

177. What did Jesus’ “Keep on repenting and believing in the Gospel” say to people to whom He was preaching? What does it say to you for your life?

178. How are repentance and faith *enabled* by the Good News assurance that we are accepted by God?

Most scholars believe that Mark traveled with Peter as his scribe and assistant. The Gospel of Mark is seen as Peter's eyewitness account, and so it appropriately begins with the call of Simon Peter and his brother Andrew to be fishers of men.

179. How is it that these men were immediately ready to leave everything at once to follow Jesus?

180. What three elements or emphases come together to make up the call that Jesus extended? What do each of them say to us for our lives as His disciples?

181. What does it say about their mission that Jesus called ordinary, uneducated men to be His disciples and apostles? What does this say to you about the work you may be asked to do in the Church?

The Holy Gospel: Mark 1:21–28

The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

January 31, 2021

One significant result of the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and the exile of the Jews in Babylonia was the development of the synagogue. The Jews in exile could not go to Jerusalem to worship; besides, the temple was in ruins. The sacrifices and rituals were not even possible. So the faithful gathered in groups to read and discuss the sacred Scriptures, to sing psalms, to pray, and to praise the Lord. In time, this practice was formalized. It became the rule that a community with at least 10 Jewish heads of households was to have a synagogue, an “assembly house.” Larger cities had more than one. By Jesus’ time, the practice of going to the synagogue for worship and study on the Sabbath was firmly established. As a boy, Jesus received formal instruction in the sacred Scriptures at the synagogue. As a Jew, Luke tells us, it was Jesus’ “custom [to go] to the synagogue on the Sabbath day” (4:16).

192. How was the development of the synagogue a distinct blessing for the Jews? What does Jesus’ habitual attendance at the synagogue encourage in us?

The synagogue did not have designated readers of Scripture. Any capable man might be invited by the elected rulers of the synagogue to read and explain the sacred writings. Distinguished guests were regularly honored in this way. Synagogue services centered on reading and explaining and discussing Scripture and included singing of psalms and a time of prayer. They provided the pattern for the worship of the early Christians.

As Jesus traveled from village to village in Galilee and His reputation as a rabbi grew, the synagogues were the logical places for Him to initiate contact with people. Having left Nazareth after being rejected there because He applied messianic Scripture to Himself and His ministry, and having made Capernaum His headquarters, He went “immediately,” “at first opportunity,” to the synagogue.

193. Why were the people amazed at Jesus’ authoritative manner of teaching? How may today’s preachers and teachers of the Word be similarly authoritative as they carry out their functions in the Church?

“Immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, ‘What have You to do with us . . . ? Have You come to destroy us?’ ”

194. Why did Jesus immediately silence the man and not allow that kind of testimony to continue?

195. What impact did Jesus’ healing of the man by exorcising the evil spirit have on the Capernaum community? What does the miracle say to us today?

The Holy Gospel: Mark 1:29–39

The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

February 7, 2021

Jesus' public ministry took on a double emphasis: teaching and healing. Both had been evidenced at the synagogue in Capernaum, when a man possessed by an evil spirit interrupted Jesus' teaching. Jesus had dramatically silenced the spirit and ordered him out of the man. The incident led to a continued ministry of healing—in Peter's home within the circle of Peter's family, and outside the home in response to the people of Capernaum who expectantly brought their sick to Jesus.

After the synagogue service, at Peter's invitation, Jesus went to Peter's home for the evening meal. In Jewish custom, this was a joyous gathering of the family as the conclusion of their Sabbath worship. Peter's brother, Andrew, and the sons of Zebedee, James and John, were probably also present—possibly also Philip and Nathanael. There had been a close relationship among these fishermen even before their call to follow Jesus. Zebedee, the father of James and John, operated a fishing business of some proportion. Peter and Andrew and Philip, from nearby Bethsaida, and possibly also Nathanael all may have worked alongside James and John in their father's business. And now they had added reason to be together, now that Jesus had become the center of their lives.

209. What does this family meal following the synagogue service suggest for our observance of the Lord's Day?

At the house, they found Peter's mother-in-law sick in bed with a high fever, as Dr. Luke reported it in his Gospel. The Healer reached out His compassionate hand and the woman was immediately healed.

210. What does "immediately they told [Jesus] about her" suggest to us? How did Peter's mother-in-law give evidence of her enjoying an instantaneous, complete healing?

211. When the Sabbath ended, the people were free to carry out the joyous "work" of bringing their sick to Jesus. What was Mark saying with his "the whole city was gathered together at the door"?

212. What does it say to us that Mark, and also Dr. Luke, wrote of “all who were sick” and those “oppressed by demons”? Why did Jesus not allow the demons to testify about Him? (See Mark 1:23–26.)

The next morning, Jesus was up before dawn, out of the house, even out of the town, to find a desolate place (the Greek even calls it a “desert” place) for a time of prayer.

213. Why did Jesus, the Son of God, feel the need to pray to His Father in heaven? What do you think Jesus talked to His Father about on this morning after He had had such impact on the people of Capernaum?

214. What does His going to a desolate place for prayer say to us for our prayer life?

Peter and the others searched for Jesus until they found Him. They reported that the crowd had assembled again, fully expecting Jesus to continue His ministry to them. Then, however, we learn what was on Jesus’ mind—His outreach to all the villages of Galilee. The Gospels may be seen as describing three separate tours carried out by Jesus among the Galileans during His “year of popularity.”

215. What does Jesus’ “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also” say to the Church in its Gospel mission?

The Holy Gospel: Mark 9:2–9

The Transfiguration of our Lord

February 14, 2021

The Epiphany Season follows the celebration of the birth of Jesus and points to His life and ministry with an emphasis on His *manifesting* Himself as the Son of God (which is what “epiphany” means). The Feast of the Epiphany is always January 6, a remembrance of the coming of the Magi. The first Sunday to follow is always devoted to the Baptism of Our Lord, and the last Sunday of the season always celebrates the Transfiguration of Our Lord. These two occasions, on which a voice from heaven declared to Jesus, “You are My Son, whom I love,” are like bookends that hold the story of Jesus’ ministry together and provide their own distinct epiphanies of Jesus as the Son of God.

Jesus took Peter, James, and John with Him to witness the manifestation of His glory on the Mount of Transfiguration. This inner circle was granted the privilege of being close to Jesus at special times (see Mark 5:35–42; 14:32–34). These three, along with Andrew, Peter’s brother, were the first to be called by Jesus to be His disciples. Why Andrew was not included in the inner circle we cannot say, but there is no evidence of any friction as a result of the Lord’s granting this special position to the three.

271. Why did Jesus want an inner circle of disciples who would enjoy an especially close relationship with Him?

“After six days” attaches this event to what went before (see Mark 8:27–38, noting especially v. 38). Jesus was “transfigured” before them. *Metemorphōthe* means a change in form, a transfiguration revealing something from within. Jesus was giving His inner circle of disciples a visual demonstration of His true glory as the Son of God.

272. What significance do you see in the fact that Mark emphasizes that even Jesus’ clothing became dazzling white? (See Isaiah 64:6; Revelation 7:13–14.)

273. Moses and Elijah came to interact with Jesus as part of this dramatic display of His divine glory. Why was it these two who appeared with Him? What did they talk about? (See Luke 9:30–31.)

All of the evangelists tell of Peter's reaction and suggestion that he build three shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, and Mark's Gospel is generally understood to be Peter's own eyewitness account. Peter later made the incident part of his testimony (see 2 Peter 1:16–18).

274. What was going on in Peter's mind to suggest his building the shelters? What does it show us about Peter that he was ready to admit that he was fearful and didn't know what to say, but spoke up anyway?

The voice from heaven spoke from a cloud. Clouds often were the setting of God's revelation of Himself to His people (see Exodus 19:16–19; 40:34–39; Acts 1:9).

275. What was the Father's main concern for the three disciples relative to their recognizing Jesus as His Son?

276. Why did Jesus order the three not to tell about this experience until after He had risen from the dead?

277. What does this manifestation of Jesus' glory say to us for our life today?