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The Revised Common Lectionary Notes

January 7, 14, 21, 28, and February 4
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January 7, The First Sunday after the Epiphany The Baptism of our Lord: Mark 1:4-11

1:4–8: John the Baptist, who is dressed like Elijah (2 Kings 1:8), is the one sent by God to prepare the people for the coming of God’s Messiah. He carries out his mission in the wilderness (see John 1:28), the place of expectations and new beginnings. It is also where God said He would take His people to renew them and draw them closer to Himself (Hosea 2:14–15). “People from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem” go out to John and are baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins in the process. That Jews submitted to John’s baptism is remarkable, for traditionally only Gentiles were baptized when they converted to Judaism. Furthermore, it would seem that John baptized people in the region where the Israelites first entered the land under Joshua—suggesting that John’s baptism constituted a new beginning, a new entry into the Promised Land for the people of God.

John does not baptize to draw attention to himself. He does so to prepare the way for the One who will follow after him—One who will be much greater than he is. John says that he does not deserve even to perform the most menial task for Him—to untie the thongs of His sandals (a task that only a Gentile slave would perform). John can baptize with water, true! But the One to whom he points will baptize with the Holy Spirit. Imagine! He will bestow the Holy Spirit, not just on a few select ones in the Jewish nation such as judges, kings, and prophets, but on all who come to Him to receive what He has to give (see Joel 2:28-29). And eventually, the Holy Spirit will come on the Gentiles (Acts 10:44–48).

1:9–11: Jesus, who is living in the northern region of Galilee when John begins his work, heads south so that John might baptize Him also. Jesus does not need baptism for the forgiveness of any sins. He seeks baptism by John to identify Himself with the New Age that His Father is about to introduce through Him. After all, He is the new Son of God. As the old son of God, Israel, passed through the waters of the Red Sea and the River Jordan, so the new Son of God must pass through water—the water of John’s baptism. Jesus will lead His people into the inheritance of an eternal relationship with the Father.

When Jesus comes out of the water after His baptism, He sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on Him (1:10). Centuries before, the prophet had cried out, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down” (Isaiah 64:1). At Jesus’ baptism, the heavens are indeed torn

open, and the Spirit comes down in a form that resembles a dove and hovers over the head of Jesus. The rabbis (teachers) spoke of the dove as a symbol of the nation of Israel; see also Hosea 7:11; 9:11, and 11:11. At Jesus' baptism, the Spirit in the form of a dove hovers over the head of the new Son of God, the true Israel. Jesus will lead a life directed entirely by the Holy Spirit.

At His baptism, Jesus is anointed into the office defined by the voice from heaven: "You are My Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (1:11). The first part of this statement reflects Psalm 2:7—a Psalm used in ancient Israel at the coronation of a king from the line of David. (The name David literally means "beloved.") Its use at Jesus' baptism declares that God has kept His promise; the line of David will not die out. Jesus is, indeed, the long-awaited descendant of David, the long-expected Messianic King, who has come to rule God's people and empower them to carry out God's mission to the world.

The direction that the life of this Messianic King will take will be different from what many are expecting. "With you I am well pleased" is a quotation from the first of Isaiah's Servant Songs (42:1–4; note v. 1). As Messianic King, Jesus will be The Servant. He will be despised, rejected, and His people will do their very worst to Him. They will finally crucify Him! However, through His death He will lavish on them the offer of a complete, perfect, and eternal pardon, drawing them into a relationship with Himself, in which they will find true life, now and forever.

January 14, The Second Sunday after the Epiphany: John 1:43–51

Some preliminary thoughts: John's opening chapter contains a list of titles that state who Jesus is and define His mission. These are:

- Word of God (1:1, 1:40)
- Lamb of God (1:29, 36)
- Rabbi (Teacher, 1:38)
- Messiah (1:41)
- Son of God (1:49)
- King of Israel (1:49)
- Son of Man (1:51; see Daniel 7:13)

With regard to **Word of God [This paragraph is also cited in the January 4 notes]**: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (1:14). The word translated as *dwelt* literally means "tented" or "tabernacled." John declares that God is now "encamped" among His people, not invisibly in the Holy of Holies that only the High Priest could enter one day each year, but in the person of Jesus the Messiah. The invisible God becomes visible in the divine-human Word. The written Word bears witness to the Incarnate Word. God's Final, Living Word is Jesus the Messiah.

1:29–42: Jesus is in the vicinity of Bethany beyond the Jordan (1:28) and is baptized by John the Baptist. In 35-42, Andrew, who has been following John the Baptist, comes into contact with Jesus and eventually brings his brother Cephas (Peter) to Jesus.

1:43–46: Jesus decides to return to Galilee. He comes into contact with Philip and says to him, "Follow Me." Philip comes from Bethsaida, on the northeast corner of the Sea of Galilee. (Bethsaida was the hometown of Andrew and Peter.) Philip finds Nathanael (possibly the same person as Bartholomew,

Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:14) who lived in Cana near Nazareth (John 21:2). Philip tells Nathanael, “We have found Him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” When Nathanael responds in a negative manner, Philip tells him to “Come and see” (1:46).

1:47: When Jesus sees Nathanael coming toward Him, He says, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.” In other words, Nathanael was not encumbered with the qualities of Jacob before his name was changed to Israel (Genesis 27:35; 32:28). (Jacob means “cheat.”)

1:48: Nathanael responds, “Where did You get to know me?” Jesus answers, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” During previous centuries, the hope was that, when the Messiah came, people would experience the peace and joy of sitting under their own vine and fig tree (Micah 4:4; 1 Kings 4:25; Isaiah 36:16). If Nathanael is sitting under a fig tree, then the Messianic Age has broken in!

1:49: Apparently Nathanael makes the connection between sitting under a fig tree and the breaking in of the Messianic Age. He addresses Jesus as “Son of God” and “King of Israel”—even though most likely he does not fully understand the implications of what he is saying.

1:50: Jesus then tells Nathanael that he will eventually see much greater things, much greater truths, about the Person in whose presence he finds himself. How true!

1:51: Many find Jesus’ statement in 1:51 somewhat puzzling: “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” The following insights are helpful.

The Holy of Holies in the postexilic and Herodian Temples was empty—apart from a low, flat stone built into the floor at its center. (The Ark of the Covenant was most likely destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC.) This stone was called the “Foundation Stone” (*eben shetiyah*). It was about 18 inches square and two inches high. Jewish *tradition* held that Jacob used this stone as a pillow when, in a dream, he saw a ladder reaching up to heaven with angels ascending and descending on it, and heard God speak to him, Genesis 28. When those who returned from Babylon rebuilt the Jerusalem Temple, they found themselves needing a symbol of God’s presence. Again according to *tradition*, they went to Bethel, found this stone, cut it to the desired size, and placed it in the Holy of Holies.

In Jesus’ day, the rabbis ascribed numerous functions to this stone. It was the holiest location on earth, “the navel of the earth,” the point from which the world grew in the initial creative process. It was the point of contact between heaven and earth, between God and humanity. It held the subterranean waters in check and prevented them from flooding the earth. It was also that place where, on the annual Day of Atonement, blood was sprinkled to atone for the nation’s sin. However, Jesus declared that He replaced that stone and the Holy of Holies, and their functions. This is but the first of numerous replacements that surface in the ensuing chapters of John’s Gospel.

Some additional thoughts: The series of titles ascribed to Jesus in John’s first chapter reaches its grand finale in John 20 when Thomas falls down before the Risen Jesus and proclaims, “My Lord and my God!” Some interpreters detect hints of a seven-day scheme in 1:29, 35; 43; 2:1. If there is a “next day” (1:29), there must have been a previous day; hence, the reference in 1:29 is to *Day Two*. (*Day One* is hinted at in 1:1, which reflects Genesis 1:1.) The reference in 1:35 is to *Day Three*, that in 1:43 is to *Day Four*, and that in 2:1 is to *Day Seven* (three days after *Day Four*). If this seven-day structure is intentional, it would

seem that Jesus' goal is to free God's people from bondage to a legal religious system and to introduce them to God's final, eternal Sabbath rest.

January 21, The Third Sunday after the Epiphany: Jesus calls us; o'er the tumult; Mark 1:14–20

Prior to probing 1:14-20, 1:12-13 is deserving of careful thought. (Note that Mark 1:9-15 is the pericope for the First Sunday in Lent.)

After Jesus is anointed into office as the long-awaited King and the nature of His Kingship is defined, the Spirit leads Him into the wilderness for *forty days*. After passing through water, Old Israel was taken into a wilderness for *forty years* to be tested and tried—but did little else but sin. Israel's behavior in the wilderness left everything to be desired. The people murmured, grumbled, and sinned constantly. Although Israel's behavior in the wilderness brought forth death and alienation, Jesus' sustained obedience brings forth the new Israel of God.

The new Israel, the new Son of God, is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested and tried by Satan. Mark's temptation narrative consists of only three words, "tempted by Satan" (1:12). In their respective narratives, Matthew (4:1–11) and Luke (4:1–13) list three confrontations between Jesus and Satan. Although both Matthew and Luke conclude their temptation narratives with a reference to Satan *departing* from Jesus, Mark makes no such statement. Most likely, Mark's point is that throughout His ministry, Jesus (the King who walked the way of a servant-without-limit) engages in a non-stop battle with Satan—and finally conquers him when He gives away His life at Calvary. In confronting Jesus, the Servant-King, Satan does not meet his match; he meets his Conqueror!

In Mark, the first miracle Jesus performs after His temptation involves a struggle with a demoniac (1:21–28). And while preaching in synagogues throughout Galilee, He throws out numerous demons (1:39). Until Jesus takes control of a land and the hearts of its inhabitants, they are under the control of demonic powers. Just as the ancient Israelites entered *occupied territory* when they entered the land of the Canaanites, so too is Judah *occupied territory* when Jesus appears on the scene.

Mark 1:13b states, "Jesus was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." According to the rabbis of Jesus' day, the first fall into sin took place when some of the angels refused to honor Adam and Eve. But now the angels are serving and honoring the New Adam, the true Son of God. Furthermore, Isaiah (11:6–9; 65:25) stated that when the Messianic Age finally broke in, animals would live together in peace, and would not harm one another or humanity; see Hosea 2:18.

1:14–15: After John is arrested, Jesus returns to Galilee to launch His public ministry. He begins it by proclaiming a message that causes many Jewish hearts to beat wildly with excitement: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). We might summarize Jesus' message as follows:

The age that you and your ancestors have longed for has finally arrived—in Me. Your dreams are about to be fulfilled. The Kingdom of God has broken into history! Change your whole way of thinking and living. Rejoice! Embrace the Good News of the Messianic Age in all that you believe, think, say, and do.

Some Jewish expectations about the dawning of the Messianic Age were extravagant. However, the setting for Jesus' opening statement is anything but spectacular. There is no display of cosmic fireworks when Jesus speaks. Jesus' audience sees no halo around His head, no regal clothing, no retinue of servants or royal guards, no pomp, and no splendor. Indeed, the setting and Jesus' appearance are anticlimactic to the Jews. To the best of their knowledge, Jesus is the son of Joseph the carpenter and his wife Mary. Even so, the claims the New Testament makes about who Jesus is, and the implications of His opening statement, are profound.

When Jesus declared that the Kingdom of God was breaking into history with Him, He was doing something that was politically dangerous. To announce any kingdom was to challenge the power of the Herods—and behind the Herods were the Roman authorities and emperor.

1:16–20: On the coastline of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus begins to gather about Himself a new people. He confronts Peter and Andrew, James and John, and says, "Follow Me!" (1:17). They follow! Jesus conducts no test to ascertain whether they are worthy of being in His company. He makes no study of their family background to check out their pedigree; see 2:13-17. He issues only an urgent summons (2:13–14). A little later, the Twelve are set aside as the nucleus of the New Israel that is being formed (3:13–18). The Messianic ministry is getting under way, and the Messianic community is being formed. In dealing with this latter section, note that in Jesus' day a teacher did not choose his students; students chose their teacher. Jesus reverses things. He calls the disciples to follow Him! Note well: We belong to Jesus, not because we chose Him, but because He chose and called us.

January 28, The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany: Hail to the Lord's Anointed! Mark 1:21–28

In Mark 1:16–20, we read of Jesus calling four disciples: Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John. No disciple ever volunteers to become a student/follower of Jesus; Jesus does the calling. The disciples do not choose Jesus; Jesus chooses them. In Mark, the first miracle that Jesus performs involves a confrontation with a demoniac (1:21–28).

Jesus and the first four disciples enter a synagogue in Capernaum on a Sabbath day—and Jesus teaches. Those present are astonished by His teaching. Jesus does not say that Rabbi So-and-So said this, and Rabbi So-and-So said that. He says, "*I say unto you . . .*" Jesus teaches *with authority*, making an absolute claim on His hearers. His message is in the best tradition of the ancient prophets—not that of the rabbis and scribes of His day.

A man possessed with an "unclean spirit" comes before Jesus—"unclean" because of the spirit's resistance to the holiness of God. The demonic presence knows who Jesus is, why He has come, and fears Jesus' power to destroy its influence. It addresses Jesus as "Jesus of Nazareth—the Holy One of God"—an action reflecting the belief that the use of the precise name of an opposing spirit establishes mastery over him. But Jesus forbids the demon to speak—demonstrating His mastery over it! After Jesus casts the demon out of the man, the crowd is even more astonished, and Jesus' fame begins to spread throughout Galilee.

Jesus then continues to proclaim His message in synagogues throughout Galilee and throws out numerous demons (1:39). Until Jesus takes control of a land and the hearts of its inhabitants, they are under the control of demonic powers.

In the latter part of the pre-Christian era and in Jesus' day, the Jewish people grieved over the fact that down through the centuries they had lived under the domination of the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Ptolemies, Seleucids, and Romans. They longed for the time when they, the "son of man," "the saints of the Most High," would be freed from foreign domination, and would themselves rule the nations of the world forever (Daniel 7, a most important chapter!). However, the true Son of Man, Jesus the Messiah, revealed to His hearers the true enemy: *Satan and the realm of the demonic*. Jesus conquered that demonic realm by living the life of a servant-without-limit to the point of giving away life on a cross. At Calvary, Jesus emerged the conqueror!

The Reformation fathers made reference to the existence of the Satanic Trio in terms of "the devil, the world, and our flesh." We might think of the demonic in terms of every spirit, power, institution, and pressure that seeks to sidetrack us from serving God and others into serving ourselves.

Many who live in the Western world link "being blessed" to what they possess and enjoy. Jesus links it only to the degree His followers serve Him in all His distressing disguises. Jesus is, after all, the hungry one, the thirsty one, the one lacking friends and clothing, the sick, and the prison inmate (Matthew 25:31–46). The following statement by C.S. Lewis is profound—and will remain valid until time gives way to eternity: *There is no neutral ground in the universe. Every square inch is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan.*

Several of Crossways International courses contain references to the reasons Edward Gibbons (author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*) lists for the decline and fall of the Roman system:

- Family life disintegrated.
- The world of entertainment became corrupt.
- Moral absolutes were discarded.
- The cost of the empire's military system was paralyzing.
- The empire's economy collapsed.

Indeed, food for thought in relation to today's world!

February 4, The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany: Mark 1:29–39

(Some of the comments offered in this section are repeated in the pericope notes for the First Sunday in Lent.)

Immediately after Jesus and the four disciples leave the synagogue in Capernaum, they go to the home of Simon Peter and Andrew where Peter's mother-in-law is sick with a fever (1:29–31). Despite the fact that it is still the Sabbath (when healing of the sick—deemed as work—should not take place), Jesus heals her.

That evening at sundown, *after the Sabbath is over*, crowds from Capernaum come to the home where Jesus is staying, bringing to Him many who are sick (1:32–34). Jesus heals many of them, and casts out many demons. He will not permit the demons to speak, because they know Him (i.e., they recognized His power and authority).

Very early the next morning, Jesus leaves the house to pray in a lonely place (1:35–39). The disciples look for Jesus, find Him, and tell Him that everyone is searching for Him. Jesus then summons them to go with Him to the surrounding towns in Galilee, where He will proclaim His divine message. In the course of doing this, Jesus preaches in synagogues and casts out demons.

Jesus' message is summed up in Mark 1:15: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come (the NRSV adds the word *near*); repent, and believe in the good news." That word *near* can be misleading. It gives the impression that the kingdom of God is on its way but has not broken in as yet. No! The kingdom of God *has* broken in—in the Person of Jesus the Messiah, humanity's forgiving Savior and Servant Lord. It has come, and Jesus invites people to "get on board."

So, no more waiting and no more delay. The hopes and dreams of God's people are reaching their grand finale in the ministry of Jesus, the radical Servant Messiah. Hence, we today are to repent, to "get a whole new mind," about Who made and owns the universe and the body in which we reside and how we are to use the body and life that God is lending us (*lending* us—not *giving* us). Jesus has come to proclaim good news! He, not Caesar, is Lord. He, not Caesar, rules the world. He, not Caesar, brings peace, and He, not Caesar, proclaims good news. How different is the Kingdom that Jesus brought—so different from the kingdoms that have surfaced throughout the sweep of history, and so different from the systems that continue to bring chaos to humanity.