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Text: Mark 1:1-15

Title: Surprise, surprise.

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File: Mark 1a

Preacher: Stephen Taylor

Slide 1

The kids were away and Kaylene and I were on the couch trying to work out what movie to watch. As the news finished and we were about to head onto Netflix, Channel 7 tried to tempt us to stay with an oldie but a goodie, The Sound of Music. Slide 2

It is one of the great movies of all time, a classic in every sense of the word. But we had both seen it a million times before, so we headed somewhere else. A movie that had a 92% compatibility rating. A movie that in the end wasn’t very good at all.

Slide 3

Now why do I mention that to you this morning? Because we are about to start a sermon series on a classic part of the Bible, the Gospel of Mark. And some of you will be yearning for something new, something different, something more exciting. A ten week sermon series on Jesus, Stephen I already know all about Jesus. That’s the meat and three veg I have been brought up with since I was a child. Why not something more practical? Or some doctrine? Something I can get my teeth into? Something that is going to stretch me and my faith?

Because I want to contend that you and I don’t know the gospels that well. Yes we know the highlights, the birth of Jesus, the sermon on the mount, the miracles, even his death and resurrection. We have seen the movie trailer of the gospel many times throughout our life. But do we know the story of Jesus? Have we watched the whole movie or just seen the trailer? Do we know how the characters fit together, how one episode flows into the next? What Mark says to us that Matthew, Luke and John don’t say? What Mark thinks you and I desperately need to hear?

So we are going to turn to Mark chapter 1 to hear the story from the horse’s mouth so to speak. Mark writes down what his mentor Simon Peter tells him about. And if you think you know the story already, Mark has a few surprises he wants to spring on us. Surprises you may not have ever really thought about before.

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1. **Surprise #1 – God’s prophet**

For one Mark doesn’t start with the birth of Jesus. Now that’s a surprise. If you are writing a biography that’s the logical place to start isn’t it? Matthew does that, he traces Jesus family tree and talks about an angel coming to Joseph, Jesus step father. And Luke does that as well only he starts with Jesus mum Mary and the strange things that went on in her family just prior to Jesus birth.

But Mark isn’t writing a biography, he is writing a gospel. He isn’t here to give us facts about Jesus, he wants us to have an encounter with Jesus. And so we see right from the very beginning that Mark is in a hurry. His gospel is the shortest of the four gospels. It is very direct, pithy even and one of Mark’s favourite words is ‘immediately’. He goes from one piece of action straight on, immediately onto, the next piece of action. There is an urgency.

And that could be why right at the very beginning Mark lays his cards down firmly on the

table. ***1 “****The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.”* Now Mark could have set the scene, teased us with a hint of mystery, but Mark isn’t interested in doing that at all. He just wants everyone to have an encounter with Jesus. To know He is the Son of God. He is the Christ, the coming Messiah. He wants everything to be crystal clear.

And what is clear, is that God is back. God is back. After 400 years of silence, God’s voice is being heard again. After 400 years of absence, God is again pulling the strings. After 400 years of uncertainly, God is making things clear, crystal clear. In the beginning God made the heavens and the earth. Now we have the beginning of the good news of Jesus the Messiah.

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***2 “****As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way”* ***3****“a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”*

Slide 6

God’s coming back. So get ready. Make your preparations. Make sure the road is ready. Roll out the red carpet. Every so often an important person comes to our nation. And the steps down from their plane are put in place. The red carpet is rolled out. Dignitaries stand at the bottom ready to welcome their honoured guests & if they are really important, the Queen or the Pope or the President of the US for example, not only do they get the armoured car, and the security detail but the roads are re-laid and everything gets a fresh coat of paint.

That’s what Isaiah is saying. The Lord God is coming. The Messiah is coming. Mark records that God is breaking the silence of 400 years. This is the good news about Jesus the Messiah, **the Son of God**.

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Now that’s a surprise! I didn’t know God had a son! I didn’t know that the God who made the universe, was part of a family. I didn’t know that at the core of his being was relationships. I thought he just thundered out words and it happened. I thought he ruled the world with an iron fist. I thought the best way to describe him was king, or Lord, not father.

Well this gospel will be filled with surprises. And when you think about it the Christian life is full of surprises. It is a surprise that God would be interested in you and me. It is a surprise that God would send his son into the world. And it is a surprise that God’s son will come again like a thief in the night. God is full of surprises. So don’t box God in. Don’t think you have worked him all out. Because God wants to speak to us today.

Slide 8

He’s the voice, try and understand it. And in this passage his voice will speak to us through the prophet Isaiah, through John the Baptist, through God’s direct speech and through his son Jesus. That’s a surprise, even after 20 centuries where God hasn’t added to his word, his word still speaks to us, if we are willing to listen that is. And the next surprise is all about

Slide 9

1. **Surprise #2 - God’s outsider**

The one who will be God’s messenger, the one who will prepare the way for God himself to come will not be an insider but an outsider. Not a priest. Not a king. Not someone with a short back and sides but someone who was way, way out there. Just look at Mark’s description of the one preparing the way. ***6”****John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey”.*

What on earth is God doing? Why has he chosen a strange looking man, with a strange diet and strange habits? Isn’t God about the good, the decent, the respectable? No God doesn’t always choose the people that we would choose. And John is a prime example. There is not a three piece suit in sight, instead he walks on the wild side. A bit like the ancient prophet Elijah. Who also spent lots of time in the wilderness and who also called people to come back to God.

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***4 “****And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for*

*the forgiveness of sins.****5****The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went*

*out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.”*

That’s a surprise that when God sends his messenger, he sends him out into the desert. No one lives in the desert, so why not go to the cities? Why doesn’t he go to the Temple where all the religious people are? Because in the past God led his people out of the wilderness into the promised land & symbolically that is what John the Baptist will do, that is what Jesus will do. He will lead God’s people from the wilderness to a place that can call home.

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So get ready. And the best way that you can get ready is by being baptised, by turning from your sins, by realising that you need to be clean before you stand in God’s presence. You need a good scrub down before the Lord comes anywhere near you.

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Do you see the surprises here? They’re everywhere aren’t they? God uses an outsider to get the people ready, not some respectable person from the establishment. God wants to initiate a shake up, not keep the status quo in power. God wants change, repentance, cleansing, reformation. If you are going to be ready, you are going to have get more than just your feet wet. You are going to have to travel away from your home and your comfort zone. You are going to have to do something in response to what God is doing for you!

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But look at what you have to do. If the Queen was coming you would think that she would want you to spruce yourself up. Buy a new suit, a new dress. Get your hair cut. Have a shave. Make sure you look your very best. But the surprising message from John the Baptist is that God actually wants you to do the very opposite. He wants you to let it all hang out.

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To confess your sins. To admit that you are not perfect. To change the way that you are living. Not to hide that stuff but to make it all very, very obvious. Not to cover up your inadequacies but to open them up for all to see.

Now that surprising isn’t it? And we see that John the Baptist is willing to say these things and be these things as well. He doesn’t mind what he looks like. He doesn’t care what others think about him. He just wants everyone to be ready to see God.

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And notice that for John it’s not about himself but it’s about the one to come. “*After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.****8****I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”*

*Slide 16*

John is like a news reader with a news flash. There’s a big story breaking at the moment.

God is back. God is coming.

Slide 17

And John is like an alarm clock, he is sounding the alarm. He is telling everyone to wake up and not just wash your hands and your face but make sure your whole life is washed.

Slide 18

And John is like a flashlight, pointing the beam of light away from him and pointing it toward Jesus. It is not about my baptism with water, he says, it’s about his baptism with the Holy Spirit. It is not about what I am wearing, I can’t even come to grips with the coming one’s sandals. John the Baptist wants all his hearers to have an encounter with Jesus Christ.

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Friends is that why you have come to Church this morning? To have an encounter with Jesus Christ? Well the way you do that is repentance. You see repentance is not just the first step, it is a part of every step. We don’t just repent once. We don’t just confess our sins once. We don’t just receive forgiveness once. We do it all the time, every day.

So if John the Baptist was here today he would be calling us to repent as well. Repent from our self centredness. Repent from our greed. Repent from our lack of love for the lost. Repent from our pride. Repent from our cold hearts. Repent. Repent. Repent. And the sign of that repentance is baptism. An outward washing that symbolises an inward cleansing. A determination to die to self as you go under the water and come up living for Christ. A picture of being sprinkled, consecrated not just with water but with God’s Holy Spirit.

So it’s not about being good, it recognising we are all bad. It is not about dressing up in God’s presence but being willing to be real before God. So in our conversations it is not about giving the impression we have it all together. Because we don’t. And I certainly don’t. It is about confession and repentance. And surprising, that is what Jesus does next.

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1. **Surprise # 3 – God’s Son**

***9 “****At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.”*

Wait a second why on earth would Jesus want to be baptised? Why does he travel all the way from Nazareth in the north, right to the south to be baptised in the Jordan by John? Does the Son of God really need to be baptised? Does the Son of God need his sins cleansed, washed away?

What a surprising move! You would think that Jesus would baptise John. You would think that Jesus would immediately draw attention to himself and then everyone would start following him rather than following John the Baptist. But he doesn’t do things the way that we would expect him to do things. No he is willing to identify himself with his people. He is willing to humble himself and be baptised. He is willing to join in as one of the people and do what everyone else is required to do.

Later on we will see this Jesus will get hungry, he will cry, he will be angry and sad, he will have times of highest joy, and disappointments that will crush his spirit. He will be rejected, abandoned, disowned, sold out. And at each time, Jesus could walk away from his responsibilities. He could take his own route, but each time he decides to identify with us,

human beings. To experience what we experience. To be one of us.

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And that is why he is baptised. Not because he was a sinner who needed to repent but he wanted to take the place of sinners who need to repent. But notice that when he is baptised, God surprisingly opens up the heavens. God speaks in a loud audible voice. Now how many times throughout the history of the world has he done that? God sends the Spirit onto Jesus like a dove & God says “*this is my Son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased.*”

God breaks into history. God puts his stamp of approval on Jesus. God introduces us to his son, his beloved son. God is endorsing for you and me the ministry of Jesus. So now that Jesus has made such a start where does he travel next? To the mountain to preach the Sermon on the Mount? To Lake Galilee to walk on water? To the sick so that he could heal them? No, instead the Spirit of God **takes him**, actually the word is it **drives him** into the desert, to fast, to pray, to commune with God.

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That’s a surprising move, don’t you think? The world is there to be saved. Salvation is there to be preached. People are waiting to be healed and Jesus starts by going into the desert to be with God. I wonder why? Because the real battle is not going to be in Jerusalem or in Galilee but in the wilderness. The real battle will be with Satan, the evil one. And there surrounded by the wild animals and with the help of God’s angels, Jesus will consecrate himself, will pray & fast & rely on God and oppose Satan.

Slide 23

Jesus needed to fight the devil on the devil’s own turf, on his home ground so to speak. He needed to face the toughness of the desert, the temptations of the Satan, the loneliness of the wilderness, first. He must first stand up to the wild animals and the wild accusations of the accuser, before he started his ministry proper.

This incident in Jesus life teaches us that the followers of Jesus are called to be faithful wherever God is calling them to be. And it may not be in the public eye, it may be where no one else sees us. It may not be in the big things as much in the little things. But it’s about listening to God’s voice over Satan’s voice. It’s about saying no to temptation and yes to godliness. It’s about struggle, it’s about consecration, it’s about pleasing the Father, no matter what. And that leads us to the final surprise.

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1. **Surprise #4 - God’s Message**

***14 “****After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.”*

Did you notice that that Jesus only starts preaching the good news once John goes to prison.

And do you realise that would have been up to a year later. A year later. It was only with the arrest of the forerunner does Jesus now step into the breach. That’s surprising. I would have thought that he would get up and run as soon as he had come back from the wilderness. But he doesn’t. John’s message had to get its full air time. The road has to be fully built and when it was and only when it was does Jesus step out of the shadows.

And when he does he preaches the same message. The one that has cost John the Baptist his freedom and will very soon cost him his life is the one that Jesus will now preach. Jesus doesn’t wait until the dust has settled on the arrest of John, until the political temperature has cooled somewhat. He isn’t looking for a more auspicious time. This is the moment, this is the right time, and so He proceeds.

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***15****“The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”* Jesus preaches a typical three point sermon. The time has come. Now is the moment. Today is the day of destiny. Don’t put things off until tomorrow. Don’t wait until a better time. This message is so important you must do something now.

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DL Moody was preaching in his Church in Chicago on October 8, 1871. He ended his message with the challenge for his congregation to think over the gospel call and be ready to make a decision on the following Sunday. He then closed the service with a hymn & then they heard the fire trucks coming from everywhere. The Great Chicago Fire had begun and many of those who heard that message did not live to see the following Sunday. He decided after that incident to always give people a chance to respond NOW to the claims of Christ.

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***15****“The time has come,” Jesus said. “The kingdom of God has come near”.* God’s king has now appeared. God is bringing people into his kingdom now.The hound of heaven is chasing up his own and drawing them near. So “*Repent and believe the good news!”*

Now do you see what he is saying? God’s message is both negative, repent and positive, believe. You start with the negative. Stop putting someone else as your King, other than God. Stop the behaviour that would displease your King. Stop going the wrong way. We need to repent. Change. Acknowledge our sin.

And we need to do something that is positive, believe. Believe that God will do something to forgive you your sins. Believe that God is worthy of being your king. Believe that life is lived well when we do what God says is the best, rather than what we say is the best. Repent and believe in the good news. Do a U turn in your life. You can’t stay the same person. The Kingdom of God is near, so if you want to be part of the Kingdom of God you have to do something about it. You have to repent and believe.

Now please notice that there is no room for half heartedness with Jesus message. You can’t half repent. You can’t half believe. You can’t half follow. You either do it or you don’t. You either come into God’s kingdom or you stay out. You either follow Jesus or you don’t! There is no middle ground.

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I like the story about a schoolgirl who was saved and someone asked her, “What were you before?” She said, “A sinner.” Then she was asked, “What are you now?” She answered, “A sinner.” They asked, “What’s the difference?” She answered, “I was a sinner running after sin. But now I’m a sinner running from sin.”

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Friends this is a surprising message but God is full of surprises. And so is the gospel of Mark. And this morning we have heard God’s voice from the prophet, from the Baptist, from God Himself and from his Son Jesus. And it is telling us to do something now. Now! Repent & Believe. Friends listen to that voice over the voice in your head, over the voice on your phone & the voice of your friends. Repent & believe. Today, tomorrow and the next day.

God is back and has turned up in the guise of his son Jesus Christ. Don’t ignore what he has to say. Now what is the surprising thing? That he is still giving us another chance to respond!