

The Coming of the King: Rhumba in the River

Mark 1:9-13

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The year Nikki and I met we got to know an older couple from our church. They were really old – like in their mid-forties. But the cool thing about them was they weren't just staying married; they weren't enduring, they were winning.

I remember Dave sneaking up behind Lila and attacking her with hugs and kisses on the neck while she attempted to get cookies out of the oven. And she would melt into his arms because she enjoyed him and they had been married 25 years. They didn't just love each other; they were in love.

And this was crazy for us. It wasn't something we had seen before. And it looked like where we wanted to end up. I mean no one gets married hoping to become a crotchety old couple who can't stand each other. And certainly no one gets married looking to divorce. And yet that's the world's experience.

Someone once told me "Marriage is like a deck of cards. It all begins with two hearts and a diamond. But by the end you wish you had a club and a spade."

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If you are joining us today we have just begun a new series through the Gospel of Mark. So go ahead and grab your Bible if you've got one handy. We are in Mark chapter 1.

Last week the central idea was that in the face of modern religion and philosophy which says "pick and choose what you want to believe and who you want to follow," the Bible says don't try to create Jesus in your own image because every Jesus we create is powerless.

And here's where Mark comes in. The Jesus Mark presents for us, the historical Jesus that was verified by eyewitnesses and predicted by the prophets, is the Jesus that is able to challenge, correct and transform you. And this is what we need.

So don't try to get Jesus to endorse your view of money, find out what Jesus' view of money is. Don't look for community that affirms your sexual desires, look for how Jesus says to win with sex. Don't assume your ideas on marriage are right, allow Jesus' words about relationship to change your opinions. Friends, don't read scripture. Let the Jesus of scripture read you.

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And today what we find in scripture sits at the very center of the gospel. Yet it would be easy to simply gloss over this passage and miss it. But if you will allow these few verses to read you, you will come away transformed.

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On that note would you stand with me as we read Mark 1 starting in verse 9? Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Mark 1:9-13]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

One of my favorite authors is C.S. Lewis. He wrote lots of great stuff – I cry every time I read Narnia – but his Mere Christianity is very much worth a read. And in Mere Christianity, there is a section titled “Beyond Personality: Or First Steps in the Doctrine of the Trinity.” And in this section God is described in a powerful and helpful way.

So everyone likes the idea that God is love but most people who talk about this don't realize that for God to be love requires Him to contain at least two persons. Love is something that one person has for another. And so Lewis writes:

“[God is] a dynamic, pulsating activity, a life, almost a kind of drama. Almost, if you will not think me irreverent, a kind of dance.”¹

And in these verses Mark pictures this dance – a dance between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And amazingly in this portrayal we receive an invitation to participate.

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Now if you are not a Jew and are not emersed in the world of the Old Testament you might miss this but let me tease it out. Mark wants us to see creation in this text.

And Mark's not the only one to do this. At the beginning of John's Gospel we get something similar. He writes:

In the beginning the Word already existed.

The Word was with God,
and the Word was God....

the Word became human and made His home among us. (John 1:1-14)

And of course, John writes this way to make us think about the creation account in Genesis. You probably recognized it because there are lots of parallels:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:1-3a)

And the reason John makes this connection (which is the same reason Mark does) is that he wants to show us that in Jesus we arrive at a new creation. Jesus is the new man, the new Adam. And in Jesus we can enter a new life – the life we were created to enjoy in the beginning but that was stolen from us by sin.

And Mark makes this connection via the word “dove” which hovers over Jesus as He comes up out of the water.

¹ C.S. Lewis “Mere Christianity” (New York: The Macmillan Company), 1952. Pg 152

In Genesis 1, as God is creating, His Spirit is hovering over the water. And the Jewish Targum adds “like a dove.” And the Word of God proceeds from here and the result is light and everything else.

And Mark parallels this. He has the Father speaking words of affirmation and love and the Son coming up out of the water and the Spirit hovering overtop. God is present; and He is present in three persons. And that’s not a mistake, but it’s a difficult concept for us to get our heads around.

We call this the Trinity. And you need to know “Trinity” is not a word that appears in the Bible, but it is the word that describes what we see in the Bible.

So there is one God who exists in three persons, but this is not tritheism. So there aren’t three gods hanging out together. Nor is this one God who takes on different forms at different times. The Trinity describes one God eternally existing in three persons.

Now when people have multiple personalities we commit them on the third floor of our hospital. In people this is a dysfunction. And so it’s hard for us to understand.

But Lewis says we shouldn’t be surprised by this. And then he gives an illustration using the three dimensions of space. So in one dimension you can have a line. And if you add another dimension you can make a square. A square is four lines. And then if you add a third dimension you can make a cube which is six squares. So each dimension uses “language” from the previous while becoming something more.

But imagine you existed in a 2-dimensional world and someone told you about a cube – six squares together. You might be able to talk about this idea, but you would have no framework to picture what a third dimension would actually look like. And so it is with us and the God of the Bible. We have language that goes beyond our understanding.

And this is actually a good thing. If we could figure God out it would likely be because we made Him up. Everything we create makes sense to us. But nobody would make up the Trinity – who could imagine it? And so it shouldn’t surprise us that there are aspects of God that He can tell us about that we can’t get our heads around.

But we get glimpses. And our most brilliant minds work to make 2-dimensional pictures from these glimpses that lead to fractions of understanding. And Lewis is one of those minds, and the dance is one of those pictures. There’s a rumba in the river.

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So in verse 10, as Jesus is coming out of the water, He is wrapped in the Father’s affirmation – “You are My Son, whom I love; and with whom I’m well pleased.” Notice how the Father points at the Son. And the Holy Spirit descends on Him and anoints Him with power. And this is a picture of the way God has always acted.

Lewis goes on to explain how God is constantly affirming and elevating the other aspects of Himself throughout scripture. So the Father endorses the Son and sends the Spirit. And the Son submits to the Father. And the Spirit teaches us about the Son. This is the ever-acquiescing love dance of the Trinity.

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The opposite of love is selfishness. And Tim Keller says “selfishness is stationary and static. In selfishness everything orbits around me.”²

But in Christianity God isn't static, He's dynamic. He is eternally pulsating with activity. And His movement is reflected in creation. He built this place to mirror Himself. And love is the 2-dimensional word that gives us a glimpse of God's 3-dimensional Self.

And love is the most beautiful thing we know. So I can do some good things without love. I can return a wallet someone drops or help an old lady across the street. But all my good actions are for me. I want to look good. I want people to affirm me. And so I can be generous, but I only do this so far that my interests are met.

But this isn't the way God is. God is full of mutual, self-sacrificing love. He centers on the other. He serves the other and puts the will of the other first. God is love and our universe reflects this.

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Now here's something interesting about religion and philosophy. People believe all sorts of stuff, but not all beliefs are equal like our world claims. If you believe you can fly like Superman your beliefs are not equal to mine. And you can prove this by observing how well beliefs describe the reality we live in. So your belief system shows itself to be valid when you start flying.

And at the center of Christianity is the belief that the people who win at life are the ones who love like our God.

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Now consider this: if there was no god, and our universe were a marvel of chance, then love would not really exist. Our experience of love would really be a chemical reaction in the brain that tricked someone into letting you pass on your genetic code with them. But does this describe the reality we live in? Everything inside us screams “Love must be something more than just chemicals!”

And we can go beyond this: if God were a unity then individualism would be the most important thing. Personal rights would hold the highest value and self-preservation would be king because the unity of God would be the supreme value. In contrast, if there were many gods then the hive would be most important and the individual would be expendable. But in the Trinity there is a dance between these two. The other is exalted but the individual is not lost. And this creates the possibility of love.

² Tim Keller “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/father-son-and-holy-spirit-5441/> (Accessed January 13, 2021)

True love always respects the individual but prefers the other. And we win at life when we love because in love we reflect our God.

Now, can non-Christians love? Sure. But when they do they are living by godly principles even while refusing to acknowledge God. And our world does refuse to acknowledge that we are made in God's image. And so instead it hypothesizes all sorts of other standards for how to win at life.

So Forbs Magazine just announced that Elon Musk has surpassed Jeff Bezos as the richest man in the world – he's winning. But he sleeps at work and spends all his time and energy on his projects. He's a genius, but there is poverty there. And Hollywood is full of beautiful people who are clothed in fame and popularity, but their lives are stories of adultery, divorce and addiction. That's poverty. And the media is fixated on characters like Trump who hold almost ultimate power. And yet they are surrounded by anger and immorality. There's poverty there. Our world doesn't know how to win.

But there is a better way. There is a dance that has been in motion for all eternity that we are invited into. And when people accept this invitation they learn how to win at life. And in Christianity – only in Christianity – do we see that the reason this is true is because of who God is.

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So imagine you find someone that you think the world of. This person is beautiful and captures your imagination. And you spend time studying them and pursuing them. But if that's where it ends it's infatuation – it's stalking.

But then imagine you find out your feelings are reciprocated. This beautiful person thinks the same of you. Isn't that an incredible moment? Have you been there? If you haven't are you hungry for it? If you have, but it's been a long time, are you aware of your loss?

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Love isn't an easy thing to replace, but here's my point: the reason we universally recognize the value of love is because love is what makes us human. And that's because here we reflect God. This means the more we love the more we look like God and the more human we are.

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Now just one quick word about singleness: the marriage relationship is not the only place love exists. In fact there are lots of marriages where love doesn't reign at all which means love is not synonymous with romantic relationship. It can be there. It should be there. But romance has no monopoly on love. The reality is love exists anywhere that two people enjoy and serve each other. Love exists where desire and duty meet.

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Now our world ties love and sex together –we even call sex “making love.” But this just confuses the matter. Really the connection between love and sex is that they are both related to desire and duty. Good sex happens when desire and duty match up.

Sex without desire is a chore – terrible. But sex without duty, without serving the other, is pornography – a distortion. Sex needs desire and duty to be good and this is how it connects with love. But other than this love and sex are two totally different things.

And this means it is totally possible for single people to enjoy love, and grow in the image of God through it, without being in a romantic relationship. And this is good. So singles, pursue community. Find people you enjoy and commit yourself to serving them. Grow to look like God. Grow in love.

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Now to those who have been married for more than six weeks, you are probably aware that love is not synonymous with marriage. And so the call here is to grow in love. And you do this by fostering desire and duty.

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I was in the front passenger seat of Dave's pickup when he unpacked this for me. He said "Several people had come and asked him for counsel because their marriages were in trouble." Nikki and I weren't the only people to realize that Dave and Lila's relationship was the way it was supposed to be. And Dave continued "What I often hear is people complaining 'I'm doing my 50% she isn't giving back. She isn't holding up her side of the relationship."

But then he said "Love isn't a 50/50 thing. You can be 50/50 partners. You can do business with this kind of understanding. But love is a 100 thing." And so if your marriage isn't full of 100 love then the answer is not to go looking somewhere else. You can find infatuation somewhere else. But the chance of finding love is remote. The answer is to humble yourself and seek to reflect the Triune God to your spouse.

Isn't it possible that even your cold and unresponsive spouse might warm if they found themselves married to Jesus?

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But Satan, who hates you, whispers in your ear "No! You've tried and it's hopeless. Give up and look somewhere else." And then Jesus' still small voice responds "I built this place. I know how it works. And really, you tried loving her sacrificially for what, 6 minutes in a row? Let Me fill you with My love for her. Trust Me. I want what's best for you." Friends, God wants love for you. So join the dance.

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But we are scared like a bunch of kids in a high school gymnasium. Love seems so risky. And like Adam we don't want to give up our own way. We don't want to risk living our lives God's way. It feels like a sacrifice. It feels like we will lose if we love. We don't even know if we can. But here, as Jesus emerges from the water, He empowers us to enter the dance.

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In verse 12 Mark gives us another picture of the new creation. He says:

The Spirit then compelled Jesus to go into the wilderness, where He was tempted by Satan for forty days. He was out among the wild animals, and angels took care of Him. (Mark 1:12)

In the first creation Satan was slithering around like a snake. And here we bump into that snake again. But the new Adam isn't like the old one. The old Adam was out among the tame animals. The lions and lambs lay down together, and yet, when for a moment the tempter inspired him to imagine life without God he looked at the tree and lusted. He chose to center on himself and as a result all his relationships were broken. The earth toiled, his sons murdered, his wife hurt. Adam had it easy and yet he failed.

But the New Adam is out among the wild animals – He had it hard. And yet He overcame the snake and He overcame in the wilderness for 40 days. And ultimately He overcame in another Garden at the end. And He overcame at another tree. And He did this with a dance – not My will but Yours be done.

The Second Adam took the tree God's way. He exposed Satan's lie that God doesn't love you or want the best for you. And He did this to show us that God's will, even when it hurts, is the path to our joy. Hebrews says "For the joy set before Him, Jesus endured the cross."

And in this act Jesus invites us into the Triune relationship of love. He shows us His desire and His duty. He loves us like a husband loves a bride, and He suffers for us – desire and duty. And because He loves us we are able to love Him and love each other. And this is what He wants. He wants love for you.

You're precious to Him. The God of the universe doesn't need you – He's enough in Himself – but He wants you. He desires you. And if you want to really live then respond to His call and give yourself to learning His dance. Foster desire and duty in the relationship you have around you and give your desire and duty to Him.

Don't just add Him to a corner, center your life on Him. Fill your day with thinking about Him, from the first moment until the last. Fill your prayers with praise. Don't just ask for stuff – love Him. And do this even when it hurts – like Jesus did – because love is where abundant life resides.