

## **Johnny B.**

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast  
Celebration Fellowship, Ionia, Michigan  
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### **Scripture Reading**

Mark 1:1-8

### **Sermon**

We have four Gospels in the Bible. They all tell the same story, the story of Jesus. But each Gospel tells that story in its own way. Take the Gospel of John. John tells the story slowly. He tells it like he has all the time in the world. The Gospel of Mark, on the other hand, is completely different. Mark tells the story in a hurry. He tells it like he's late for an appointment, like he's late for court.

In the opening sentences of his Gospel, Mark talks about Jesus, Isaiah, and John. Boom. Boom. Boom. He doesn't say much about them, just enough to identify them. It's Jesus the Messiah. It's Isaiah the Prophet. And it's John the Baptist. Boom. Boom. Boom.

**Mark does tell us that John was preaching.** But he doesn't tell us much about what John was preaching. About the only thing we hear John say is, "Forget about me. Someone more important is coming!" And that figures. Because John was all about pointing away from himself. John was all about pointing to Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Because the story is about Jesus. John has that right.

Mark tells us one other thing about John's preaching. He tells us that John was preaching "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Well, that's simple enough, isn't it? We know what baptism is. We know what repentance is. We know what forgiveness is. And we know what sin is. But put all those words together, and we might be in for a surprise.

**The surprise starts with "forgiveness of sins."** When we hear those words, the first thing we think about is how we have our own individual sins forgiven because of Jesus. And that's part of it, for sure.

But John was a Jew from the first century. And the people he baptized, they were Jews from the first century. For them, "forgiveness of sins" was not about each individual person getting a clean slate from God. No, for them "forgiveness of sins" was about God forgiving Israel as a people.

This is part of the big story of the Bible. According to that story, Israel went into exile in Babylon because of their sins, especially because of their idolatry and greed. And according to that story, at about the same time that Israel left the Promised Land, God left Israel. The prophet Ezekiel saw it. In a vision, he saw the glory of the Lord depart

from the Temple. As a result, the Temple was left empty. And the people of Israel were on their own.

**Sometimes we want to be alone.** Sometimes we're almost desperate to be alone. We need some space. We need some room to think. We need some peace and quiet. Times like those, it can be good to be alone. But none of us want to be abandoned.

When you're ten years old and your dad leaves and he never comes back home, even if he isn't much of a dad, it still hurts. It hurts to be abandoned. When your sister doesn't come to see you here, when your kids never come for a visit, it hurts. Maybe you weren't much of a brother. Maybe you really messed up as a father. But it still hurts. It hurts to be forgotten. It hurts to be on your own, especially when it seems like you'll be on your own for good!

Imagine how you would feel, though, if your kids finally came for a visit. Imagine how you would feel, if your brother decided to come and see you every week. Imagine how much you would look forward to those visits. Imagine how excited you would be.

**That's why there was so much excitement about John the Baptist.** He had a simple message. He said, "Get ready! The Lord is coming back!" Finally. After being alone for so many years, after feeling completely abandoned, finally the Lord was coming back to Israel!

And the people were getting ready. Ages before, Israel's ancestors crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land. Now John was standing in the Jordan, and the people flocked out to him. John plunged them down into the water to make them clean. And when they came back up, they were ready for God to come. They were ready for God to come and lead them into a new Promised Land.

**Repentance is all about welcoming God.** Repentance is about wrapping your arms around what God is doing in your life. And repentance is about wrapping your arms around what God is doing in the world. At the Jordan River, the people went down into the water so they could be ready for what God was about to do, and so they could be a part of it. That was their repentance.

And that's what repentance means for us, too. Repentance means changing the direction of our lives. But that's not easy to do. Because everybody has plans for our lives. Prisons and hotel chains have plans for where we sleep. Trinity Services Group and Little Caesar's have plans for what we eat. Parents and grandparents have plans for who our friends are. Bunkies and pastors have plans for how we use our money. And, of course, we all have our own plans for our lives. We all have our own ideas about how things ought to be.

But there's one plan that matters. There's one plan that comes first. Repentance is about putting that plan before all the others. Repentance is about putting God first.

**I used to volunteer at Marion Correctional in Ohio.** Here's something I noticed there a few years ago. Lots of the guys in the Horizon program—that's what I was part of—lots of the guys in the Horizon program were wearing these rubber bracelets that said, "I am second." Have you seen those? "I am second." They wore the bracelets to remind themselves of an important lesson they were learning.

I remember the guys telling me that the reason so many of them were in prison was because they put themselves first. They put themselves and their addictions before their children and before the mothers of their children. They put themselves and their gangs before any thought for God and for God's Kingdom. Again and again, they put themselves first. And that's how they wound up in prison. That's what they told me.

But they were learning a new lesson. They don't come first; God does. That's why they were wearing those bracelets, the bracelets that said, "I am second." To remind them that God comes first.

**Here's what happened because of that lesson.** The guys at Marion were taking a long, hard look at themselves. They were paying attention to how they behaved. They were sizing up their attitudes. They were rethinking their goals and their loyalties. What they were doing was taking an inventory. They were coming to grips with all the times and all the ways they put themselves first. And they were paying attention to all the misery that came from that.

And then—this next part is important—then they were dedicating themselves to a better way of life, to a way of life that puts God first. Not that they ever got this new way of life down. They would be the first to tell you that they were no better at that than any of the rest of us. But they were working on it. With God's help, they kept working on it. What they doing, to use a Bible word—what they were doing was repenting.

**God is good; God is kind; God is merciful; God forgives.** And God has come to us through Jesus. And we welcome Jesus, because he is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. We welcome Jesus by letting go of our own way. And we welcome Jesus by becoming part of what God is doing by the Spirit, part of what God is doing in our own lives, part of what God is doing in the world.

It's all about new life. And in this new life, God is first, not you, not me, not anyone else. That sounds like something John the Baptist would say.

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Glory and thanks be to God:  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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