

# Numero Uno in the New Year Who Gets to Sit in God's Seat?

Mark 1:1-11

Sermon notes from the pulpit of  
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois  
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A Chesapeake Bay Retriever, a Great Dane, and a tabby cat die and go to heaven. God is sitting on his throne and asks each what they believe in. The Chesapeake Bay Retriever says, "I believe in gentleness and love. I believe it's important to surround your master with care."

"Good," God says. "You can take a seat at might right side."

The Great Dane says, "I believe in discipline and being alert. I believe it's important to surround your master with protection."

"That's good, too," God says. "You can take a seat at my left side."

God looks at the cat. "What do you believe in?" God asks.

The cat looks at God and says, "I believe you're sitting in my chair."<sup>[1]</sup>

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It you know cats at all, you know how accurately (for many cats) this joke rings. While dogs may treat you like a member of their family, many cats treat you like a member of their staff.

This is such an odd—though I hope not too irreverent—way of peeling open this text from Mark. John the Baptist makes it clear that he is not equal to or worthy of Jesus. John lets the crowd know that he and Jesus are in no way equals. If there is an order, Jesus is first, not John. If there is a rank, Jesus is grade A, not John. If there is a throne, Jesus and Jesus alone belongs on it, not John.

Jesus is number one.

Not John. Not you. Not me.

Jesus stands in water up to his knees at the beginning of this New Testament gospel. In the Old Testament book of Genesis, which also intones those words about "the beginning," God is the mastermind of creation. In both books, there's no doubt who the central characters are.

There's, also, no doubt about our place. In Mark's gospel, John is making it clear, so very clear, that Jesus is the one who is the center of this story. And John's place is to serve, to worship, to revere. Jesus is the master. John's job it to worship the God who rips open the heavens. John's place is to stand in awe of the dove that represents God's Holy Spirit. John's duty is to bow before Jesus and to serve neighbor.

*Not only is Jesus more powerful that I am, "I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

There is no question who stands at the center of this text. And there's no question of who we look up to when we bow down.

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On this first Sunday of this new year, it might be worthwhile to remind ourselves about our place in the bigger picture. The arrogant cat might dare to tell God that *you're sitting in my seat*. But we dare not utter those words. God is God. We are not God. God is worthy of praise and wonder and awe and thanks. Not us. God alone is worthy of our attention and allegiance, not the weapons we carry, not the politics we espouse, not our keen intellect or brazen ego, not the power we lord over those less powerful than us. God alone belongs on the throne of our hearts.

And God's son deserves at every turn our rapt attention, commitment, devotion, praise, service, care. We organize our lives around the preaching and teaching of Jesus. His living, dying, and rising again informs who we are and everything we do and don't do. Jesus is the Lord of this dance called life.

This seems obvious and simple, but we observe that we often live as if *we* matter the most, not God. God wants us to care for others, but we are experts, instead, at caring for and thinking about ourselves. When we do this, when we live this way, we are suggesting to God that he's sitting in our chair. *We* deserve comfort. *We* deserve praise. We call upon the Santa Claus god and want to living Lord to do as we (arrogantly) ask. *We* deserve to be the center of God's and everyone's attention.

John is saying: For the student, Jesus is teacher. For the disciple, Jesus is Lord. For the sinner Jesus is both redeemer and judge, holy peace and refiner's fire. For those who search, Jesus is the answer. For the lost, Jesus is the way.

Our place in the bigger picture is one of service. God is the host and the healer. Our response is gratitude. We show that gratitude by praising God and by serving neighbor.

The Heidelberg Catechism puts it this way (and I'll close with these words):

Q. What is your only comfort  
in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own,<sup>1</sup>  
but belong—

body and soul,  
in life and in death—<sup>2</sup>

to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood . . .  
He also watches over me in such a way<sup>6</sup>  
that not a hair can fall from my head  
without the will of my Father in heaven;<sup>7</sup>  
in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.<sup>8</sup>

Because I belong to him,  
Christ, by his Holy Spirit,  
assures me of eternal life<sup>9</sup>  
and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready  
from now on to live for him.<sup>10</sup>

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It's a brand-new year. Are we ready to live like that? Wholeheartedly, are we willing and ready from now on to live for Jesus, with Jesus, following his example, caring for the things he cared about, daring the things he dared, loving the way he loved?

With God's help, and by God's grace, I hope so. For you, and for me, and for our church—*I hope so.*

AMEN.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Origin unknown. Not original to me.