

Year B 2024 Are You Ready to be Changed Forever First Sunday in Lent Mark 1 vv9 to 15

You know, if this Gospel story is sounding familiar – like you’ve heard it recently – you’re not imagining it. Just last month, on the Baptism of the Lord, we heard the part about Jesus being baptized. Two weeks later, on the Third Sunday after the Epiphany, we heard Jesus proclaiming the good news that God’s kingdom is here. The only part of this story that we haven’t heard recently is this very small part: “And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”

Every year, on the First Sunday in Lent, we hear about Jesus’ temptation for forty days in the wilderness – those 40 days are the basis for our 40 days of Lent, our journey more deeply and clearly into relationship with God. Yet, Mark doesn’t seem to be giving this life-altering experience much air time. Mark, in his typical fashion, rushes us through three extremely important events in Jesus’ life – his baptism, temptation in the wilderness, and the beginning of his public ministry. They crash past us in a blur – part of Mark’s urgent excitement in telling us the amazing news, the greatest development in our story of salvation: the kingdom is here, Jesus brought God’s kingdom.

Despite the shortness of Mark’s telling, he does give us all that we need. Jesus’ journey in these few short verses is our journey. And Mark’s account, right at the beginning of his narrative, provides us with an amazing insight, an astounding “aha moment” that changes our lives. So, if you’re ready to never be the same again, let’s have a closer look at this Gospel story.

We are very early in Mark's Gospel – we have been told we are beginning the good news of Jesus Christ, we meet John the Baptist, people are flocking to him for a baptism of repentance, he tells us one is coming of whom he (John) is not worthy to untie his sandals and, suddenly, we meet this "one": Jesus of Nazareth. Today, we see and hear Jesus for the first time in Mark's Gospel. We see him, for the first time, as he is being baptized by John in the Jordan River. As Jesus is coming out of the water, the heavens are torn apart and the Holy Spirit descends on him as a dove. This word – torn apart, ripped open – is the same word we hear in Isaiah (62:2) when he cries out:

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence –
as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil –
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

This is the voice of longing – longing for an act of God that breaks through and accomplishes the justice so longed for. Today, Mark tells us, today we witness this act of God. The heavens are torn open. God's justice is about to be accomplished. How? The Holy Spirit descends from God to rest on one who is fully human – Jesus of Nazareth – and the Holy Spirit stays there. The voice of God is heard: You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased. We are let in on this moment of love. Jesus is the Son of God, we hear. Not only is Jesus fully human. Jesus is fully God. Jesus is the way in which God chooses to accomplish his purpose of the complete reconciliation of all things.

How is Jesus going to accomplish this purpose? Immediately, we see the Spirit driving Jesus out into the wilderness. There is no laying back and basking in the

warm glow of God's love, no idle dwelling on the amazing knowledge of being God's child. The Spirit casts him out – the same verb used by Mark as Jesus casts out demons – Jesus is cast out into the wilderness. This is a forceful shove. This is a must. And it really doesn't seem like this is the way to accomplish God's purpose, going off by oneself in the wilderness for forty days. Ah...but it is, says Mark.

There is something hugely important going on in the wilderness. Even though Mark gives us very little detail, what he does say, says a lot. Jesus goes into the wilderness for forty days. The number forty is, of course, very significant in Scripture. It rained for 40 days and 40 nights during the Great Flood (Gen.7:4). Moses spends 40 days and 40 nights on Mount Sinai when God is giving to him the 10 commandments (Ex.24:18). The Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness after being rescued from oppression in Egypt. Jonah spent 40 days traveling Ninevah to warn them of their impending destruction because of their sins against God (Jon.3:4). Forty days, forty nights, forty years...these all indicate a time during which change occurs. It is a time of self-reflection, discernment, time spent with God, time spent wrestling with the ways of the world that are contradictory to the way of life with God. And Jesus spends forty days in the wilderness. The wilderness in Scripture is the traditional place in which this wrestling and discernment occurs. Jesus is with God during this time. It *is* the Holy Spirit who led him into this. But Satan is also there. The presence of Satan tells us that this is not a time of quiet retreat. This is a battle for a human life. Jesus must choose between God's ways and the ways of the world that don't mesh with those ways, the 'selfish, accumulating, I must survive and thrive at the expense of others' ways represented by Satan.

Mark intensifies this time of battle in the wilderness by throwing in another well-known phrase: Jesus is with the wild beasts. In the book of the prophet Ezekiel, God angrily explains to the leaders of Israel that they took care of their own interests at the expense of the people under their care. The people were disregarded like sheep left to be eaten by the wild beasts; people uncared for who suffered hunger, lack of physical care, and lack of spiritual care. God says that's going to change because God himself will come to rescue the people from the wild animals (Ez.34). From Isaiah we learn that when God comes to live among the people, Isaiah pictures a highway through the wilderness to get to God, a highway called the Holy Way, surrounded on both sides by wild beasts but these beasts won't be able to get onto the highway (Is.35:8-9) and in fact, when God returns to live among his people, there will be perfect peace – the lion will lay down with the lamb (Is.11). All the while that Jesus is in the wilderness with Satan and with the wild beasts, he is under the loving, caring protection of God: the angels waited on him, we are told.

Mark is calling to mind for us the whole story of God's salvation from the time of the flood to the long-awaited time of the fullness of God's kingdom on earth. The battle is won – Jesus emerges from the wilderness after forty days and God has triumphed. Jesus is firmly on the side of God and has had an astounding revelation during his time in the wilderness. He emerges to proclaim the good news of God: The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near! His astounding revelation is lost in our English translation. Yes, the kingdom of God is here – it has always been here. God made the world and all of creation. It has always belonged to God. The amazing news, the astounding revelation is that, as Jesus proclaims that the kingdom is near, the words in Greek mean not only near

but present – present in the person of Jesus. “I bring God’s kingdom!” is the amazing news Jesus has for us. Creation is God’s but the problem, to be blunt, has always been the people living in it. But now, the goodness of creation intended also to be found within humanity – also God’s creation – is found within Jesus of Nazareth. The perfect love, peace, and joy, the humble, selfless serving, and abundant generosity towards all others that embodies life in God’s kingdom is contained within the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth.

This has never happened before. Why this is such amazing news is realized in our “aha moment”, our life-changing realization: through the mystery of baptism, we carry within us the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, the perfect love, peace, and joy, the humble, selfless serving, and abundant generosity towards all others that embodies life in God’s kingdom is contained within the humanity of you, of me, each of us.

Mark’s story, this whirlwind of excited urgency, this story is our story. Through baptism, the divide that separates us from God is torn apart and God’s Spirit descends on us and God says to us: You are my child. The Spirit immediately thrusts us into the wilderness of the world where, under the loving, caring protection of God, we must nevertheless daily discern our way forward, continuously choosing between God’s ways or the ways of the world. Lent is a time of particular focus on this daily struggle and discernment. With new intensity and deliberation, ‘the 40 days of Lent call us toward the fullness of life found through Christ. We move toward the paschal Triduum, the three most serious – yet most underlaid with joy – days in the year, when we mark the Last Supper, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus and the new life available to us when we live

out that great mystery that is the foundation of our faith. We move toward the moment at Easter when we will renew our baptismal promises: “Do you believe in God, source of all life, in Jesus Christ God’s Son, in the Holy Spirit?” “Do you renounce Satan? And all his ways” And all his works?” We get forty days to build up within us a strong and resounding “yes” to these questions, yeses that define our lives as Christians’ (very loosely quoted from p.62 of *Lift Up Your Hearts Homilies and Reflections for the “B” Cycle*).

This is why it is so important for us to journey in this daily struggle together. Leaning on the four pillars of Christian life: worship, prayer, Scripture study, and works of justice, we can nurture the fullness of God’s kingdom within us, let it grow, let it show, revealing God’s kingdom to the world.

As we work through our struggles in the wilderness, we can proclaim, indeed we must proclaim in joy: The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is here!