

Year B Proper 16

Being the Cloak of Christ

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

There's a lot of movement and activity in this gospel - but before we focus in on what is there, I think it is important for us to know what is not. We hear verses 30 to 34 today and then we skip to verse 53.

What we skip over is Jesus' miraculous feeding of the 5000 and then his walking on the water. These are two jaw-dropping miracles that show us Jesus' power - the power of God. But we skip over these today in order that we do not miss something a little quieter, less dramatic.

Mark has, once again, done some sandwiching. Surrounding these two powerful miracles we find something just as amazing, something that Mark is very concerned to show to us - the revelation of life in God's kingdom. Mark shows to us the inauguration of the kingdom of God in Jesus. These verses emphasize Jesus' identity as the true, divine shepherd, who will guide his sheep into the kingdom. We are shown the nature of that kingdom, through prayer, through preaching and teaching, and through healings that disrupt the social and political structures of this world.

In Jesus we find the embodiment of God's mission - of our mission, our very purpose for existing as Christ's body. From the very beginning of our history with God - right from Genesis 1, verse 1, God has had one purpose and one purpose only - to bring all of creation into perfect unity with each other and into union with God through experiencing God's love and being God's love. The rest of the Bible is our story of

how God is working with humanity to fulfill that purpose and how humanity responds to God's promptings.

Jesus is the crucial key to fulfilling God's purpose. Jesus is the human embodiment of God - God's word made flesh, God's love for the world in human form. Jesus is God's purpose, God's mission, in action - born to bring us into relationship with God and with God's creation. Born to teach us how to be in relationship with others and to bring them into relationship with God as well. Through this perfect relationship of love, embodied in Christ and enacted through Christ, we see the revelation of God's kingdom, spreading like ripples in a pond, as more and more people hear and choose to live the life of God's kingdom.

Part of Jesus' mission is already accomplished - he has enabled us to be in relationship with God by eliminating the barrier of our sinfulness that is our inevitable entanglement in the corrupt, oppressive, and unjust power structures of the world. Jesus, in his perfection, was able to completely, totally resist those powers when they did their worst to him. In doing so, as Paul tells us, Jesus was the first person raised from the dead in a body that would never die again. Jesus became the first human - because he is fully human as well as fully God - he became the first human to be in perfect relationship with God. He is fully one with God. What is even more amazing is that he enabled us to follow in his footsteps.

We are not living for salvation; we're living in salvation. We now appear righteous in God's sight. That is amazing - more amazing even than the jaw-dropping miracles left out of the story today. It is very good news indeed but not the end of our story of good news since salvation is an

ongoing process bringing the world and us closer and closer to the intended perfection.

So, how it is that we became participants in this process of salvation accomplished through Jesus' death and resurrection? It is through baptism. Through the mystery of baptism, we join in Jesus' death and resurrection - we enter into salvation, clothed in the righteousness of Christ, made a new creation because of the gift of the Holy Spirit. That doesn't mean that, because we're baptized we can say, "Phew, I'm saved" and sit back and relax. With the gift of the Holy Spirit, comes a big responsibility and the daily reality of choice.

Jesus says that, through the Holy Spirit, he will be with us always. When we were baptized, we became Christ's bodily way of being present here on earth and one way that Christ is active here on earth is through us. "...that we are living members of his mystical body..." Some of us have said those words since we were little kids but did we understand what we were saying? Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ is in us, working through us, present and active here on earth today. Each day, each moment, we must continuously choose to align ourselves with God's ways, to live according to what life is in God's kingdom. Through this choice, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are steadily transformed into the image of Christ and we reveal - more and more - God's kingdom.

Remembering that God has just one purpose - the unity of creation amongst ourselves and our union with him - and remembering that Jesus is the instrument of God's purpose to fulfill that mission, we then realize that, as Christ's body here on earth, we are now that instrument of God's will - we are God's mission here on earth.

Being God's mission - the sign of his kingdom, witnesses to his kingdom, God's instruments as we bear the kingdom to our needy world - is hard work and today's gospel story tells us how to do it.

To be God's mission in the world is to live the life of the kingdom. So what does that look like? First of all, the gospel reading tells us that the disciples have just returned from being sent out by Jesus to preach and teach and heal and they are now excitedly gathered around him, sharing everything they've experienced. *This* is our time to gather around Jesus - for where two or three are gathered in my name, I will be among them - and we share our experiences, we are nurtured by our encounter with God in the liturgy, nurtured in finding Jesus in each other, nurtured through the activity of the Spirit as we hear the Word, and share God's table. Together with God and with each other, we experience the perfection of God's kingdom and then we're ready to bring the fruit of this encounter out into the world, continuing to be God's mission until the next time we gather together to excitedly tell Jesus all about it. We are Christ to everyone around us, we are filled with the Holy Spirit - whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. In thought, word, and deed we carry the kingdom with us into the life of the world. All that we do and all that we are is an opportunity to reveal God's kingdom and invite others into that kingdom. Then we return here to gather around Jesus to share all with him.

We learn, too, that an important part of our mission is to disconnect from the world regularly. Jesus tells us to go off by ourselves to a deserted place to engage in prayer and he does this a few times himself. It is not simply a time of rest. The word we hear today translated as "deserted place" is actually the word for wilderness.

Wilderness in the Bible is always a place of discernment - connecting with God in order to learn what role we are to fulfill in God's purpose. It is important, then, to talk to God about how we are feeling, what we are thinking, and lay our problems on God so that He shares our burden. But, it is also very important to *listen* to God - to hear how he wants us to be His hands in the world. Our quiet time is also a time of praise and joy. All of this helps us to feel refreshed, strengthened by God, ready to face the world knowing God's purpose and how we are to specifically work towards that purpose with God.

We know that Jesus' times of personal retreat were always brief and then he was right back at it - preaching, teaching, healing, always with compassion. As disciples, we are meant to live as part of this world but we separate ourselves by the way that we live - as a compassionate community of faith.

This brings us to the next point - teaching - proclaiming the good news is a big part of being God's mission to the world. It doesn't have to be standing on a street corner preaching. Living the kingdom life is our greatest proclamation of the good news. Wearing a cross around our necks is also a wordless proclamation that means much when our words and actions reflect that cross. The early church grew at a time when non-Christians were not even allowed to set foot within the house churches. Christians were afraid of being betrayed as traitors to the empire and so they kept to themselves and kept others out. Yet their numbers grew because people saw how they lived - sharing, loving, caring for everyone - and people knew that life was better than what they had.

Finally, we have the healing that Jesus did in the gospel reading today and there are two important things we can take from this. First, Jesus' ministry of healing and casting out demons always served the same purpose - to bring those people who had been rejected by society back into the community. There's a power imbalance, these people are seen as having less power, and Jesus is restoring the balance of power because in God's kingdom there is absolute equality. Secondly, healing is an integral part of the Church's mission but that doesn't mean all of us are able to heal with a touch. It *does* mean that we can all restore the rejected, welcome the marginalized, and bring freedom to the oppressed. And we pray for the healing of the whole world - listening for what we can do. Through baptism, each of us became a minister of reconciliation for Christ. Each of us has gifts given through the Holy Spirit - knitting socks for people in hospital, driving people to appointments, adopting pets from the animal shelter, whatever it is. We all have a ministry that will raise up the weak, helping to restore equality to the balance of power, and making people a loved part of our community.

"And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed."

We, the church, are that cloak.