

Sermon – February 18, 2024

Pastor Dan Hollis

Mark 1 : 9 – 15

You may remember the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. You may even be asking yourself—upon hearing our Scripture reading today—*isn't it longer* than that? Like, wasn't there more to the story? More details, more emotions. Y'know, like Satan saying, "if you're the Son of God, then turn these stones into bread," or "jump off that cliff and let the angels catch you." Well all those details are definitely part of the story, and in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke we get to really *sit* in those forty days of Jesus' life, and *feel* what he felt and *understand* the struggles and trials he faced. The same is true for the *baptism* of Jesus; there are more details to be found in Matthew and Luke around John the Baptist and Jesus' experience at the river Jordan. But Mark does something very peculiar... *instead* of diving *deep* into these two very important pieces of Jesus' life story, he parses them down to only the most essential details, and lines them up—one right-after-the-other—where they stand, in the *lead-up* to the *start* of his ministry.

While we lose a lot of the depth and meat of such valuable accounts, I think what Mark does here allows for something really special that we otherwise can't see in Matthew and Luke's framing. That's why having four different Gospels telling the same life-story in different ways or different perspectives isn't a *bug* of the Bible, it's a *feature*. In this case, when these moments in Jesus' life are made a little more bite-sized for us as readers, and presented in context with each *other*, it helps us to make meaning of the whole experience in a new, birds-eye-view kind of way.

So what do we see? Shortly before his ministry began, Jesus was baptized, he *experienced* and was able to recognize for *himself* the love of God, and he faced and overcame a harrowing period of trial and temptation. And *then* he was able to get to work. I actually kinda love the way Mark presents this account, because of how abruptly everything seems to happen. He peppers the whole account with active language designed to pull you breakneck through it all. "And *just* as," "torn apart," "and," "and," "immediately *drove*," "now." Mark doesn't want you to take a pause between each scene, because he wants to show us something about all of them *together*—something we can miss if we wait a few weeks between readings.

To Mark, each of these elements—the baptism, the acknowledgment of God's love, the trials in the wilderness, *and* the beginning of the work of ministry—they're all connected. When we look at them side-by-side like this, we can start to see what was *necessary* to *prepare* Christ for the work he needed to begin. And I also think—in true Jesus fashion—it gives *us* an opportunity to make meaning out of our *own* lives, so that we *too* can *prepare* ourselves for the work God needs of us.

The season of Lent, which starts today, is often seen as a season of sacrifice, or a season of *guilt*. Some years people might give up things that are hard to do without, and some years people might devote themselves to critical introspection of all the ways they fall short. Maybe even take it as an opportunity for self-improvement. I would challenge you, in the spirit of today's reading, to see this season of Lent... as a time of *preparation*.

The *first* step of getting prepared to do something *new* often requires a fresh start. A clean slate. For Jesus, this was the waters of baptism. Baptism is a recognition of God's *cleansing* impact on our lives—God looks at us with forgiveness, and coming into *relationship* with God means that our mistakes and shortcomings are in the *past*, as though we are *cleansed* of them by the very *fact* that God desires relationship *with* us. That's called *grace*. We don't know much about Jesus' life between his early childhood and his baptism at roughly age thirty, and maybe we don't *need* to, because in the cleansing waters of God's grace, what happened to us in the *past* isn't nearly as important as what God has in store for us in the future.

Then, "a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" Couldn't we *all* use that? Now Jesus is beloved in a unique way; his relationship with God the Father is something we can barely begin to grasp... but the acknowledgment that God loved him was just as important to Jesus' journey as it should be for any of us. I don't mean to skip ahead, but at the end of our reading today, Jesus uses a word our Bibles translate as "believe." In the original Greek, this word has deeper depths than our simple English understanding of the term. When we say "belief," we're usually thinking just of "head belief." There's a fact or a lesson or a statement, and we either choose to *believe* that data point in our heads, or not. The word in *Mark's* language was *more* than that—it wasn't just about *knowing* something's true in your *head*, but about *feeling* it in your *gut*. Trusting it in your heart. Somebody like me can *tell* you God loves you, and you can be like, "yeah, sure, intellectually I *believe* that..." but until something happens that makes you *feel* that love in your *gut*, it's just not the same. Opening ourselves to *recognize* and *experience* the love God has for us—God's *outpouring* of love for *you* daily... that can change everything about the way you *relate* to yourself, and the way *we* relate to each *other*. I'm sure it did for Christ too. After thirty years of trying to make sense of his place in the world, he finally had proof, written on his heart, that God loved him... that God was *pleased* with him. And if you get nothing else from this sermon today, I hope you can learn to open your heart wide enough to hear that same message that God has for *you* too.

And then, even after *all* that, Jesus found himself *driven* into the wilderness. For forty days (and *forty* is a number the *Old* Testament often used to emphasize that

something “felt like *forever*”), Jesus was *tempted* by the world’s great Adversarial force, Satan, and *contended* with the threats of wild beasts and uncaring wilderness alike, and *only* at the *end* of those forty days did he find *relief* at the hands of angels. Now, in Matthew and Luke’s more detailed accounts of Christ’s wilderness journey, we’re able to draw specific lessons from each of the *different* temptations he faced and overcame, but in Mark’s telling *again*, the lesson is more of a birds-eye-view. This *time* in the wilderness, this time of trial and tribulation, was another *step* in Christ’s preparation. Rather than let the struggle and challenge grind him down, Christ *turned* his wilderness experience into an opportunity for transformation. Through that difficult time—for Divine as he was Christ was also fully *human* and subject to the same human needs and discomforts and temptations as *we* are—Jesus allowed himself to be *transformed* by that difficult time into someone that was *prepared* to do good wherever he went and whatever he encountered. To do what *God* needed of him.

And so, prepared by the cleansing waters of baptism, the life-changing love of God, and the transformative challenges of the wilderness, Christ was finally ready to begin his good work. *Now*, even facing the loss of John the *Baptist* wasn’t enough to slow Christ down or lay Christ low. He came to Galilee, undeterred, and began to proclaim the good news of God. Fully prepared for the risks he was taking and all that would be asked of him in the few short years to come, his very first teachings after *all* that had happened boiled down to one simple thesis: “the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Jesus’ ministry was in part to prepare the world for this mysterious “kingdom of God” to be among us, and we *hear* throughout Mark’s Gospel—and the Lord’s Prayer printed in church bulletins the world *over*—that we will *know* the kingdom of God has *arrived* when what is *happening* on Earth *looks* like what happens in Heaven.

“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.” When God’s hand is *actively* visible *through* the life and work of *all* of us—imperfect yet beautiful humans all... *then* we’ll know it’s come to pass.

Jesus said that the kingdom of God was *near*, because *he* was the missing *piece* that would finally start to *prepare* us to *make* that kingdom—that *world*—a reality. It’s through the example of his *actions* and his *life* that we *see* what it *looks* like to live in and be an integral part *of* that heavenly world, and it’s his *teachings* that begin to *prepare* us for the challenging and difficult work of seeing that world come into being.

Jesus needed to *prepare* himself for the daunting work ahead of him. He needed the cleansing waters of baptism, the loving acknowledgment of God, *and* the transformative struggle of the wilderness in order to be *ready* to do what needed to be done on Earth and in Heaven. That's what Mark's bite-sized version—of what's otherwise a much thicker story—helps us to realize. Jesus needed *all* of that *before* he could be ready to *effectively* proclaim the good news of God and prepare *us* to take part in God's kingdom.

And as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, *Jesus'* journey should help us make sense of our *own*. If we wish to see heaven-on-earth come to pass, we too need a fresh, clean start... we need to be able recognize God's love for us... and we need to allow our struggles, trials, and temptations to transform us rather than destroy us.

So this Lenten season, and in every season of struggle that you face, I hope that you can remember that Jesus has been where you are. Jesus has felt what you have felt: beset on all sides, bearing weight no one should ever have to. Jesus knows what you face and feels your pain. So let him be your guide. Seek the fresh start of God's cleansing grace that *Christ* found in the Jordan River; open your heart to the love God feels for *you* that *Christ* found on the wings of the dove and a voice on the wind; and *turn* your trials into opportunities for transformation, as Christ did in the wilderness.

Let us make our attitude this season of Lent an attitude of *preparation*... because if we do—on the other side of the wilderness, we might just find ourselves prepared for a *lot* more than we think. Thanks be to God. Amen.