

Walking With Jesus
First Sunday of Lent
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Text: Mark 1

The Gospel of Mark could be thought of as the Cliffs notes of the 4 gospels – the Reader’s Digest version of the story of Jesus – do people still use Cliffs notes and the Reader’s Digest? Did you know there actually is a Reader’s Digest version of the Bible? – it’s true - with the 4 days of creation, the 5 commandments and the 6 disciples? Actually that last part isn’t true, there IS a Reader’s Digest condensed Bible, but it keeps all 7 days, 10 commandments and 12 disciples. ☺

And Mark keeps most things too, just in a much briefer version than the other gospels. And that is especially true at the start of the gospel: for Mark there are no birth narrative - Mark’s gospel starts right in with John the Baptist for the first 8 verses, and then the passage today continues with: baptism; temptation; beginning of ministry – check, check, check – 7 verses and done.

That’s a lot of story in just a few verses – and while Matthew and Luke’s more expanded versions of the story do give some interesting details, one of the strengths of Mark’s brevity is that this narrative makes it very clear that these 3 events are connected to one another. By going check, check, check through baptism, temptation, and into ministry, Mark’s intention isn’t to be rushed – what Mark does is draw our attention to how these 3 events are in a sense all one event, all dependent on and in conversation with one another. And as Mark connects these events for us, I think there is a crucial moment, a lynchpin in the narrative that we have to notice in order to get the full impact of how Mark presents this story to us. Here’s what I think is the most important line in these connected stories to pay attention to – it’s this: “Now after John was arrested...” – did you notice that when you heard the passage? Jesus is baptized, tempted, begins his ministry – but in the transition from baptism and temptation to ministry is this line: “now after John was arrested.” That line caught my attention - and it’s

what I want you to keep in mind as we listen to this story – because I think it will direct us to what to pay attention to in our lives.

So let's be brief, like Mark, and glean just a nugget from each of the 3 pieces of this story- Jesus' baptism, and temptation and ministry - along with that "now after John was arrested" line.

Baptism. Have you ever wondered, 'why is Jesus baptized?' – it's a good question, since baptism can be sometimes characterized as a kind of salvation necessity, a way of assuring that one is right with God. But, I think it is clear that Jesus Christ, God with us, did not need to be made right with God; so baptism must be about something else – and that's what Mark's story tells us very well, and succinctly. As Jesus emerges from the waters of baptism, the dove-like Spirit descends and a voice speaks: "my Beloved." Baptism is much like the Transfiguration story last Sunday in which God's voice also speaks "Beloved" to Jesus – it is not something new about Jesus, it is a revelation for us to see what is already true about Jesus: one filled with the Spirit and beloved by God.

Temptation. The Spirit that blesses Jesus also drives him to the wilderness – forty days – tempted by Satan – and there were some wild beasts there too (they seem to be friendly characters) – and at the end, God's angels tend to Jesus. So what's going on here? Well, it seems to me that a good way to understand temptation in this story is like the baptism story in reverse. Because with Mark's simple description of 'tempted by Satan', we hear enough to know what is going on. Satan is the power, the voice, the palpable insidious presence in this world that persistently speaks as true what is false: the power that purveys an identity that you are not of Spirit and love, but rather that you are defined by fear and survival, by status and security. The experience of Jesus in the wilderness is an encounter of which truth to trust: does Jesus trust the truth of his baptism? – Spirit-filled and Beloved; or trust the truth of Satan? – defined by the false powers of this world.

Ministry. The way Mark tells the outcome of the temptations of Jesus is by Jesus emerging from the wilderness and into this proclamation: 'God's reign has come near – turn

and believe God's good news.' This is Jesus acting out of the truth of his baptism, trusting his identity in Spirit and as Beloved – the truth of God's good news rather than the powers voiced in the wilderness.

So that is a good story – a story of baptism and temptation, of identity and trust, as the way to be part of God's good news. But that's where that lynchpin line intervenes into the story - “now after John was arrested” – this is not just a chronological place holder – this is the point at which it turns out that this is not such a tidy process, a neat progression from baptism through temptation to good news. Turns out that you can successfully wrestle demons in the wilderness all you want, but when you step back into the world, the challenge has only just begun. There are powers in this world diametrically opposed to identities of beloved and trust in God and good news – and such power is not to be underestimated: this is the power that arrests John (John, who was saying that God's good news would take down the powers that be) – the power that would kill John. What I want us to realize is that when we hear “now after John was arrested”, that how that sentence ends is not a given. That sentence could end... ‘then Jesus decided to lay low for a while’...’then Jesus decided to tone things down a bit’...’then Jesus went back to the wilderness.’ I wonder if you believe me with that? – that Jesus really could have done something different – or do you think I'm just making that up for dramatic effect? Certainly we know that Jesus did in fact lean into the path of God's reign, proclaiming good news – but what I want us to know, to realize, is that it *was* a choice, a challenge – that it was difficult and courageous. This was not a detached stroll for Jesus, going through the Messiah motions – this was going into the teeth of the powers of this world – strong, dangerous, deadly powers.

And I think when we let that sink in – then this story can very much sink into, speak into, our lives, our world, our faith. I think it speaks to the realities of the powers of brokenness we face in our lives – to any experience of the broken, deadly power present in this world.

Those broken powers that, like Herod who arrested John, are political and social and religious – how does “Now after...” sound there in our world?...

- Now after women were underpaid and underrepresented and sexually harassed...
- Now after black adult males were imprisoned at 5 times the rate of whites...
- Now after the Reformed Church said that LGBTQ people were sinful in the eyes of God...
- Now after immigrants were villainized as the problem rather than facing the problem of a broken immigration system...
- Now after there was another slaughter of children at a school...

How do we end those sentences? – laying low, toning it down...or leaning in to walk with one who proclaims God’s reign of justice is near to us, that good news claims this world.

The power of brokenness can impact us in ways personal, private – how does “Now after...” sound there in our lives?

- Now after a debilitating bout of depression...
- Now after a marriage broken in divorce...
- Now after a diagnosis of cancer...
- Now after being trapped in a destructive pattern of behavior...

How do we end those sentences? – in despair, losing self and God and hope?...or leaning in to walk with one who proclaims God’s reign of compassion is near to us, that good news claims this world.

The powers of brokenness can be very much about the very ordinary and everyday:

- Now after a difficult day with your children, or your partner, or your parents...
- Now after dealing with a difficult job and not being sure you have enough for your family
- Now after treating someone cruelly or acting in a way that caused another harm...
- Now after feeling discouraged and not quite sure what to make of life...

Whatever it may be, what comes next? - how do we end those sentences? – shutting off from others, settling for what we know is wrong, giving up on beauty and purpose?...or leaning in to walk with the One who proclaims God’s reign of love and mercy is at hand, that good news claims this world.

For us to walk with Jesus, is not to be part of a neat and tidy story: God’s love, our trust, good news – all set! No – there is nothing tidy about our lives and world – but as a community of faith, we renew ourselves in this truth: I am Beloved by God – I trust in God; in order to confront the “now afters” of this world – the powers of brokenness that seek to define our lives and world. In the face of brokenness, what we will do next is not inevitable or easy - but what the Spirit speaks to our hearts is God’s truth that the broken powers of this world are not inevitable either. So we will lean into to the good news of God that Jesus brings near: to hope and integrity, to commitment and love, to beauty and creativity, to justice and mercy. Let us come and be nourished in such gifts of God at the table of our Lord. AMEN.