

March 1, 2009
Lent I
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St James-Fremont

How many verses in today's lesson? What does it say in the Green Pages, Mark Chapter 1, how many?

Seven verses, not the longest you've ever heard in church, and by the time we finish Lent and head to Palm Sunday you'll get the whole Passion Story, the central story of the Christian faith, usually read in parts and an amalgamation of the four stories of Mark, Luke, John and Matthew.

The events in our readings, in the three mini-stories we have, give us a sense of what the authors of this book wanted us to know about John and about Jesus.

We begin with "in those days", which refers to the verses that come before today's reading. Those days were the days of John the Baptist, in the midst of his glory days, at his high point, at the top of his game.

One story says of John the Baptizer that he was born to a Temple priest. If that was true, he may have been raised in Jerusalem. Now, John appears in the wilderness. He begins his thematic preaching of repentance and forgiveness, inviting people to be baptized. They leave the urban areas of Jerusalem and Judea and head into the wilderness to see him, hear him and be baptized by him. He says another one will come after him who will baptize not with water but with the Spirit. There is no hint that John has been baptized by anybody.

It seems that the Galilee and Nazareth are not known for being centers of art, culture or the best of city life. Here comes Jesus, entering the picture for the first time, and he comes from the Galilee. He is baptized by John and there is no hint that Jesus baptizes anyone with a water baptism.

Let me go back to the Transfiguration Story of last week for just a moment. A select few disciples are on the mountain top with Jesus and two of the greats of Jewish theology and history, Moses and Elijah. Then what happens? Mark's story, in chapter nine said, "**and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!'**" This comment is directed at whom? To the disciples, as they are instructed to "Listen" because Jesus is God's beloved.

Today, as Jesus is baptized, there is a different message as the heavens are rent asunder, the Spirit of God descends on Jesus and there are other words spoken, ***'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'*** This is directed at whom? It is directed to Jesus. He is being called out and this moment is a beginning, an epiphany, the first step of an undertaking that will take many amazing turns before he reaches the end of it.

But first, we have a couple of other things to consider.

The active and creative Spirit doesn't invite Jesus to take a stroll in the wilderness but the story says the Spirit drove him into the wilderness. Pushing Jesus forward into this time of deprivation and difficulty after this marvelous epiphany is an interesting turn of events. Elijah and Moses both fasted 40 days in events recorded in the Old Testament. Exodus 34:28 reads:

He was there with the LORD for forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.

I Kings 19:8 reads:

Elijah got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

This is like weaving a tapestry, are you still with me? Back to today's lesson where we left off with the wilderness sequence, "Now after John was arrested...."

You know what that means, right? John's book carries the phrase "He must increase and I must decrease." Mark is subtle on this point. John goes from his heyday as the wilderness prophet to the jail cell. He is executed in private and only his head is on display, according to another account.

If John has been arrested, this signals the end of the ministry of John who did what he was called to do, according to Mark. He prepared the way of the Lord and now the stage belongs to Jesus who begins his message to repent and believe, for the Kingdom of God has come near.

Now that I've managed to weave in the threads of some history and some perspective, I want to weave us into the tapestry. After all, we are believers, too.

We are the Gentile believers who step into this story after it has been told, written about and preached for generations upon generations. We inherit this story from the line of God people that started with Moses, Elijah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Rachel, Jacob, Leah and Deborah and Isaiah.

Someone has prepared the way for us. It may not be a figure quite as dramatic as John the Baptist or Elijah, but someone has shared the stories and brought us to a place where we could hear about God and hear about Jesus and bring us to a baptism of our own. Thanks be to God. Now it is our turn, and here we are.

Here is the challenge. Are you going to say anything? Are you going to do anything? Are you going to take the story to the next generation?

We are baptized into the Spirit of God, which now rests upon us. This baptism is not an amulet we wear around our necks to keep us happy, well-fed and well-rested, loved, nurtured and forever secure. This Spirit of God and this baptism may mean we find ourselves in the ordeal of wilderness life and all its temptations.

For Christians, hearing the voice of God, called into our vocations, sometimes knowing exactly what we need to do sounds like a wonderful place to be. But that epiphany may be the first step to the wilderness.

And out of that wilderness, and ordeal and testing comes a strength that encourages us in hard times. You've had some hard times, and I've heard many of your stories. I caution you in making the hard time stories the themes of your life. Wilderness ordeals are starting points, not an end unto themselves.

What we make out of the epiphanies and the ordeals of our lives as Christians, as God people, as members of the Body of Christ, may shape the belief and hope of the next generation, too.

By the time we end the first chapter of Mark, John has arrived and baptized and was arrested, Jesus was baptized, endured 40 days' privation and started preaching. He starts calling the disciples, casts out a demon, heals Simon Peter's mother-in-law and several others, embarks on a wider preaching tour in the Galilee and heals a leper.

And they asked if anything good could come out of Nazareth.