

First Sunday in Lent, February 18, 2024
“That’s What It’s All About” (Mark 1:9-15)

Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! We all recognize these phrases as being connected to the great comic book, TV, and movie hero, Superman. This Superman, who is filled with super-human strength and power, is always bursting onto the scene to save the day. His speed is like lightning, his actions deliberate, and we hardly have time to catch our breath as he quickly moves from one rescue to the next.

The opening chapter of Mark’s gospel, which includes our text for today, unfolds in much the same way. Jesus bursts onto the scene, as if out of nowhere, and in only a few verses is baptized, tempted in the wilderness, and begins preaching in Galilee. There is no easing into this story. Mark simply thrusts Jesus at his readers, and off he goes. The way in which Mark tells the story, I believe, gives us a clue as to how it should be interpreted.

Jesus appears like a bolt out of the blue; and when he begins his ministry, it is at break-neck speed. We don’t even have a moment to pause and ponder what is going on before Christ hits us with his message: *The time is fulfilled, the KOG has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.* Jesus’ words are filled with the same sense of urgency we have felt in the text thus far: Repent now! The kingdom of God is here!

So what does this action-packed drama have to say to us? Well, let’s slow things down and take a look. No sooner has Jesus’ baptism been completed before Mark moves him into a battle of the temptations – into forty days of isolation where he is time and again tempted by Satan, God’s foe, God’s adversary, the power which is against God and behind every human disease and suffering. And I think we can rightly conclude that if Jesus, the Son of God, is tempted by this evil force, then we, too, as followers of Christ, will also be tempted.

We, of course, know that temptations abound. They are completely unavoidable. We are being tempted everywhere we go. At school, we are tempted to cheat or to be a part of the in-crowd by experimenting with drugs or alcohol. At work, we are tempted to slander and back-bite fellow employees or to perform our jobs at levels which are under the standards our employers have set. At home, we are tempted to complain and criticize or in some way abuse the loving relationships in which God has placed us. And on-line, there are many temptations to engage in uncharitable or destructive behavior.

Just as the devil tempted Jesus to abandon God and follow him, he comes at us with the same force and intensity. Why? Because we are of God. Martin Luther once said that the devil goes most fiercely after those in whom he smells Christ. And, my friends, as Christians wearing the aroma of Christ, he is most assuredly after us. And just as Jesus was given a choice, we too must choose. Will we follow the way of Christ or will we yield to the power of the devil? Of course, the choice we all want to make is obvious: we want to follow the way of Christ. But in the reality of living daily in a sinful and broken world, the choice doesn’t always seem so clear-cut. Will we choose deceit or truth, pride or humility, prejudice or brotherly love? No matter how hard we try, we often fail in our attempt of right-living.

However, there is good news for us this morning and it comes from our text: *Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying 'The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near.'* But what is this good news and what is the kingdom of God? Jesus uses these two terms a lot in his teachings, but never does he define them for us. Therefore, we must assume that these terms were understood by the people of his day. So, to gain an understanding, we must look far back into the Jewish religion.

We know the Jews had been looking for the promised messiah. And we know there were certain expectations they had. This messiah would be a strong military and political leader who would finally redeem Israel and set her free from her oppression; at this time, their Roman oppression. Upon the arrival of this messiah, they would experience the in-breaking of God, who would establish a new kingdom where the messiah would reign supreme.

However, Jesus was not to be this kind of king or ruler. Rather, he was sent to be a servant of God, a servant who would suffer a violent death on a Roman cross for the salvation of God's people. So, when Jesus spoke of the good news, he wasn't speaking of the Holy Scriptures, but of what God was doing through him. And when he spoke of the kingdom of God, he wasn't speaking of some futuristic political reign; he was speaking of a God who, out of love and compassion, entered into our world – our history – and dwelt with us in our humanity, establishing God's eternal reign in the hearts, minds, and lives of God's people.

So, for us to live in the kingdom of God, we don't have to wait! For when we live in Christ, the suffering Servant who died and rose again, in his love, peace, justice and righteousness, we are living in the kingdom of God. It is here among us now, just as Jesus proclaimed. And this is the good news Jesus came to bring: the good news of salvation; the good news that we are given the power to live life victoriously, knowing that, through Christ, we are on the road of life rather than the road of death; the good news that Christ's victory over sin, death and the devil is our victory as well. And it is that victory through which we are given the strength to wage war against the evil forces of this world.

So how should we respond to this good news? Jesus tells us: *Repent, and believe in the good news.* See how this works? Jesus first tells us the good news of what God has done and is doing for us and, only after telling what God is doing, does he tell us what we should do in response. And the significance of this? Only because of what God has done are we empowered to do God's will.

Repent, Jesus says, *Change from you evil ways, do an about face, turn yourselves around.* In a sense, he's asking us to do the hokey-pokey. Christ is calling us to put our whole selves, including heart, mind and will into him; and to turn ourselves around, away from sin and in his direction. Responding to God through repentance – putting our whole selves into Christ and learning to know and experience the deep love God has for each of us – is what the season of Lent is all about.

It's that time in our church year when we remember Jesus' struggle in the wilderness, the time when we slowly progress toward the somber mood of Good Friday, and then into the glorious

celebration of Easter Sunday. It's that time when remember our baptism, not only into Christ's death where our sins are buried with him, but into his resurrection, as well. And as we make this journey, reflecting all the way on what God has done for us in Christ, it provides us the opportunity to look deep within ourselves and determine what our response to this divine gift of love should be. Repentance, which means to be sorry, is part of that; but true repentance involves change – change in our thoughts, words, and deed. It involves learning to hate the sin in our lives that separates us from God and committing our lives to him.

Repent! Do it now, Jesus says, for the kingdom of God is near. Hear the urgency in his message. The kingdom of God is here and available for us at this very moment bringing love to those who feel no one cares, bringing comfort to those who mourn the loss of a loved one or a broken relationship, bringing peace to those whose hearts are filled with fear or worry, bringing hope for those who are confused and searching for a place in the world. It's here now and Christ doesn't want us to miss it. That's the urgency of his message. And we don't want to miss it either. For living in the kingdom of God is the most wonderful thing in the world. Amen.