

## **First Sunday in Lent**

**Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; Mark 1:9-15; I Peter 3:18-22**

**Mark 1:9-15** deals with three scenes that inaugurate Jesus' ministry: his baptism (1:9-11), the temptation of Jesus (1:12-13) and the beginnings of his actual ministry (1:14-15).

*The Baptism of Jesus.* "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan" (1:9). That's the unbelievably pithy and precise report made by Mark regarding Jesus' baptism. There is no debate between John and Jesus about the appropriateness of John baptizing his cousin, as there is in Matthew (3:13-15). Nor is there only an allusion to Jesus' baptism as there is in Luke, so brief the reader almost misses it (3:21). In Mark, it is simply a factual report: "Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan". Yet, stated so tersely, this act of being baptized as recorded in Mark was for Jesus a truly momentous event. Why can we make this assertion?

Only Mark tells us that Jesus alone "saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove" (1:10). The other accounts of his baptism suggest that all the people heard it; only in Mark does the author make it clear that the Spirit's descent was viewed solely by Jesus. How, then, would Mark know to write about it unless Jesus had shared with his disciples what only Jesus alone had seen and heard? Therefore, this was obviously an event of deep portent to Jesus.

Jesus' baptism was an emotional experience so deep that Jesus could hear God speak to him and had such a powerful impact upon him that it gave him his sense of call and drove him into the wilderness to be tempted with illegitimate ways to accomplish that call.

What happened to Jesus at his baptism, according to Mark, was that for Jesus this act was the act that ended even the slightest hint of participation in the structure and values of a Jewish society that had become so corrupted by the exercise of unilateral power that it had now become a politically oppressive, economically exploitive and religiously dominating system that was the exact opposite of God's intentions for humanity under the Mosaic covenant. Israel had turned its back on the liberating God of Moses and Elijah, even though it surrounded itself with the veneer of Godly worship. It was in his baptism that Jesus turned his back on participating in such a world. From now on, he was committed to the transformation of Israel into the nation God had called it to be – not by cooperating with the systems nor in revolting against them, but in offering a third way – the way of building a people of relational power transformed by God's intervention through Christ into the people God wanted them to be. A new creation – a new world order has just been birthed at Jesus' baptism.

Mark's account then ends, "And just as (Jesus) was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (1:10-11)." Jesus receives God's affirmation of the decision he has just made!

Thus, God is telling Jesus in this revelation following his baptism that he is the one chosen by God to return Israel (and even the world) to society as God intended it to be – a people and its institutions living in political justice, in practicing an economy so sharing wealth that poverty is

eliminated, and – most of all – a people living in loving relationship with God and with each other. He is Messiah. He is the “divine man” whom God has called. But most of all, he is “the Beloved” – the one particularly loved by God who, in his loving of humanity and each person, will demonstrate to them how God also loves them.

Thus, in his baptism, Jesus is both assured by God that he is on the right course, and is confirmed by God as his beloved one who will create a “nation” of people who love one another, build a society centered in love, and are therefore the beloved ones, as well. God’s new world order is inaugurated at Jesus’ baptism!

***The Temptation of Jesus.*** The next statement is equally terse. “And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him” (1:12-13).

The Greek word translated “drove” is a very strong word that could be equally translated “compelled”, “coerced”, “constrained” or “pressed”. It almost suggests that Jesus could not have *not* gone into the wilderness. He felt a divine compulsion to go into the desert! It was the natural response, given the decision he had just made. He needed time to be alone and to reflect both on his decision and the implications of that decision of having given himself to making the kingdom of God happen.

Jesus was driven into the wilderness, to stay there for forty days. The forty days is, in microcosm, a type of what Israel had itself to endure by being in the wilderness for forty years. As that time in the wilderness was Israel’s trial and testing that shaped them into the determined, single-minded people that finally entered into the Promised Land, so the forty days for Jesus was shaping him into the man who could resist the temptation of both the systems of Israel and their demonic power, and who could remain single-minded in working to realize the shalom community.

There in the wilderness, he was “tempted by Satan”. The Greek word translated “tempted” was later used to describe the action of Jesus’ human opponents. He would be tempted by his political opponents to compromise himself (cf. 8:11; 10:2; 12:15), and would need to warn his disciples to resist such temptation themselves, especially after he was gone (14:38).

Mark does not tell us what the temptations were that Jesus battled in the wilderness. Perhaps he didn’t think it was as important to name those temptations, as it was to report that Jesus was tempted to compromise himself. But Matthew and Luke name those temptations, all of which provided apparent strategies for building the shalom community but which would in reality sell that community to Satan. Those temptations were to work for the liberation of the world solely by economic reform that would redistribute wealth (turn “stones into bread” – Mt. 4:3-5; Lk. 4:3-4), by seeking political revolution that would make Jesus the Caesar of the world (worship Satan and all the world’s kingdoms are yours – Mt. 4:8-10; Lk. 4:5-8), or by committing such religious miracles that people would be forced to embrace Jesus (“cast yourself down from the Temple’s pinnacle”) – Mt. 4:5-7; Lk. 4:9-12. The temptation that Jesus faced in the wilderness was to use inappropriate means to reach an appropriate end – to use power unilaterally and coercively in order to get people to embrace relational power to build the kind of world God intends for

humanity. But Jesus resists such temptation so that, at the end of the temptations, the angels came and comforted him.

***The Inauguration of Jesus' Ministry.*** Mark concludes this summary of the beginning of Jesus' ministry with the words, "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (1:14-15)."

Jesus begins his ministry by proclaiming his message of the kingdom, but only begins to do so after John had been arrested. The inauguration of Jesus' ministry is a moment of great celebration, but it is also an ominous moment, because John's arrest foreshadows Jesus' inevitable arrest. The political, economic and religious systems will be threatened by and will vigorously oppose any criticism that calls their authority into question and proposes society as being lived differently than how they manipulate it to perform. They eliminated John. And so they will eliminate Jesus. The shadow is already cast, even at the inauguration of Jesus' ministry.

The words Jesus uses to announce the beginning of his ministry are significant. He states, "The time is fulfilled" and he also announces "the kingdom of God has come near". The two Greek words that are here translated "fulfilled" and "come near" are in the perfect tense, which represents an action begun in the past but continuing on into the present. Thus, by using these words, what Jesus is proclaiming is that God has been at work through his servants in Israel since the time of the patriarchs and of Moses, proclaiming and working for the building of a shalom community of justice, equitable distribution of wealth and a faith based in active relationship with God and one another. The self-serving political, economic and religious systems of Israel and of the world have resisted that kingdom – from Pharaoh through Israelite kings to the present high priest, the king of Galilee and the Roman procurator of Judah. But God's work of liberation and salvation continues on – even when a John the Baptist is arrested. That work of transformation, began in the past, has now been carried on into the present through Jesus and will then be carried on by Jesus' disciples into the future, even when he is betrayed, judged guilty and crucified. For he will rise again and thus create a resurrection people. In and through him, the kingdom of God is now reaching its apex -- because you can't keep a good man down!

**Genesis 9:8-17** is another baptismal story, appearing in the Hebrew Bible. It is the story of the covenant that was made between God and Noah at the close of the flood that had destroyed the remainder of humanity. This, one of the earliest covenants in the Bible, was God's promise to Noah that he would never again destroy the world through a flood.

Covenants were the essential vehicle used throughout the scripture by which God came into agreement with God's people. A covenant was a solemn promise made by one or both members of the agreement that bound that person to that agreement. It was the formal act, usually with some symbolic action, that obligated each to the other – and sometimes had dire consequences resulting from the breaking of the covenant. God covenanted often with Israel and the Church (in fact, calling the Hebrew Bible the "Old Testament" is in essence calling it the "old covenant" between God and humanity, with the "New Testament" being the "new covenant" made between

God and humanity through Jesus). This covenant between God and Noah was one of the earliest covenants found in the Bible.

The terms of this covenant as stated in Genesis 9:8-17 is (1) it is initiated, drawn up and ensured by God; (2) it is an eternal covenant, never to be dissolved; (3) God made this covenant with the entire human race and every form of animal life; (4) its aim is to protect all life from destruction. It is therefore an ecological covenant, proclaiming that it will not be God who brings destruction to the earth. Rather, if the world is ever destroyed, it will be by the hands of humanity, acting out of greed, a lust for power and the perception of humans as being supreme and not God. The rainbow was given as the symbolic action that it would not be God who would destroy this planet.

But how is this covenant about baptism? Every covenant that God made with God's people had a symbolic action or a sign that was used to remind both God and the people of both the making of that covenant and the obligation inherited by embracing that covenant. As the symbol of the Noahic covenant was the rainbow, so the sign of the Abrahamic covenant was circumcision (Gen. 17:11), of the Mosaic covenant was the Sabbath (Exod. 31:13, 17), of the Davidic covenant was David's offspring (II Sam. 7:11-16) and of the New Covenant made through Jesus were the sacraments of the Lord's Supper (Lk. 22:20) and Baptism (I Pet. 3:18-22). Thus the first and the last covenants are inextricably linked. As it was a flood that took away life, so it will be a flood (baptism) that announces life. The waters announce birth into the covenant community and acceptance of God's grace upon the one baptized. As baptism symbolized the initiation of Jesus into his ministry and baptism announces our reception into the community of faith, so the receding waters symbolized new life to Noah and a new beginning for the human family. All are linked together through the waters of baptism!

**Psalm 25:1-10** is the first half of a two-pronged poem. The psalm is an acrostic, in which a letter of the Hebrew alphabet begins each sentence (except in vv. 5 and 18 where the Hebrew letters, *vav* and *qof* are skipped). The psalm is essentially a prayer seeking the forgiveness, guidance and deliverance of God. It is divided into two parts. Verses 1-10 deals with the personal sin and cry for deliverance of the psalmist. Verses 12-22 deal with the corporate sin and cry for deliverance of Israel. Both prayers are developed using a reverse structure (called a *chiastic structure*) with verse 11 as the psalm's pivot point at the psalm's center. Thus, verses 1-3 and 19-21 express the psalmist's hope for both himself and for Israel, verses 4-7 and 16-18 concerns God's mercy and graciousness toward both the psalmist (4-7) and Israel (16-18), and verses 8-10 and 12-15 affirm that God teaches the way of covenant keeping. The lesson for the Psalm for the First Sunday in Lent deals exclusively with the Psalmist himself.

It begins with a commonly used line (e.g., Psalms 86:4, 143:8; cf. 24:7-10) that sets the theme of the Psalm: "In you, O Lord, I lift up my soul." The Psalmist tells us that his soul is encouraged, even in spite of both his sin and the great sin of Israel, because of the character and covenantal love of God. He then continues:

“O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exalt over me. Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous” (vss. 2-3).

Here, the Psalmist expresses his hope in God’s redeeming and forgiving nature. He both expresses his trust in God, but also indicates that he doesn’t want either to be “put to shame” or to have his “enemies exalt over” his downfall. He doesn’t want, by his example, to be a reproach to God and God’s intentions for humanity.

The most intriguing element in this statement is the phrase translated in the NRSV, “Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame.” Obviously, from the remainder of the psalm, it is clear that it is this Psalmist who is the “those who wait for you”. But the Hebrew word translated “wait” is *qawah*, which is better translated “invoke” or “call”. That is, the poet is actually saying, “Do not let those who invoke you aloud be put to shame”. The difference in translation is important to note, because the word “wait” denotes passivity while the word “invoke” denotes activism. It is not that the Psalmist is quietly sitting by, hoping against hope that God will not allow him to be put to shame, and thus hurt his witness to God. Rather, he is actively storming the gates of heaven! He is invoking God to rule in his favor. He is resolutely and unwaveringly crying to God for help!

But why does he need help? The Psalmist continues. “Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long. Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness’ sake, O Lord” (vss. 4-7)!

From this portion of the psalm, we learn why the Psalmist was so energetically “invoking” or “calling” upon God. He had committed grievous sin in “my youth”, sin that was not simply acts of disobedience against God but true “transgressions” of the covenant and of the Law. What was this Psalmist’s youthful sin that weighed upon him, even into his old age?

We get a hint of what it was from verse 11. “For your name’s sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great”. The sin which this Psalmist had committed was to “take the name of the Lord in vain”, thus breaking the third commandment! That does not mean that, in a fit of anger, the Psalmist spoke curses upon someone by using God’s name (e.g., “May God damn you”). What it means is that this Psalmist, during an extended period of his youth, substituted the worship of another god for that of Yahweh. He was not only guilty of breaking the third commandment, but the first, second and fourth, as well. This psalmist had most grievously sinned – and had sinned over and over and over again! He well deserved to be fearful and guilty, for he was asking God to forgive much. This was the crime against God that weighed heavily upon him, even into his old age.

But “God is good – all the time”! The Psalmist pleaded with God to both forgive his transgression and to exercise “steadfast love” (*chesedh*) or grace-filled love toward him. He recognized that there were no grounds upon which he could defend himself or negotiate with

God for his forgiveness. He had sinned so grievously that he had to simply throw himself upon the mercy of God. And so the Psalmist does! And so God does!

“Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees” (vss. 8-10).

The Psalmist is forgiven by God. The Psalmist is embraced by God. And the Psalmist, though totally undeserving, is returned to fellowship with God – and all because of God’s “steadfast love” and “faithfulness” that is faithful to us even when we are faithless to him. With John Newton, writing 25 centuries later, this Psalmist could sing “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me”! That is the amazing story of this hymn of undeserved redemption.

**I Peter 3:18-22.** The Apostle knits the story of Noah, the redemption of a Psalmist and the baptism of Jesus into insights about what the church – God’s new people – need to be about as they seek to live faithful to their baptismal vows. Peter begins by examining what it is that Christ has done for humanity. “For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God” (3:18a). Jesus’ innocent suffering and death, inaugurated in his baptism, was a sacrificial death for us. It was that sacrificial death, substituted for what should have been our death that has led both to Jesus’ and to our resurrection and new life.

In the light of such divine intervention that can liberate us from the shackles of worldly greed, lust for power and the drive to dominate and control, we are now called by God to follow Christ’s example. We are to live a life of integrity as he lived a life of integrity. Driven by the same forces of greed, unilateral power and domination that faced Jesus in his temptation, we too can turn to God for deliverance. Centered in God and his Word in imitation of Jesus, we can use Godly motives to work for God’s kingdom, living a life of integrity in the face of the opposition of the “principalities and powers” of our time (i.e., “disobedient spirits” – vs. 19), confident of ultimate vindication through Christ (vss. 18b-19).

Noah and his family, the author of I Peter points out, were physically saved from drowning in the great flood (vs. 20). His rescue, and then God’s consequent covenant with him, prefigured the waters of baptism and the salvation they signify (vss. 21-22). The floodwaters brought judgment to the wicked. But at the same time, those same waters brought physical salvation for those who were chosen and justified by God (that is, Noah and his family). And it was with that family that God made a covenant to protect all humanity and the environment. Therefore, in the Noah story, Peter contends, baptism symbolizes judgment on sinners and renewal of life on those who respond in faith to Jesus Christ (Romans 6:4).

Thus it is that, like Jesus, we who are baptized can hear God’s call to us to be his beloved, even in the face of temptation, and can carry out that ministry to which Christ calls us, sharing with Christ, with Noah and with all of the worthies in the faith in resisting the priorities of the world and its systems. Instead, we can join with Christ in working for the kingdom God would build

upon the earth, God's shalom community of justice, the equitable sharing of wealth, elimination of poverty and a continuing dynamic relationship with God and our brothers and sisters in faith.

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