“Fullness of Time”

Mark 1:9-15

First Sunday in Lent, Year B, February 21, 2021

First Presbyterian Church, Sandpoint, Idaho

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The Gospel of Mark has an intensity to it, a sense of immediacy and action as it uses words like “Jesus came…just as he was coming…you are…I am…the Spirit immediately…and the time is fulfilled.” In this short paragraph we read this morning, Mark has moved Jesus from relative obscurity, through baptism, into devilish testing in the desert, and into ministry in Galilee. With Mark, no word is wasted as the fullness of time takes shape, and each image is loaded as it pushes us into a cascade of imagery and action.

When Mark says, “In those days,” for example, we can read this in a practical way, moving us from the verses before this as they talk about John the Baptizer out by the Jordan River proclaiming the coming of the one more powerful than he, the one who will baptize in the Holy Spirit. That’s the context set up as Jesus comes “in those days” while John is going about his prophetic work.

“In those days” also marks this within history. In a linear sense, Jesus showing up by the Jordan puts not only a geographic location in play, but calendar time also adds a context for culture, history, and religious development. In many ways, we are far removed from the world of John dressed in camel hair and Jesus coming from Nazareth for baptism. The culture is different, several languages have come and gone. For people like us, using “In those days,” Mark is almost saying, “Once upon a time,” a literary technique, designed to point to the beginning of a story, because he is introducing Jesus to the world through his gospel.

Being that far removed from the original context, there is a danger if we hear, “In those days” and relegate this to the past, thinking this story of Jesus is encapsulated in first century Palestine. It’s easy to label it as irrelevant for us, not sophisticated enough for more modern sensibilities, or simply too strange to deal with outside it’s original setting and audience. But that’s the other thing about Mark. His bluntness doesn’t let us off the hook.

One Labor Day Weekend I performed a wedding. It was held in the mountains, at a lodge, and the ceremony was outside. In the conversations leading up to the wedding, I remember the bride and groom missing one of their close family members who had recently died. In the sunshine of a lovely day, the music escorted the wedding party, the bride and groom met me up in front of all the people there, and as if on cue, a large, colorful butterfly made an appearance. The butterfly flittered a couple of laps around the wedding party, cruised over the people gathered in their seats, then came around me and the groom, finally landing on the bride’s bouquet of flowers. It rested there for a while. I made the observation that, “A butterfly is a classic Christian symbol of Resurrection.” In loving ways that day, bride and groom and the others made a heartfelt connection to the loved one. That person who had died, but in some way was fully present with us, through love. This butterfly became a symbol during a very holy moment. That wedding scene was a reminder for all of us that God’s Spirit is at work in ways that are mysterious yet trustworthy.

Jesus enters the water, which is itself a very loaded image in scripture. Cleansing, renewing, archetypal in life and death, water surrounds Jesus in his baptism. Coming out of the water, a rebirth, the Holy Spirit descends upon him, like a dove, another scriptural image of covenant and peace. God’s voice speaks a confirmation, “You are my beloved son, with you I am so pleased.” This is amazingly affirming, definitely a “feel good” kind of verse.

One of the things Pastors get paid for is to pray. It’s part of the job, comes with the territory. But it’s also an expression of calling, of a holy vocation dedicated to serving Christ and helping others. I am rather careful, however, in the words I choose when praying, because, as Mark’s gospel reminds us, words matter and each word counts because it conveys a power beyond mere letters put together. One word I try and avoid praying for is “strength.” I rarely ask God to give strength, not because we don’t need strength, not because weakness is necessarily preferable, but because strength is only gained through adversity. Another name for strength training is “resistance” training, intentionally creating a strain that must be overcome. Praying for strength, it seems to me, is like asking God to give you adversity. Life is hard enough as it is, so why ask for more? If we seek comfort during challenges, or courage in the face of fear, I usually put a qualifier in there, saying, “God’s strength,” or “strength of the Spirit.”

Sure enough, Mark wastes no time uniting love, fullness, peace, and the gift of Spirit with the reality of increased adversity, challenge, temptation. Jesus comes out of the water, is confirmed by the dove and the voice of God, and “the Spirit immediately drove him into the wilderness.” It was a short trip, he was already on the margins, on the edge, the outside, away from the centers of power, control, and prestige. Faith on the fringe allows room for the Spirit to work in dynamic ways. This wilderness journey lasted a very long time but it’s a necessary troubling, one that every culture tends to have by different names. Vision quest, walkabout, initiation. Our culture tends to lack an agreed upon process for this, where a person gets in touch with their own mortality and the finite, fleeting nature of life as a created being, yet still remaining hopeful and discovering connections to help and guide throughout life and beyond. Everything belongs in this larger Reality. We see this as Jesus is tempted by Satan and waited on by angels, even as he is with the wild beasts. There’s no fear here, no anger or hatred or even spiritual battles. Only unity, purposeful adversity, and strength given and gained.

John is arrested. The heat is getting turned up, the pressure’s on. Jesus makes sure to stay away from Jerusalem just yet, but he does make an appearance, begins public ministry based on his strength of Spirit. His message is countercultural, challenges the limitations of the religious status quo, and is entirely positive. There’s that sense of imminence in Mark… “came to Galilee…proclaiming…good news…of God…time is fulfilled…kingdom is at hand…” It’s a positive message that begins and ends with the term “good news.”

As we journey through the season of Lent, preparing our hearts for Easter, Mark’s Gospel helps us see past, present, and future finding fulfillment as God’s reign unites, encompasses, and holds all of time from outside of time. Grand and lofty visions of something that seems ethereal or distant come front and center, come near, and this leads to the specific, the contextual, the personal. Like Jesus seeing the dove descend and hearing God’s voice of love, we too are called to turn and notice: there is more in life than meets the eye and God’s Spirit is in our midst as we are held in Love, even in that mix of challenges and comfort. There’s a call to trust, to know the heavens tear open and the spiritual realms are pulling us forward. We are not left to our own process, but invited to lean into this vision of the heart, the unfolding of the soul, an opening of the mind as believing helps us unlearn so many preconceived perspectives as the Spirit dynamically shapes faith anew.

Thanks be to God for holy strength, held in divine Love and union. May we, like Jesus, learn the art of letting go, dying to ourselves, rebirthing in Christ, so we may live in the fullness of time the good news at hand. And may God’s humble and vulnerable love, in Christ, be glorified now, even as forever. Amen.