

The Ministry of Jesus: Preparation and Launch
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Mark 1:9-15

It is the First Sunday of Lent; simply stated, this is the time in which we prepare our hearts and our minds for the observance of Holy Week and Good Friday, and for the celebration of the Resurrection on Easter. It is to be a time marked by spiritual reflection and self-examination, as we ask ourselves what it means to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. And as we do at the beginning of Lent every year, we find ourselves standing with him on the banks of the muddy waters of the Jordan River, listening to the uncompromising voice of a man who wears animal skins and subsists on whatever he can forage from the wilderness landscape.

Stop and think for a minute: the Gospel of Mark says nothing about Jesus' birth or parentage, but he does give us a full description of his kinsman, John the Baptist, describing John's ministry as "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

Repentance: That's what was on Jesus' mind as he waded into those waters and leaned back on John's arm, sinking below the surface. But as we gaze on this scene, as we always do, we have to ask, *Why?* Why repentance? What does this have to do with him? We can't imagine that he has much guilt on his conscience; why does Jesus need to be baptized? But for John—not to mention Jesus—the call to repentance is not just to be sorry for some things which you regret doing or saying and then to move on, but rather to find a new direction altogether. That's what repentance means: an about face, a change of course, the beginning of something new. And so, for Jesus, what is more likely than trying to ease a guilty conscience is that this is the time he is coming to terms with his call to ministry, the mission that God has for him. Is he ready for it? Does he wish he could just keep his life as a humble carpenter? Would he like to be a healer, but doesn't know if he wants to confront the evils of the world and the hypocrisy of the religion of his people? Does he suspect even now that the road will be very challenging, may require suffering?

We can't say for sure, but we can surely believe that as the waters flow over him, whatever might have been holding him back—any regrets he may have harbored, any doubts he may have had, any misgivings he may have felt about his future—all, all are washed away, and he knows that a new direction has been charted, a new road stretches out before him.

Is there a new direction in your future? Not because of any guilt you feel or any deficiencies in your life, but because God is calling to you, offering you something new, wanting you to reach for more than you have been, urging you to become more fully the person God intended you to be? Perhaps in some way it will involve a break from the past, perhaps a change of attitude or a shift in a long-held opinion or belief; or it may be the acceptance of a new role, seizing a new opportunity, undertaking a new challenge.

Of course, you may not be ready to answer that question just yet; but as we gather here at the beginning of this holy season, we should remember that just as surely as Jesus was drawn to the Jordan those many centuries ago, so also are we drawn here today by the Spirit. Just remember that just as surely as Jesus emerged from the waters of baptism to receive a blessing of from

God—“This is my beloved Son”—so also that blessing is reenacted every week as we pour the water of baptism and receive assurance of pardon: God tells us each week that we too are God’s beloved sons and daughters.

But that brings us necessarily to the next scene in the drama: We have just seen the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending, we’ve just heard God’s voice saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved,” and the gospel tells us: *And immediately Spirit drove him out into the wilderness.*

The Spirit *drove* him into the wilderness. Pushed him, forced him, *drove him*. The same Spirit that brings divine blessing now brings extraordinary testing: Mark tells us, and the other gospel writers agree, *He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan...*

Now here again, every year at this time we are reminded of this central fact of Jesus life—and this is the only way to look at it—his preparation for ministry. Just as his baptism represents his coming to terms with and accepting his vocation, this sojourn in the wilderness represents his coming to terms with all the things that could go wrong for him. Mark, as usual, is very spare on the details of this period of testing; Matthew and Luke give us to understand that they have to do with the very real temptation to use his spiritual powers to gain worldly ends: Hungry after forty days without food? Just turn these stones to bread! Cast yourself down from the pillars of the temple—let’s see how great your faith really is! And if you’re just willing to compromise with evil a little bit, there’s no end to the power you can have on earth! Such a deal!

Friends, if we want to follow in Jesus’ footsteps, we’re going to have to recognize that temptation and testing await us as well. That’s why we read this passage. Just as the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, the Spirit has driven us here for the beginning of this season. We set aside this period of Lent to take a good look at the state of our spiritual life, at the quality of our relationships, at the status of our vocation. And we will inevitably be confronted with the truth that, left to our own devices, we will make mistakes in judgment, errors in execution. We’ll make decisions out of less than pure motivation. We’ll take the path of least resistance. We’ll do what’s easiest. We are here because we already know what Jesus told his sleepy disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane: *the Spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak*. We already know that.

And so we need to be reminded of what the Letter to the Hebrews tells us, that *we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin*. To follow in the footsteps of Jesus is accept the humanity of our temptation, to embrace the tests to which the Spirit *drives* us, knowing that in the end, as with Jesus, God’s angels will minister unto us.

And then, the journey begins in earnest with these thrilling 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."*

We must not let the familiarity of these words dull their impact on us. We’ve already seen how Jesus identifies himself with the ministry of John, submitting to his baptism; now, in the face of John’s arrest, Jesus steps into the breach, and echoing John’s call to repentance, begins his own ministry. His mission, says Mark, is to proclaim the good news of God: to announce that *the time*

is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. And we might notice that the Greek word for time that used here is not the one which means chronological time—what day or hour it is—but rather *καιρος*, which means “the right time,” and what he means is that God has chosen this moment to accomplish his purpose. Jesus himself of course is the embodiment of this kingdom of which he speaks, but we see that kingdom revealed not in political maneuvering in the halls of power or in any attempt to wield influence in the most high-ranking circles of his religion; rather, he embodies in the kingdom in his attitudes toward the poor and the outcast, in his ministry to the sick and the possessed, in his challenge to the rich and powerful, in his welcome to all who simply want to hear the good news of God.

And as we noted a moment ago, that message necessarily leads to a call *to repent and believe the good news*, and we cannot miss that this is John’s major theme as well. The announcement of the coming of the Kingdom means a new direction for individuals in their spiritual journey, but also a new direction for the community in the way we relate to one another and to the world around us.

And so we who would follow in the footsteps of Jesus become at once those *who are called by Jesus, and those who call others to follow*. To follow in Jesus’ footsteps is know that the call to repentance is always in the air, and just like Jesus, we are to be ready to follow the new direction God has for us, and to call others to join us. To follow in Jesus’ footsteps is also to accept that, just as Jesus went into the wilderness to confront the forces of evil in the world, so also we must be ready to examine our own lives, to see where greater reliance on God is needed. That’s what this season of Lent is all about.

And to follow Jesus is to hear his call to a new direction in our own lives, and then to join with him in announcing that God has come near to our world. Our Presbyterian Book of Order lists as one of the “great ends” of the church that we are to be “the exhibition of the kingdom of God to the world.” And so to follow Jesus is to demonstrate that we intend to live as citizens of that kingdom, welcoming all into his embrace. May these holy days of Lent enable us to examine our lives and our faith, that we may truly embody God’s kingdom for all to see.