

## Mark 1:9-15

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." 12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

This Sunday's Gospel reading comprises three episodes:

- Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:9-11),
- his temptation (1:12-13),
- and his inaugural preaching (1:14-15).

Mark offers us the organizing point (1:15a): "***the kingdom of God has come near.***"

"The kingdom of God" is *the* announcement around which the rest of Jesus' words and deeds revolve.

In Mark "God's kingdom" is ***mentioned fourteen times***: its coming, its peculiarities, to whom it belongs, and challenges to its entry.

God's kingdom -- is not a place but a power.

***It is God's dynamic potency, power and presence to put right all that is wrong in this world.***

Mark 1:9-14 offers us clues to this kingdom's character.

- At *Jesus' baptism* the kingdom's end-time features are front and center. Emerging from the Jordan, Jesus "saw the heavens torn apart." The Spirit's descent upon (literally, "into" [eis]) *Jesus recalls the prophets' promise that Israel would be reinfused by the Spirit in the last days.*
- **Jesus alone** hears the heavenly voice addressing him, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased": a scriptural embrace interweaving Psalm 2:7, Genesis 22:1, and Isaiah 42:1.
- Flashes of God's kingdom illuminate *Jesus' temptation*, which Mark narrates.



- Unlike the other Gospels, in Mark the Spirit “immediately drove” Jesus into the wilderness for forty days of temptation. The desert is a place of arduous testing and divine deliverance.
- **An interesting thought:** under the Spirit’s aegis Jesus stands at the center of God’s in-breaking kingdom as both beneficiary (at his baptism) and wrestler (at his temptation).
- “Now after *John was arrested*” is no throwaway clause. It casts a long shadow over John’s superior successor, Jesus, who will also be “betrayed”, “arrested”, and “handed over”.
- Like John, Jesus, too, will die by the hand of a weak overlord who is outwitted by others’ schemes. *The kingdom proclaimed by Jesus clashes against mortal principalities and powers that do not gracefully yield to God’s governance.*
- Listen up, folks! Lent is a big moment for meditating, thinking, listening.

The road sign in Mark points us in a different direction. “The time is fulfilled” – rather, it is time to make a U-turn.

This time is not *Chronos*, measured by calendar or clock. It is *Kairos* -- a time of critical spiritual, godly decision: not every day, but D-Day. This *Kairos* is filled to fullness: the cup has been topped up (Psalm 23, cup overflowed), its contents brimming to overflow.

Jesus doesn’t just say God’s rule is coming, he also says “the time is fulfilled.” It is, of course, *Kairos*-time of which Jesus is speaking; not the steady beating of the clock that characterizes *Chronos*, but rather the **magisterial, pregnant, significant *Kairos*** of God’s action and activity. Interestingly, the only other time Jesus utters the word “fulfilled” is at Gethsemane when, after he has been betrayed and is about to be arrested, he says, “Let the Scriptures be fulfilled” (14:49), even as all his disciples then desert him in fear.

Lent is to Easter as Advent is to Christmas: **God has set the kingdom into motion**, which will soon go into turbo-drive. As with Advent, so also with Lent: the suitable response is to “repent and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15b).

“Repentance” is not feeling miserable over our sins or regretting that we haven’t been more religious. To repent (*metanoein*) is to turn our minds God-ward: a 180-degree swing-around from kingdoms of our own fabrication toward God’s rectifying power (Mark 8:33).

Make a U-turn; get on the off ramp and go the other way. Trust God who is driving.



“Belief” in Mark is not creedal or even particularly cognitive: *it is trust*, relying less on the head and more on the gut. After unfurling of our sails to catch the Spirit’s current, *we rely on God’s ability to carry us beyond the squalls. And God is able –*

- to forgive our sins (2:1-12),
- to retrieve us from waywardness (2:15-17),
- to cast out diabolical powers we cannot control (5:1-20),
- to restore us from years of wretchedness (5:24b-34),
- to hold onto us tightly when we turn tail and run away (14:27-28; 16:1-8).

Jesus demonstrates how God’s power is propelled by *mercy*. That is good news: the best anyone could hope to hear. **Ponder that.**

In Mark, the Spirit did not *lead* Jesus into the wilderness, but *drove* him there. Mark employs a verb that has a more violent sense than we might imagine and certainly more so than the one Matthew and Luke employ to characterize the Spirit’s guidance. Of course, perhaps we should not be surprised that the Spirit whose entrance rends the heavens to tatters now drives forth – even “kicks out” – Jesus into the wilderness.

*This is a sober and, a helpful reminder that Christian faith is not a panacea, it’s not an answer to all our questions and problems, and it’s certainly not an invitation to the easy life.*

Baptism into the Spirit of Christ is to be called to, indeed driven into, an adventure that will include *testing, challenge, and temptation.*

***Lent is a time where we step back***, contemplate our mortality, refrain from indulgence, not so much, as a spiritual contest but rather to make room to behold the coming of God’s rule and activity in and through the ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This helps us identify with Jesus.

So much clouds our vision and distracts our gaze from God’s work in our lives. *Lent tries to make room to refocus and recognize God at work where we are.* And God’s work and activity is not limited to Jesus’ road to Jerusalem so long ago; but it animates and illuminates our lives today. It helps us see the signs.

- What is our service?
- What is our task?
- What is our cause?
- What more can I do?
  - Water



- Immigration
- Homeless
- The disabled
- How is the energy of the Holy Spirit stirring within me?

We spend inordinate amounts of money and time and/or undergo painful procedures to maintain an appearance of youth. We post only those pictures and tidbits to our social media that portray a happy and fulfilling life. We are reluctant to disclose anything that is particularly difficult for fear of embarrassment. But embarrassment from what?

Are we embarrassed that we are not perfect? Why do we not acknowledge that our life is touched by loss? What is the shame to face dying? Let's become real.

This passage for the first Sunday Lent is helpful first because it is *realistic* – life is filled by challenges, testing, moments of feeling overwhelmed, sobering news, and loss. It became **real** for the disciples. “This Jesus would die.”

Equally important, however, this passage is also important and helpful because it is *hopeful*. The Spirit present at Jesus' baptism propels him into the wilderness but does not leave him unprepared or alone. Indeed, it is critical to note that the Spirit does not drive him forth until he has received the affirmation of Baptism that he is God's beloved Son, well pleasing to his Father, and recipient of the heavens-rending power of the Spirit. And he was not abandoned in his testing, but received the attentions of angels. And when he comes forth to begin his ministry at the occasion of John's arrest, he does so aware that the time – God's time – is ripe, indeed full to overflowing.

*We receive in Baptism the affirmation and acceptance and promise of accompaniment from the God who created the heavens and the earth, the One who caused light to shine in the darkness and raises the dead to life. What can we not accomplish? Of course, we will be called to testing and challenge and suffering and growth –*

- *this world God loves needs our care and attention, our action and commitment, and God has called us to be part of the struggle as agents of love and protection! But we do not enter this alone.*
- *The same Spirit that conveyed God's promises also drives us into a world desperate to hear of and experience God's love and continues to tend us through angels we recognize and others that come to us at unawares.*
- *We also will be drawn, called, and even driven to those places that need special attention because they seem at times hopeless, yet always with the promise that the time for God's rule that Jesus inaugurated continues.*
- *Indeed, we labor and struggle and work and hope confident that, because Jesus was raised from the dead, nothing can ultimately defeat those aligned with God's love and life.*



- *Lenten courage recognizes that the road to resurrection leads always and inexorably through death. The Apostle Paul, one of the earliest and most articulate heralds of the difference Christ's death and resurrection makes, sang that "**death has lost its sting**", not that we will not experience dying.*

Jesus starts his ministry when John is arrested, and that arrest will result in his death.

Jesus himself is given over to death in the crucifixion. We, too, are dying, and Lent reminds us of that... in order that we might also be reminded that God *always* draws life from death.

We all face death. We all experience loss. Wherever we are in our faith journey, whatever **place of loss and dying we are experiencing; we are not without God's presence**. Indeed, God is most reliably and powerfully at work wresting life from death, giving hope to the hopeless, and drawing us to life abundant that begins now and continues into the age to come.

God is with us at HAGL, even as He was with Jesus: In Baptism, in temptation, and as we live hearing and applying the preaching of Jesus. **AMEN.**

