

MY BELOVED

Mark 1:9-13

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Nazareth...Nazareth!

As we continue to build this story of Mark's, we don't want to forget the importance of Jesus emerging from his hometown of Nazareth. The most recent examination of ancient evidence indicates a population less than five hundred people! As indicated in John's gospel, the prevailing view of this town was revealed by Nathanael's comment, "Can anything good come from Glenn Springs... I mean Nazareth?" He was not an ivy leaguer or the winner of American idol or a sports star or from Atlanta or a child of the Rockefellers. He came from a nothing family, in a nowhere town, working with his hands, as a carpenter. Right from the very beginning of this gospel Mark's readers would have read that and thought, "What? really?" A world-changing savior simply does not come from that type of background. And, perhaps, that is even more true in our own time. Just look at the universities our Supreme Court members attended.

But nevertheless, the more famous John the Baptizer has humbled himself before this carpenter from Nazareth. But to pass the torch from John – the forerunner, the Elijah – to Jesus the Christ will require a baptism. A baptism that even seems to change our Lord. This is no token event for mere appearances. Not according to Mark.

As I said previously, Mark goes to great lengths to demonstrate that Jesus' identity as the Messiah emerges in small doses to the crowd that follows him and even the disciples taught by him.

But in this baptism, we see that Jesus himself is discovering what it means to be the Messiah. It is a very personal event for him. In Mark, it feels like the crowd has dissipated before the baptism. Luke leaves us the impression that the crowd witnessed the event, heard the voice of God, and saw the dovelike presence of the Spirit. Mark tells us

specifically that it was Jesus who saw the heavens opened, the Spirit descend, and heard the voice of God.

It is something for Jesus alone to experience. His identity is still a secret and it leaves us with the impression that this is an existential moment for Jesus. Whether it is a new realization for Jesus, or more simply the triggering of his devoted ministry, we will never know. But it is clear that something profound happened and it drives him into the wilderness. Seeing the triggers for this monumental event is very instructive for our own faith. Like Jesus, seeing the heavens open, hearing the voice of God, and being tested are the same paths we follow to become our true selves.

As Jesus emerged from the waters, he witnessed a profoundly dramatic intrusion of God into history. Markan scholar Lamar Williamson translates it this way, "[Jesus] saw the heavens in the process being ripped apart." This is not an easy, peaceful feeling of a gentle effervescent appearance of God. Don't let the dove fool you. In fact, the word for "torn apart" is the same powerful word used to describe the rending of the temple curtain upon the death of Jesus. This event echoes the yearning of the prophet Isaiah (64:1ff):

*O that you would tear open the heavens
and come down...so that the mountains
would quake at your presence...so that
the nations might tremble at your
presence! When you did awesome deeds
that we did not expect...*

This event fulfills that yearning.

But though the moments are incredibly powerful, we can still miss them because the presence of God is hard to see with our normal sight. Jesus sees it as a dove. This is not meant to denote the appearance of a white, winged bird. But

rather a sleek movement; more than seeing it directly before you, you sense its presence.

If you are distracted, you might miss it. But when it catches your eye, it captures your soul.

When we are awake enough to notice these moments, we are caught off guard. It is the intrusion of God into our lives when we least expect it. One person experienced it when she saw a man with blue eyes, across the street. It suddenly ripped her into memories of her late husband. Against her better judgment, she walked over to him. This man was a beggar; she gave him change to hear his voice. She left that encounter feeling as if God had placed her late husband in her path to bless her on that day.

The heavens were torn open on that day.

It is these moments of shock that elevate our faith to the next layer of depth and awe. For Jesus it was also meant to connote his chosen status, as we learn in John 1:33: “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.”

This Holy Spirit baptism is surely not all sweetness and light. Immediately, like a bird tossed by its mother from its nest and forced to fly, Jesus is tossed into the heart of wilderness country to be tested. Luke has this pleasant-sounding transition: “Jesus was *led* by the Spirit.” Not Mark. In Mark, Jesus was not invited, nor cajoled, nor gently suggested to go into this back country; he was “driven”! Driven by God’s spirit. It’s the same word used to describe Jesus casting out demons! Jesus was cast out into the wilderness. In John, there is no wilderness mentioned. In that text, Jesus is the one in control.

But Mark gives us the impression that this is happening *to* Jesus, not through him; Jesus is not the one in control. This destiny is being thrust upon him from the divine above. Not on his own timetable. Mark sees this as a critical element of this humble, servant Messiah.

Our English text reads “tempted”. He was driven there to be tempted by Satan. But Mark uses the word “*peirazó*” throughout his gospel – more to describe testing, than tempting. This time in the wilderness is meant to hone Jesus’ mission through trials. Like a football player doing “two-a-days” before the season begins.

It is the same way we grow...as human beings and as disciples.

Think about those moments in life that used to amp your blood pressure and make your heart pound. Perhaps it was a gruff word from your boss or a verbal jab from your neighbor. Only now you have become more centered in yourself and you take it in stride. That is how testing helps us to respond with grace.

Nineteenth century abolitionist and clergyman, Henry Ward Beecher, lived during the Civil War, the emergence of Evolution, and the early days of the women’s suffrage movement. “In the years leading up to the Civil War, he raised money to purchase slaves from captivity and to send rifles — nicknamed “Beecher’s Bibles” — to abolitionists fighting in Kansas.” (Wikipedia) He weathered the challenges and came to be called the greatest man in American, because of his belief in the power of trials and testing. As he wrote, “We are always on the anvil; by trials God is shaping us for higher things.” Don’t you feel as if you are being pounded and shaped by the anvil in this time.

Think about how you want the anvil of our times to shape your children or grandchildren or nieces and nephews. How are we shaping them in this crisis? It is urgent for us to use these trials to shape them and their faith into resilient, strong people of God.

But Jesus would need to endure hardship hardly known to any other in history. And so, God would gift him with one more thing that would carry him all the way to the cross. Before Jesus is thrust into the wilderness, he hears a voice: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” This voice immediately calls to mind the inheritor of the

throne of David described in 2 Samuel 7: "I will raise up your offspring after you, ..., and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. *I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.*"

After witnessing the powerful presence of God, Jesus came to know the blessed love of God. The claim by the creator of heaven and earth that he is indeed the precious one. Jesus' moniker as the beloved is thought not only to reflect his earthly character but his eternal identity as the one eternally loved by God. But, in this moment, as his ministry was set to begin, those words were a powerful source of assurance and confidence granted to Jesus as the hard road ahead was set to begin.

God does not reserve such blessed words for only the Christ. When we hear such words of absolute endearing acceptance, admiring joy, and all-encompassing grace it instills an inner peace that we can carry with us for the rest of our days. I remember sitting with Bill Arthur, our beloved interim pastor, in his final days at the Hospice house. In those moments of his pain and sense of impending death there was a lightness of Spirit that clearly triumphed over any terrestrial agony and sorrow he knew. Perhaps more than anyone I have known, he carried that inner confidence of God's loving power, that blessed everyone who hears his voice. Because when you heard him, you instantly knew; he has heard the voice of God that has come down from heaven declaring you are my beloved child, because nothing else could have led him to speak with such grace, joy, and love.

Amen.