

Sermon for Lent I, February 18 2024

As we begin this holy season of Lent, the Gospel places us firmly alongside of Jesus as he begins his ministry. Since this is the Gospel of Mark, there is very little detail, just a list of events:

Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan, and the voice of God affirms that he is God's Son and that God is pleased with him.

Jesus goes out into the desert and the devil tempts him but Jesus doesn't accept the devil's offers, and he's cared for in the wilderness by angels.

All of this is preparatory work. The real work starts not with something Jesus does, but by something Herod does: Herod arrests John the Baptist.

Sidebar here: This is not the same Herod who killed all the Jewish baby boys when Jesus was born; this is Herod Antipas, was a very nasty person. He decided he wanted to marry his half-brother's wife – conveniently named Herodias – so he divorced his first wife and took Herodias as his own. John the Baptist saw that as deeply wrong, and said so. Out loud. To anyone who would hear. Herod was not fond of criticism – what Roman Emperor ever was? – and so he had John arrested. Eventually, John was executed.

By the way, a sidebar within a sidebar: this marriage caused more damage than what happened to John the Baptist. It sparked a political conflict, because his new wife's father ruled some territory that had been in dispute and this marriage triggered a war for control of that territory. And a few years later, Herod and Herodias were sent into exile to Gaul because of a purported conspiracy against the Roman emperor Caligula.

Okay, now back to the story at hand.

John the Baptist is sometimes called the Forerunner: he was the one who foretold that the Messiah was coming, and that he might baptize people with water for repentance but that the Messiah would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and with transforming fire.

But John was not just saying the words describing what would happen: the things that happened to him foretold what would happen to Jesus.

John was betrayed, arrested, and handed over. Eventually he was executed. The Greek word used to describe all these actions is precisely the same one used to describe how Jesus was betrayed, arrested and handed over, and would die by the hand of the same weak overlord who ended up exiled in a foreign land.

The whole of the story that we journey through in this season seems to be about our grief of what Jesus goes through, but perhaps we can imagine something very different if we pay attention to the last verse in today's gospel: *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."*

What do we hear? Not a "poor pitiful me" statement from Jesus, but a statement of Good News: Jesus is among us. The kingdom of God has come near. It's now time to believe the Good News that I tell you about."

Jesus knows how this is going to end. He knows that his troubles with Herod Antipas will be a magnified version of what happens to John the Baptist. But he's got work to do, and stories to tell, and people to heal.

He's pointing everyone FORWARD to what is possible, and he doesn't shy away from this work, no matter what the cost.

On Wednesday, at our Ash Wednesday service, I reminded you that the strangeness of Lent is that it's a painful story that has a surprise ending: the conquest of death. Eternal Life. If we simply focus on the fact that Jesus dies on the cross, we miss the point of why he wants to tell us Good News. We get stuck in thinking of him as some sort of failed prophet.

But although this is hard work, it is also about the fact that he conquers death. He is resurrected. And he tells us that we can be resurrected as well. This work that he does: the teaching and preaching and healing

and arguing and walking, always walking, and praying, this is the same work he invites us to do as we seek resurrection and eternal life. He doesn't shy away from telling us that it will be hard. He shows us that others might not accept what he has taught if we try to share it. But his promise is sure: he redeems us. His grace lifts us up.

So this season of Lent.

This story of the Messiah come to earth beginning his ministry as fully human and fully divine.

How do we live into this with Jesus Christ?

Maybe the first question is the one that may be hovering in your brain: what is keeping me from following the way of Jesus? The Way of Love?

Are we feeling too unworthy? We know the stories of so many people who did God's work as best they could. The Holy Spirit and the angels were with them and are with us.

Are we feeling too tired? There is work for everyone, work that can be accomplished no matter what our situation, and every bit of that work matters.

Are we feeling too angry, what with the state of our world today? We can take that anger and turn it into something that is productive and will bring about change.

This season is a time for us to come unstuck, to break the patterns that keep us from living into the people Jesus knows we can be. We honor what he did by doing what we can. May we think and pray and then act on that in whatever way we can, in thanksgiving for Jesus who loves us and in hope for a better world.

Amen.