

1st Sunday in Lent, February 21, 2021
Mark 1:9-15

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Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Helen and I have been watching that English farming show again. Last night we returned to the most recent season that ran out of new episodes when we were last watching it. The episode we watched was filmed in February of 2020, just before the pandemic hit, and they're going to get into how the pandemic has affected the farmers in upcoming episodes. I'll probably let you know what I've learned from that at some point down the road, but what grabbed me last night and what tied into Mark's Gospel that I've been studying for us recently, is that it was the beginning of lambing season. There aren't many sheep around these parts as far as I know, but I imagine that there will be some calving going on pretty soon. What's true for lambs is true for calves as well. The first moments of a newborn's life are crucial. First, the lamb or calf has to take its first breaths. One trick that Scottish farmers use is to take a piece of straw and stick it in the calf's nose in order to get it to sneeze and shake its head, which will help clear the airways of the mucous and fluid. Once the animal starts breathing, the next thing that needs to happen is the mother needs to accept the newborn and begin bonding with it. The third thing that needs to happen over the next few hours is that the newborn lamb or calf needs to stand up and begin nursing. The main takeaway from all of this for our purposes is that birth is a traumatic process with a lot of urgency about it. Coming out of the birth canal is only the beginning that quickly sets the newborn on a life-or-death journey.

This is now the second time since the beginning of the church year that we have had the baptism of Jesus in our Gospel reading, and also the second time we've had the end of this reading, which is the beginning of Jesus ministry. But it's the first time we have had them together. Both of them are important enough to repeat, but here in this framing of the text we get to see how they are connected. Baptism in the Christian tradition is of course loaded with imagery of new birth, and since there is no other birth account in Mark's Gospel, you could say that his baptism is it. Jesus shows up, gets baptized, and then is immediately driven out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. And that is the preparation for his earthly ministry. This is what was on my mind as we were watching that farming show. Just as newborn livestock are immediately thrust into the difficult business of living, so Jesus, as soon as he is baptized and named Son of God by the voice from the cloud, is immediately thrust into the difficult work of his mission, driven out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit.

The church early on made a connection between Jesus' baptism and our own, and between his temptation in the wilderness and our preparation for our own lives of faith. In the early church, the season of Lent was the time for baptismal preparation. Candidates for baptism went through instruction in the faith in this period, leading up to their baptism at the Easter Vigil. In the Easter season that followed, they were accompanied by their now-fellow Christians in living into their baptismal vocation.

It has recently occurred to me that the whole of the Gospel according to Mark is also making this connection for us, preparing us for our baptismal calling to be agents of God's mission in Jesus Christ. And the key to it all is the three times in the Gospel that Jesus is explicitly called the Son of God, aside from the very first verse, which is really the title of the Gospel, as I mentioned in a sermon back in Advent.

The first time happens here in our Gospel reading this morning, at Jesus' baptism. As he is coming up out of the water, Jesus sees the Holy Spirit descending upon him and hears the voice of

God say to him, “you are my beloved Son.” Notice, though, that only Jesus sees and hears this. And then, as I just mentioned, the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness.

The second time Jesus is identified as the Son of God was in last week’s Gospel reading, the Transfiguration. That took place after the disciples, specifically Peter, had identified Jesus as the Messiah, the promised king of Israel, but also after Jesus revealed that he was preparing to go to Jerusalem, where he would both be crucified and raised from the dead. As I mentioned last week, the disciples were not happy with that revelation. And so up on the mount of Transfiguration, God now speaks to the disciples, and says, “this is my Son. Listen to him!” And as soon as that happens, the Transfiguration vision ends and Jesus leads the disciples down the mountain and makes for Jerusalem. The disciples are undergoing instruction here, I think. They recognize that he is God’s Messiah, but they don’t yet quite grasp what that involves. Still, imperfect though their understanding is, as imperfect as their faith and trust in Jesus is, they follow.

The final time in Mark’s Gospel that Jesus is identified as the Son of God is coming up in five weeks, at the other end of Lent on Passion Sunday, when we will read through Mark’s account of Jesus’ crucifixion. Right near the end of that account, immediately after Jesus breathes his final breath and the curtain of the temple is torn in two, the Roman centurion who is overseeing his crucifixion, says this: “Truly this man was God’s son!” The first two times it was God speaking. Now, after Jesus has completed his mission, it is a human being who finally says what God was saying all along, and, ironically a human being who was Jesus’ enemy, responsible for putting him to death. What happens next thrusts us into the story. Jesus is buried in the tomb, and on the third day is discovered by the women to have been raised from the dead, just as he said. Mark’s gospel ends with the young man at the tomb announcing the resurrection and instructing the women to go tell the disciples. But they don’t say anything because they are afraid. This puts us, the readers and hearers of this story on the spot. Now *we* know the story. Now it is us to us who have been baptized into Jesus death and resurrection, to be the agents of proclaiming and living out that story in our own lives. Will we be afraid, too, and not say anything to anyone? Or will we be driven by the Holy Spirit into mission for the sake of the world that God has so loved in Jesus Christ?

Just as Lent has been a time for baptismal preparation in the church, and still is in some places, so it is also a time for reviewing and renewing our baptismal vocation. I encourage you to use this gift of time that we set apart each year. Use it for daily devotions, for fasting in one form or another, and for being generous with your resources on behalf of those in need. It’s not too late to start. We’re only four days in, and Sundays don’t really count. And here’s an extra challenge. Read through the Gospel of Mark, from beginning to end. It’s the shortest of the Gospels. You can do it in one sitting. Or you can read a chapter a day. There’s still time to do that twice over, with several days to spare. It will give you a better sense of the big picture, how it all fits together and leads you into your own life of faith. And here’s another challenge: join the Adult Sunday School during Lent as Pastor Janet Lepp leads us through a study of Jesus’ Passion, and how we can use those stories from the four Gospels to deepen and strengthen our relationship with God and with one another. All of these – prayer, fasting, generosity, and study – are traditional practices of Lent that help us to reinforce God’s love and forgiveness in our own lives so that we might become God’s partners in extending that love and forgiveness to the world around us. May our Lenten journey be blessed. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.