

Mk. 1:9-15

1st Sunday in Lent

February 16, 1997

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

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

I think it was the corner of West 22nd and Oberlin Avenue in Lorain. West 22nd is Rt. 611, maybe you know that corner; on the northwest is a large parking lot for stores mostly abandoned. Broken glass, debris, asphalt in need of repair, yes, that's the place he sent him. I don't think I'd like to spend a single night there, but he did, forty days and forty nights, in that very place. You can imagine what it was like at 2 am. Drug dealers, gangs, women whose lives were going nowhere, violent ones. The police keep their guns ready when they answer a call there. Yet he sent him there unarmed. And you know what? - he was safe. Angels kept him safe.

No wonder he came speaking of God's rule. The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God has come near; turn and believe the good news.

Think of how good that news is: God's Son is safe even in that wilderness on the corner of East 22nd and 611.

And we thought he could only be safe in Avon Lake, the settled land, and not in the wilderness. Why, we had given up on the wilderness - in my own heart I believed that gangs and prostitutes and drug dealers are all beyond hope. Build more jails, lock them up. Pass another ordinance; keep them out of our civilized towns. Divide the world between those worth saving and those who are lost forever. Circle the wagons, keep our children safe.

But the moment God announced to Jesus that he was God's Son, right then after his baptism when the Spirit of God came upon him – immediately, Mark tells us - the Spirit of God drove Jesus out into the wilderness. God's child will be safe even there.

Even though Satan is there, and wild beasts, Jesus is safe there.

The Kingdom of God is near.

And I had given up hope even on me.

Do you know what that is like, to think that I'm just the way I am and that will have to be good enough? I make peace with my sin as if part of me can belong to God, and part of me not. So I hold a grudge, I remember] exactly what another did to hurt me. I keep all that hurt out there in the wilderness as if God cannot touch it there. No, I do not offer it to God in prayer, praying for a new heart and a right spirit. Lots of things I do not want a new heart about, the wilderness of my greed, the wilderness of my judgmental attitude, the wilderness of my prejudices. No, I want to think there are parts of life that don't belong to God.

But immediately the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness.

To the wilderness Jesus returns again and again when he needs to be refreshed in prayer. Right there on the corner of 611 and Oberlin Avenue.

Do you know what else happened there in the wilderness? One day there was a crowd of more than 5000 who had followed Jesus there, and he fed them. With five loaves and two fish, and there were twelve baskets full of leftovers, there in the wilderness. Why that parking lot became like paradise when Jesus was there.

Is there anything Jesus can't do? Is there anyone or anywhere he cannot claim?

Jesus who was safe in the presence of Satan, safe among the wild animals, would not be safe in the Holy city. He would not be safe among his closest friends, one of whom would betray him, another of whom would deny him.

Jesus would not be safe among the religious leaders; he would not be safe as he stood before the representatives of the government. We need to pay attention.

It was not in the wilderness that Jesus was crucified but in the Holy City. Not gang members and criminals and prostitutes condemned him, but the godly folk, Lutheran ministers, the people in church every Sunday morning.

We need to pay attention.

The kingdom of God is near. There is no part of you that God is not interested in claiming, no part of your life or behavior that is exempt from God. And no place on earth, nor anyone on earth that God is not interested in ruling over. If we, God's people, would be ready to write some of them off, thinking we could have God over here on the side and forget about them, then we are putting the Son of God on trial, condemning him and all that he stands for to death. If we think God has no right to all of our life, we become those who call for Jesus death in us, and all the world turns dark.

A child is being baptized today. Just how much claim is God making on this child? 5%? 15%? 75%? “You are my son,” God is declaring, “my Spirit will be in you, my rule, my kingdom will be seen in you.” God has grabbed hold of Dennis' whole life just as God is grabbing hold of the whole world.

Even the wilderness at the corner of 611 and Oberlin Avenue, and more surprising still even the temple at the corner of Lake Rd. and Highway 83, and most surprising of all the temple of the Holy Spirit that is your body and mine.

The kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe this Good news.

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