

B Lent 1 2.18.24

Mark 1:9-15

Focus Statement: Jesus is bending the world to justice

So first off, for at least the second time since we started in Mark, yes, we've read this passage already. The first Sunday in Lent is always the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. And Mark has a tendency to under-narrate, shall we say, stories in scripture. So in order for this morning's reading to not be two verses long, the lectionary committee added to the beginning and end. There are a couple of perks to this. First, it gives us the opportunity to see Jesus' temptation not as this isolated event, like it appears in years A and C when we read only that portion. We see what led Jesus into the wilderness and what happened after he came out. The second is this repetition gives us the opportunity to notice something powerful about scripture, how our reading of it changes even as the text does not. These are the exact same words we read on January 7th and 21st. The words did not change. But we hear them differently this morning because we are different. We were Epiphany people then, we are Lent people now, and who we are and where we are shapes how we understand these words. That's what makes scripture so powerful. It doesn't change, but we do, and God's words are big enough to meet us wherever we meet them.

With that, let's start with the familiar. Jesus being baptized by John in the Jordan. We know, because we read it in Advent, that John was at the Jordan because he was "the voice of one crying in the wilderness...proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside, and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." Jesus

being baptized by John wasn't unique, John was baptizing all kinds of people at that time. What made Jesus' baptism complicated though, as we've talked about before, is the fact that John proclaimed his baptism to be one of "repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Why would Jesus need repentance for the forgiveness of sins, he's Jesus. He himself was the one through whom forgiveness of sins is possible. I read this week an interesting take on this by Osvaldo Vena, professor emeritus of New Testament at Garrett Seminary. Dr. Vena pondered if this baptism of repentance wasn't about individual sins, but of corporate sins, social sins. What do I mean by that? When we think about baptism, or about the confession and forgiveness we did at the start of worship this morning, we tend to think about these as individual actions. We baptize people one at a time, so that they, as individuals, become part of God's family. And when we made confession and received forgiveness it was on an individual level. We were confessing the sins we ourselves had committed, receiving forgiveness that we, as individuals are in need of. Which is certainly necessary. We sin, we are human, it's part of the deal. And we need and want—and God wants to grant us—forgiveness of those sins. But to make sin only an action of an individual is to both make sin too small and us too weak. Because what about the great cosmic ills of the world? Environmental degradation, systemic racism, economic inequality, just to rattle off a few. None of these are the fault of any one individual. I mean, sure I could put more energy into turning off lights or keeping my heating bill lower, but on the grand scale, my individual actions have zero effect on global climate change, just to pick one. But even if I am not solely responsible, I do benefit from the system that created it. I'm not likely to be a climate migrant, I live in an industrialized society that created enormous wealth and opportunity while foisting the cost on others. Ignoring the reality of my benefiting

simultaneously lets me off the hook and renders me powerless. After all, if I can do nothing to change it, why do anything at all?

What Dr. Vena is proposing is that baptism is about giving us that power back. Jesus baptism is about Jesus, as a fully committed member of the human family, claiming not his own sin, because, again, Jesus, but the reality of these greater corporate sins, in an act of repentance and forgiveness that allows not just us as individuals to change, but the world itself to change, in preparation for the coming Kingdom of God.

So Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan, this baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And just as he was coming up out of the water, we see the apocalyptic results of that repentance. The heavens are torn open, the Spirit descends like a dove on him, and a voice from heaven declared, "You are my son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased." And then...

And then immediately after that, that same Spirit that just descended upon him in a blaze of divine favor, drove Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. Jesus' ministry starts with this great cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil. But already in this battle, we see that one side has already won. And we see that in this simple phrase that is easy to overlook, "and he was with the wild beasts." Here's why that phrase matters. Think back to the beginning of Genesis, when Adam and Eve were in the garden and sin entered in. And we can argue about who was at fault and how that happened, but that's not the point. The point is, one of the effects of the fall was that creation and humanity were no longer

partners with each other, but were made to be adversaries. Genesis chapter three ends with Adam and Eve put out of the garden, the wilderness no longer a place of safety but of danger. But in this story we see that division mending, a glimpse of the words of the prophet Isaiah, where “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together.”

And after forty days, Jesus came out of the wilderness and immediately got to work, “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.’” Right away at the start of Jesus’ ministry we see the implications of what we witnessed at his baptism, that the heavens have been torn open, the Spirit descended, and the power of God is among us.

Which is great and powerful and earth-shaking, but also so what? What does this mean, what does this matter, outside of a story we’ve already read parts of four different Sundays since December. What difference has this story made, does this story make, in our lives and our world today?

I was reading a commentary this week by Boston University School of Theology Homeletics Professor David Jacobsen, who ended with a reflection on Martin Luther King Jr.’s paraphrase of Theodore Parker, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” The sense there being that God’s creation is in the end one of justice, and we just have to wait it out. But Dr. Jacobsen points out how Dr. King’s actions lead to a different paraphrase, changing the intransitive “bends” to the transitive “bend.” As in, “the arc of the

moral universe is long, bend it towards justice.” King, after all, did not sit around waiting for justice to bend in his favor. He pursued the act of bending it even as that work of bending threatened his work, his family, and eventually claimed his very life. And Jesus in this text was not waiting for the moral arc of the universe to bend. He came out of the water, into the wilderness to do battle with the very forces of evil, and then back into the world to proclaim the nearness of the kingdom of God.

So what if, dear people of God, this is the work which the church is being called this Lenten season, and every Lenten season, and really throughout our lives. To follow in the footsteps of Jesus, grab hold of the arc of the universe, and take part in the work of bending. We’ve been to the river, confessing the sins of a broken world. In the person of Jesus Christ, we’ve seen God break into the world. Now, we follow in Christ’s own footsteps, taking part in the redemptive work of Jesus in bending the world to justice. Thanks be to God. Amen.