

Good News in the Wilderness

In our gospel reading this morning, Mark's begins his story with the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. Mark is writing in or just before the year 70 but for him the beginning of the good news began in the words of a prophet from the Hebrew Bible. Mark quotes the Prophet Isaiah in verses 2 and 3 but scholars have noted that he is actually quoting a mixture of texts from Exodus, Malachi and Isaiah. Apparently, these scriptures became so widely known orally throughout Israel that they eventually became attributed to one book, not three. And whether Mark consciously knows this or not, we can at least say that he isn't too concerned about being a literalist. But what he is concerned with is telling a subversive story about good news and there is nothing more subversive than playing around with holy texts and reimagining their meanings. Today, we call Mark's story a gospel but gospel as a genre wasn't recognized until the 2nd century, so what Mark is doing is spreading a word of hope to people in his community. But where does this word of hope originate?

Almost 600 hundred years before Mark writes his story, the people of Israel were living in exile in Babylon. They were removed from Jerusalem and the Temple was destroyed. They could not understand why exile had come upon them and so they asked God, "Why?" "What could we have done to deserve this?" We all know this feeling when we can't find a job, or we're diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, or we're ostracized by our own government. We know this feeling when it seems as though we are being punished for no reason by our friends, society, and even the one we call God. At Oral Roberts University, I remember dating someone who once told me she would never leave me no matter what I did, and I thought, "Lord, what have I done to deserve this?" The people of Israel were asking, "Lord what have we done to deserve this?" Israel was in exile almost 60 years before hope finally came to them in an unusual form. King Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon in 539 BCE, delivering the Israelites from exile and gaining such a reputation with Israelites that Isaiah subversively refers to him as God's anointed one (Isa 45:1) a phrase we now use for Jesus as the messiah. It is in this context where Isaiah writes of a voice crying out from the wilderness calling Israel out of exile and back to Jerusalem. The scene is reminiscent of the exodus where the people of God were delivered from Egypt's oppressive hand. God was calling Israel back to the wilderness and giving her the opportunity for a new beginning.

And Mark evokes the memory of those listening to his story by recalling this liberating voice from the wilderness. For Mark, this voice has returned as John the Baptizer. Now what sort of man is John? John is a rugged and hairy individual with a noticeable fixation for leather (Many of us are familiar with this subculture, but who knew it was biblical?). Like Mark, many of us may have an affinity for John the Baptizer but that soon dissipates when we find out his sweet and salty diet consists of wild honey and grasshoppers! But Mark's affinity for John is deeper and an integral part of his story of hope. John is involved in something so subversive that he is forced to live in the wilderness. He is baptizing people as a proclamation of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, but John's ritual washing is flying in the face of the Temple in Jerusalem. People already have a place to repent but the Temple has religious leaders who collude with Rome's corrupt and oppressive leaders. Jesus later calls the Temple a den of thieves and I'm sure John had the same feelings. Even more subversive though, is the fact that many from not only

the countryside but from the city of Jerusalem were foregoing the Temple and traveling out into the wilderness to be baptized by John. John's baptism was a prophetic act with the message that people were repenting, or turning back to where their relationship began with God. People were turning to the wilderness to find peace of mind.

Today, many of us can understand finding peace in the wilderness when we go on nature walks and hear the sound of leaves rustling and birds chirping. But in Jesus' day, the wilderness was not commonly thought of as a peaceful place. The wilderness was a place of fear where people were susceptible to danger. Many bandits preyed on people who were traveling. Jesus is even tested in the wilderness. But Mark is telling his listeners: the wilderness is a place of fear but it can also be a place of rebirth. Israel's relationship with God did not begin in the Temple but out in the wilderness. The people of Israel found peace and found out the truth of who they are in the 40 years of wandering through the desert during the exodus. The Israelites were originally a wilderness people.

Today we should ask ourselves, "Are we a wilderness people?" Last Sunday we had a mass wedding on the front steps of the church. I'm sure many of you saw the article in the Sun-Sentinel or read it online. I was reading many of the comments that people left online underneath the article and there was one guy who referred to himself as Bubba who was outraged that we would have the nerve to bless the love two same-gender loving people have for each other. Bubba went even further in stating that the Sunshine Cathedral can hardly be a Christian church. I'm sure many of us have known a "Bubba" or two in our lifetime. But there may be a little truth in Bubba's words because many Christian churches don't spread the good news that we share. Many Christian churches don't share the good news of Jesus. We are not like any other Christian church. As Mark would say, we are a wilderness church. A wilderness church speaks out for justice and spreads hope when other churches preach damnation. A wilderness church has the courage to be an actual follower of Jesus and ask questions about its faith rather than simply accept every dehumanizing, non-relevant religious doctrine. A wilderness church knows that the whole point of religion and the idea of God is to bring hope to people's lives.

We know what it's like to not have hope in our lives. But God was with us in the midst of our wilderness just as God is with the poor mother who can't feed her kids or the homeless man who comes every week to the Cathedral looking for food. God was with us just as God is with the confused transgendered teen who is contemplating suicide or the lesbian who is discriminated against by both straight folks and even us privileged gay men. As Mark alludes to, sometimes good news starts in midst of the wilderness in our lives.

We are challenged today to hear the voice of God no matter where we're at in life. Even when we feel as though we're lost in the desert...even when we feel danger around us...even when we've been forced into social isolation...even when we feel we have been robbed of our dignity and our humanity...even when the bandits of our social world are looking to strip every bit of sacred value from us... even in our wilderness, the good news is there is hope and it's just the beginning. Amen.