

The Beginning of Good News
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Mark 1.12-15
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My great-aunt Gladys was really depressed about how mundane her relationship with my uncle Arthur had become. Every evening in come in, flop into his recliner, turn on the 6 o'clock news, and say to Aunt Gladys, "Hey Gladys, what's for dinner."

Aunt Gladys was sick of it. She was ready to recapture some romance for their marriage. So one day, she was ready for him. She put on a black leather bodice, black stockings, and black stilettos, and as the cherry on the cake, she even put on a black eye mask. She was certain this would get his attention and set the wheels of romance in motion. Uncle Arthur came in, walked right past her, flopped into his recliner, turned on the 6 o'clock news, and said to Aunt Gladys, "Hey Batgirl, what's for dinner." It took the ER six hours to get the stiletto pump out of his forehead.

That's a beautiful story, don't you think? Our gospel reading we heard today is also part of a beautiful story. The story actually begins like this:

Here is the beginning of the good news about the divinely anointed Jesus - The prophets speaking for spirit of Life have written:

"I will send a messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare a way...make a clear path.'

And so John came, washing people in a desert region and preaching a cleansing that comes from positive change. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their fears and mistakes, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River .

John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt, and he ate bugs and wild honey. And this was his message: "After me will come one more dynamic than I...I ritually wash you with water, but he will immerse you with the energy of life, the spirit of perfect wholeness."

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan . As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he envisioned the heavens being torn apart and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And he heard a heavenly voice saying, "You are my child, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by the nagging evil of self-doubt. He was in a place of turmoil, and messengers of grace attended him.

After John was incarcerated, Jesus went into Galilee , proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "God's counter-empire is near. Change your attitudes and start to believe the good news!"

That's how Mark's story begins. That's the first 15 verses of our oldest gospel.

We know that Mark is writing in the wake of Jerusalem being destroyed by Rome . He opens his story by telling us that it is a story of good news about Jesus. Usually, "gospel" or "good news" was a term applied to Caesar's exploits. But over against Caesar's rule Mark says he has good news about someone else.

He then sets the scene by interpreting some ancient scriptures to be a prognostication of John's ministry. This shows that Mark believes John's ministry was legitimate, and if John is fulfilling a divine role in human history, then John is the perfect one to affirm the legitimacy of Jesus' role.

And so Mark shows Jesus going to John and receiving John's imprimatur on his ministry. John says Jesus will be more dynamic than he is, and then John baptizes him as a symbol that Jesus is ready to be an agent of change in the world.

As a result, Jesus feels affirmed. He now knows himself to be a child of God, loved by God, approved of by God. But have you noticed when we hear about our wonderful potential we sometimes think the news is too good to be true. And so Mark has Jesus being driven immediately into the desert.

The desert symbolizes loneliness, fear, hardship. Ancients believed demons lived in the desert, and so Mark shows us Jesus wrestling with his own demons of doubt and despair. Can he believe the validation he has received from John, and from his own experience of spirit? Is he who he has been told he is? Is he really a person of sacred value, full of enormous potential, with gifts that will benefit his world?

Apparently ministers or messengers of grace, affirming angels of some sort, confirm the good news Jesus has received, and he is able, after a period of struggle, to emerge from the desert ready to make a difference in the world. Once he really believes that God believes in him, he's empowered.

Once we believe in ourselves, we too are empowered.

And so, he returns to Galilee and starts preaching good news, not about the system of oppression that Caesar represents, but good news about God...the God who affirms us as children of holiness, persons of sacred value, worthy to receive love and capable of giving it, just as we are!

John has been incarcerated, and Jesus responds. He speaks out. The empire crushes those who want liberty, who want justice, who want opportunity, but that is not the way things ought to be. The empire that has captured John is not the way. The empire that destroys cities, and cultures, and religions, and temples...the empire is not God's way. In fact, God's way, God's counter-empire, the kingdom or commonwealth or dominion of God...is near - as near as our own empowering thoughts and choices.

And so Mark's Jesus says, "let's change our attitudes and start to embrace this hope."

Of course, Mark knows his little community is no match for the Roman Empire, but he also knows that the Empire can only control physical realities; he wants his people to refrain from internalizing their oppression. He tells them to repent, to change their attitudes so that the Empire never steals their hope, their dignity, their sense of their sacred value.

Victor Frankl was a WW2 concentration camp survivor. He couldn't defeat the Nazis. He couldn't escape his captivity. But even in captivity he was in charge of whether or not the Nazi Empire got inside him. They could jail him, starve him, threaten him, even kill him but they could not take away his hope or his dignity without his permission. He learned that what got him through that terrible ordeal was the realization that he couldn't control all the circumstances in life, but he could control how he responded to those situations.

Isn't that what Mark is saying to his community as they mourn the loss of their holy city and Temple? He remembers Jesus, who was also targeted by the empire, and he uses a dramatization of his life to offer hope and empowerment to his people during a difficult time. Choose your attitude! Believe the good news. Believe that you are God's child, a person of sacred value, loved and loveable, part of matrix of life-giving, supportive relationships that truly models the kingdom, or counter-empire of God. The circumstances may be challenging, but they don't define us. It may take us a while in our own deserts before we really believe that, but once

we do, we'll never be the same. Our attitude is our own to choose, and this can bring us great comfort no matter what is happening around us. According to Mark, this is the good news. Amen.

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**I choose to be hopeful.
I choose to believe in my goodness.
I choose to believe in God's love for me.
I choose to believe the good news.
And so I am thankful.
And so it is!**

"God finds joy and rapture in us." - Meister Eckhart