

The Subversive Mission
Mark 1:9-15/Isaiah 42:1-4; 64:1-5

On this First Sunday in Lent the purpose of the gospel reading is usually to help us focus on the temptation of Jesus by Satan in the wilderness. This temptation theme pops up every year on this First Sunday in Lent because it supposedly helps us get into the issues of sin and repentance and penitence – you know, the stuff of Lent. We are supposed to slog through all this bad stuff so we can appreciate Easter all the more. So, in that sense, this story about Jesus dealing with temptation himself helps us get into all the stuff of Lent. I get all that.

But the fact is Mark doesn't dwell much on this issue. I mean, whereas Matthew and Luke go on and on about the Temptation, Mark dispenses with the whole thing in two sentences. Here's what Mark says, "...the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." That's it.

For Mark, it appears, Jesus being tempted wasn't the big deal. Indeed, Jesus getting baptized doesn't garner much attention either. Because, you see, what Mark really wants to get into is the inauguration of Jesus' mission, what I call "The Subversive Mission."

Indeed, "The Subversive Mission" could serve as another title for the Gospel of Mark. The whole book is about Jesus' subversive mission. Mark presents Jesus as one who came to subvert the old order and establish a new order, a new way of living in community.

Of all the literary works of the ancient world, Mark's story of Jesus stands virtually alone as a story for and about the common people. It is usually the elites and the victors who write history. The voiceless masses, the 99%, are not a part of those stories. But Mark's story explicitly reflects the daily realities of disease, poverty, and disenfranchisement that characterized the social existence of first-century Palestinian peasants. From the very beginning the "crowds," the common folk, flock to hear Jesus proclaim the subversive message of a new order.

One of the ways Mark sets the "common people" theme is that Jesus just seems to come out of nowhere. Following the prologue of verses 1-8, which features John the Baptist, we see Jesus emerging from the crowd to

be baptized just like everyone else. It says he came from Nazareth, a “nowheresville” village for which there is no attestation of it even existing before it is mentioned here. Nazareth is in Galilee, a region held in contempt by the more sophisticated folk of Jerusalem and Judea. It was surrounded by several Hellenistic cities with large gentile populations. It was mostly agricultural so was populated by a predominantly poor population. Galilee was cut off from Judea and Jerusalem by Samaria, which the Jews avoided as much as possible. Jews didn’t travel through Samaria to get to Jerusalem, they went around it. Thus, it could be said, that Galilee was a no-account, back-water place. Mark intentionally emphasizes that Jesus came from very humble roots.

So there he is, getting baptized by John in the Jordan, just like everyone else. Of course, we, the readers, know that this is no ordinary baptism. Mark tells us:

...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. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

However, the way Mark writes it, no one else present saw or heard this, “he saw the heavens open up.” Only Jesus! And now we, the readers, are also in the know.

Here Mark utilizes one of his most significant writing techniques – overt allusions to the Old Testament. He does this throughout the gospel. In this case he alludes to the two scriptures from Isaiah which we heard earlier. From Isaiah 64, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.” From Isaiah 42, “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him.” Both of these Isaian passages speak directly to Jesus’ “subversive mission” - doing justice: “he will bring forth justice to the nations,” says Isaiah 42.

So, Jesus is baptized by John. And then he’s gone, leaves the stage, disappears. He’s off to the wilderness, by himself, pushed along by the Spirit of God. Well, not by himself. Here we encounter what some scholars call the ‘mythic accomplices’ – Satan tempting him, surviving with the beasts (symbolic of political powers), and the angels who help him get through it all. For Mark this is all very symbolic and apocalyptic – apocalyptic in that spiritual, heavenly forces intrude on the physical, political world. For Mark’s

story, it is in the wilderness where the political/spiritual struggle for the world commences. Jesus will encounter these forces many times in the course of Mark's story.

One of Mark's interesting writing techniques is how he plays around with time. Things don't always proceed chronologically. Scholars call Mark's approach "plotted time," where time is manipulated to fit the plot. Sometimes we have no idea how much time has elapsed. Indeed, lots of things seem to happen "immediately." This is a favorite word for Mark. One moment he's getting baptized by John; the next moment he's out in the wilderness all by himself.

And then, sometime later, we really don't know when, only that it is after John has been arrested, Jesus re-emerges onto the scene. Jesus comes back to Galilee. Again, Mark's framing of the story is interesting: Jesus came from Galilee and now returns to Galilee. It is in Galilee that Jesus' subversive mission will play out.

Jesus proclaims a great apocalyptic *novum* or new time. In Mark's telling, God's salvation history is now set in motion. This new movement of God does not occur in the center of religious life, in Jerusalem, in the temple, but it occurs in the peripheries of society, in Galilee, far away from the established, legitimate religious center.

Picking up the mantle of the fallen prophet (and cousin) John, Jesus continues the proclamation of the kingdom of God and for repentance. "The time is fulfilled (*Kairos*), and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news."

From the very beginning of the story, Mark creates dramatic tension. In the first verses, Mark announces a new beginning (gospel), and immediately the prophetic voice of Isaiah is heard in the voice of John, who appears in the wilderness, far from the centers of power and religion, who heralds a "stronger one" to come. Jesus emerges out of nowhere, gets baptized, with an apocalyptic intrusion from heaven, and then disappears off into the wilderness to do battle with Satan. Then Jesus re-emerges to make this grand proclamation. The "time is at hand." The kingdom "has come near."

Yet, Mark keeps postponing the readers' expectations. Jesus appears and then disappears. After this great proclamation, instead of some grand commencement of this new kingdom, Jesus is found wandering up and

down the seashore looking for some men, peasants really, to accompany him on his mission.

It's like Mark doesn't want his readers, us, to get ahead of the story. He doesn't want us to be anticipating some triumphalistic, militaristic, eschatological expectation of Jewish nationalism and holy war. For the story of Jesus is not about forcefully expelling the Romans from the land. And it is not about reforming the religious establishment to make it purer. Indeed, Jesus' mission is one of subversion. His mission is an assault on the old order, Roman and Jewish, and the construction of a new order, a new community. Indeed, and this is the key, Jesus' mission is a mission of non-violent confrontation of the powers of the world. That call was true for the people who heard Jesus say it directly, it was true for Mark's community some forty years later, that struggling faith community of peasants in Galilee (the first hearers of this gospel), and it is true of us who look to work out what it means to follow Jesus in our world.

Of course, following Jesus is fraught with dangers. Mark's story, if nothing else, is the story of Jesus the Subversive getting himself in trouble, getting arrested, and eventually executed. Indeed, as the story goes, shortly after Jesus proclaims this new kingdom, the authorities, the powers that be, are plotting to arrest him. The wanted posters are posted. To the established order, Jesus' crimes were numerous: sedition, vagrancy, criminal anarchy, conspiring to overthrow the government. Mark's story of Jesus shows him perpetrating the crimes of healing the sick, casting out demons, feeding the hungry masses, treating women respectfully, welcoming children, and claiming to have honor when everyone knew he had none. Mark's story is a story of inclusion, breaking down walls, respecting the disrespected, and most significantly, the way of non-violent direct action against injustice and tyranny. This is not a safe way to travel. It is dangerous.

Our contemporary reading by Norman Shanks reflects this agenda. This new way of living in community that Jesus introduced is, as Shanks notes, to be a "healing, learning, serving community, faithfully living by the values of the kingdom...standing up and speaking out against all that diminishes and disempowers humanity." Thus, "it will be a transforming community...resilient and persistent, however hard the way."

Similarly, the Shirley Murray hymn we will yet sing, “Community of Christ,” encourages us to live out our creed and risk our lives, to see those past the Church’s door, and to cry out for justice and for peace.

So, on this first Sunday in Lent, we are invited to go into the wilderness of Lent. As Jesus did his forty days in the wilderness, so are we invited to do so as well. May we dare venture out with the Subversive Christ. Amen.

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Rev. David Brown