**February 22, 2015 – First Sunday in Lent**

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They say that good things come in small packages. If that’s true, then Mark’s account of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness is absolutely fabulous! Our Gospel passage today encompasses Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan, his temptation, and the start of his ministry in Galilee, all in 7 short verses. Mark’s economic writing style would put Ernest Hemingway to shame.

But still, it’s all there. The whole story, with the first two sections leading us into to the third.

In the first section we have Mark’s brief account of Jesus’ baptism. There’s no conversation between John and Jesus, and not a lot of build up by John beforehand. Just SPLASH, and then the world goes crazy. The heavens are torn open and God tells Jesus that he is God’s beloved son.

The NRSV version (actually most versions) say that the Spirit descended on him like a dove. This brings to mind those religious pictures I’m sure we’ve all seen of Jesus standing in the Jordan, mysteriously not wet at all, with a pigeon-like bird either fluttering over his head like it’s going to land on a telephone wire, or heading straight down like a kamikaze pilot. Either way there are lots of rays shining around in all directions – from the clouds, from the dove, from John, though sometimes he isn’t even there, and from Jesus.

Well, what if it’s not the telephone wire dove, but rather, the kamikaze dove, and what if it doesn’t alight gently on Jesus’ head. What if it keeps going? As I’ve said many times, Greek is a slippery language, with words often having more than one meaning. Well the word being translated as “on” is *eis*, which is a very common preposition in Greek. The problem is, although one of the translations given IS “on or upon,” by far the most common translation is “into.”

The Spirit descended like a dove and went INTO him. It forms a slightly different picture, and one that’s much more dramatic, even almost violent, at least as far as Jesus is concerned.

And then there’s the voice. In Mark’s version only, God speaks directly to Jesus. In Matthew and Luke, he speaks ABOUT Jesus, which implies that everyone around him heard the voice, too. But we don’t know if everyone hears it in Mark. We only know that Jesus heard it.

There has been a lot of speculation about why Jesus had to be baptized at all. Matthew even addresses this by having Jesus tell John that his being baptized fulfills all righteousness, whatever that means. But Jesus is without sin, so he has nothing to repent, right.

But repenting, or metanoia, also means to turn your life around. So while Jesus doesn’t have any sins to confess to and stop doing, this definitely is a pretty major turning point in his life. At that moment, he is filled with the Spirit, and he hears God’s voice telling him who he is and where he fits into God’s plan.

Then BOOM! He doesn’t even get a chance to dry off (because in my world, he actually gets wet at his baptism) before the Spirit drives him out into the desert. Once again, the translation is a little softer than the word deserves. The word for drive is *ekballo*, which literally means to throw out. Driving out implies that the person being driven is at least still on his own two feet. Being thrown out is more like a bouncer ejecting a rambunctious drunk from a bar.

This is some pretty forceful imagery. Imagine if each of us, after our baptisms, had first had the Holy Spirit shoot into us like an arrow, and then had been scooped up by the seat of our pants and the scruff of our neck and tossed into the wilderness. It would leave quite an impression.

So now we move into the desert. The temptation, in Mark’s version, is almost a let-down. Matthew and Luke go into great detail about exactly how Jesus was tempted, 12 and 14 verses, respectively, including the dialogue between Jesus and Satan. But Mark’s measly two verses merely say that he was there for forty days, was tempted, was with wild animals, and was ministered to by angels. It leaves a lot to the imagination.

And I think that’s the point. When we have a more complete description of what went on in that wilderness, we tend to focus on that. Our whole season of Lent has increasingly become modeled after it – instead of a season of turning our lives around, it becomes a season of austerity and deprivation, of resisting all the temptations that Satan can throw our way.

I don’t think that’s necessarily a bad thing, but it shouldn’t be all that Lent is to us. So let’s strip away all of the Lenten baggage that’s built up over the centuries, and look at what the text says.

As an aside, this is one of the beauties of the Gospels. This year we’re looking at Mark’s stripped down version. Next year we’ll look at Luke’s much more expanded take on it, and the year after that, Matthew’s. It’s like looking at the same scene painted by three artists from different schools – we get to see new details and perspectives with each one. And then, when we come around to Mark again in three years, we will have a greater depth of understanding to bring to this same old story. It’s a great system!

But back to Mark’s terse telling of these cataclysmic events. So Jesus is tempted, but we don’t know how. He is “with” the wild beasts, but we don’t know if it was a situation more idyllic like Adam naming the animals in the Garden or dangerous like the martyrs facing the lions in the coliseum. And finally, he was waited on by angels, but does that mean that they took care of him because he was fasting (which Mark doesn’t mention one way or another), or did they bring him lunch on a tray every day?

So he was tempted by Satan unsuccessfully, surrounded by wild animals but not attacked, and cared for by God’s servants. In short, Jesus went into that wilderness relying solely on God to help him. That’s what not focusing on the specifics leaves us with – that Jesus relied utterly upon God for his very survival. God first claimed Jesus as his own Son, and then Jesus responded to that claim with his own faith.

But the story doesn’t end there. After the desert experience of totally trusting in his Father, Jesus emerges and immediately sets off on his mission to proclaim the good news and to call for repentance.

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” One more time we run into one of those slippery Greek translation problems. Basileia can mean kingdom, as in a physical place, which is what we usually think when we hear that word. However, the first definition is something more like rule or authority, or maybe kingship. It’s not that there’s some kind of physical realm floating out there, like in James Blish’s *Cities in Flight* novels, that somehow just had a near miss with Earth.

Rather, this is Jesus saying, “God’s rule and authority is close at hand. In fact, it’s standing right in front of you. And this is Good News!” Jesus is God’s authority on earth, and he’s also God’s good news for all mankind.

So what does that mean for us, as we enter into this season of Lent? Well, we, too, are claimed by God as his own children, so it logically follows that we, too, should respond to that claim with everything we are and everything we have, and trust that God will take care of us.

We, too, have God’s Holy Spirit inside us, and we’re called to turn our lives towards following that Spirit where it may lead – whether out into a desert or to church every Sunday and Wednesday. Maybe that’s what Jesus was doing out there in the desert – learning to listen to the Spirit and to tune out both temptation and fear. We need to do the same.

And then, since we’re following Jesus’ example, it stands to reason that we, too, should proclaim the good news of God in Christ, not just here in church, but everywhere we go, and in everything we do.

Lent is about so much more than giving up chocolate or taking on some spiritual discipline, although those aren’t bad things to do. Lent is about turning our lives around, learning to listen to the Holy Spirit within us, and following that Spirit into a deeper understanding of both God’s care for us and his plan for our lives.

Amen.