



March 5, 2006

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Sue Verboom

Mark 1:9-15

“Water, wilderness, witness”

We gather today on the first Sunday in Lent. Lent is a season of the Christian year. It begins on Ash Wednesday, and lasts 40 days, not counting Sundays. Sundays are not counted because every Sunday is a little Easter celebration: a time to proclaim and rejoice in the good news that “Christ is risen”! The word “Lent” is not mysterious; it comes from an old Anglo-Saxon word which means “spring”.

During Lent Christians prepare to celebrate Easter. Historically this was a period of fasting and preparation for baptism by converts. Over time, it became a season to ask forgiveness for our sins, and to reflect on our own mortality. During these forty days we are invited to engage in introspection, reflection, prayer, and even fasting.

So let’s get started. Let’s reflect on our lives by looking at Christ’s life, to see what it reveals to us.

Let’s begin at the beginning. Let’s begin with the first chapter of Mark, our lesson for today.

Biblical scholars are fairly certain that the Gospel of Mark was the earliest of the New Testament writings. It’s the shortest Gospel. I’ve heard it called the “breathless” gospel, because the style is almost like that of a child who has run up to you and is pouring out what she has to say as quickly as possible. Sentences tend to be short, direct. Many sentences are prefaced by “and then...” or “right then....” or “immediately”. The writer of Mark says what there is to say, gets right to the point.

Matthew and Luke each spend a couple chapters in the beginning of their gospels describing Jesus’ conception and birth. The Gospel of John opens with a sweeping prologue that clearly proclaims Jesus’ unique, exalted position in all the universe.

Mark gives us none of this. His opening sentence states, “this is the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”. He tells us about John the Baptist. It’s not until verse 9, our opening verse, that Mark mentions Jesus, and he is cut and dried, factual. Jesus is identified as “coming from Nazareth”—which was not a glamorous place to be from—maybe a little like Nebraska (where I was born and raised!). We don’t have any words spoken by John- we’re simply told that he baptized Jesus. It is when Jesus comes up out of the water that Mark’s gospel begins in earnest, for it is at that moment that Jesus’ special nature and heritage is revealed.

As we travel through this brief passage from Mark’s writings, we learn about events that shaped Jesus Christ. But that’s not all. We are also invited to see how what HE experienced is like what WE experience. Jesus was fully human, as well as fully divine. He experienced and knew all that WE experience and know. Jesus’ life, relationships with others, interactions with God the Father—all of these have the potential to tell us about OURSELVES.

The story of Jesus Christ can tell us:

- what does knowing, loving and serving God look like?
- what can we become, with God’s help?

Jesus’ baptism can tell us something about our own baptism. In Mark, Jesus’ baptism was a moment of blessing- a time when God affirmed his identity: “This is my beloved Son.”

OUR baptism affirms OUR identity. Even though we may have been baptized as a tiny infant, public declaration was made: “This is God’s precious child, who is now marked for Christian discipleship.” Jesus’ baptism was a moment of being claimed by God and assured of God’s love and blessing. In baptism God claims us—CHILD, YOU ARE MINE! In baptism God blesses us- CHILD, I LOVE YOU AND ALWAYS WILL!

So, many of us share an experience with Jesus: Baptism. (If you have not been baptized, please know that in the United Methodist Church, baptism is not just for babies. We have celebrated with great joy baptisms of adolescents and adults in our church. Pastor Rich, Pastor Doh and I are honored when we have such an opportunity. Let us know if you’d like to know more.)

In the waters of baptism we are cleansed, refreshed, renewed. The waters of baptism bring us new birth into a life lived in God.

Jesus’ story continues in Mark. What do the next events teach us about leading lives faithful to God? What happened to Jesus next?

Whoa. Wow. Surprise. Jesus went from the water of baptism to where? Recognition? Success? Peace? Joy? Delight? Abundance? Wisdom? Prosperity? Happiness?

No. Jesus went from water to wilderness. In Hebrew and Christian tradition the wilderness is the dwelling place of forces hostile to God. It's the place of primeval chaos that threatens human life. The wilderness seems to be a place without God.

This may seem pretty creepy, actually- that Jesus could be told by God in one moment, "Yes, you are my son; I love you and I'm delighted with you" and in the next minute find himself in a terrifying barren place encountering Satan himself.

But, you know, I don't find this entirely creepy. In some peculiar way, this story reassures me. Have you ever heard preachers or read books that seemed to be telling you, "If you've truly got faith, everything will be sunshiny all the time"? What about "have faith, you'll be rich; your children will be talented, successful, AND respectful and loving; your spouse will be adoring; none of you will ever be sad or depressed or sick or lonely"--? Those messages really bring me down- because my experience has definitely not always been sunshiny.

I've gone from high moments of spiritual closeness with friends, loved ones, with God- to discover illness in a family member, a flooded basement, snags in relationships with people I care about, financial difficulties, and on and on.

Jesus' experience teaches us that "prosperity preaching" is one-sided. Yes, God's loving presence blesses us. Yes, we will still experience suffering. Baptism, faith- these are not inoculations against suffering, temptation, or struggle.

Jesus' experience in the wilderness reveals that God's Spirit may even LEAD us into such times. The good news is that God stays with us- when we are pulled this way and that from conflicting desires and perceptions, when we struggle to learn and live the will of God. God's angels minister to us RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE of the wild, vast, frightening wilderness.

Jesus went from the water of baptism to the wilderness of temptation and struggle. Then what? Jesus came out of the wilderness preaching good news.

The time in the wilderness had changed him. The wilderness had taught him about God and himself. It prepared him to share what he'd learned with others.

What did Jesus learn? He learned that God is with us all the time. When we are high in mountaintop joys, and when we are deep in the valley of despair and anguish. Jesus came out of that struggle witnessing to the God he had met in both places. Jesus came preaching, saying, "Hey, folks. You don't have to wait or long for God any more.

God's power and reign are here right now. Let your hearts be melted. Believe this good news!" THAT's the gospel message.

We are called to follow Christ through these forty days of Lent:

LIKE HIM- to pass through water that claims and blesses us;

LIKE HIM- to find God's spirit and angels never leave us, even in the wilderness;

LIKE HIM- to WITNESS to the God we have met in both places.

We are called from water to wilderness to witness. Raise your voices, my friends. Share your stories of blessing, wilderness and angels. May God's voice blend with ours as we share this good news! Amen.