

The In-Breaking Kingdom (Mark 1:4-11)

What a week we've been through. Our hope for a kinder, gentler 2021 was shattered this past Wednesday in our nation's capitol and the repercussions of that event are still roiling the temperament of the nation. How this resolves remains to be seen, but one thing is sure, we're not the same people we were on Tuesday. Emotions are running high in our collective self, from disbelief to jubilation, disillusionment to anger, arrogance to confusion—the events were stunning at the very least and unsettling to most. We grieve the lives that were taken, the injuries suffered, and the loss of national pride in what this revealed. Many have been quick to say that this is not who we are as a people, but in fact, this may be closer to who we are than not, at least in this moment of our history.

Given this event, I found it interesting that the lectionary for this year directs us to the first chapter of Mark calling our attention to the baptism of Jesus. On the one hand, this is typical in the sense that the church year always leads us through this same history, but through different gospels. On the other hand, that we're led to Mark in this moment is notable, for Mark is a gospel of action typified by the regular use of the word, "immediately." Mark moves us rapidly through the actions of Jesus in his life—the descriptions are brief; Mark is the shortest of the gospels, but they are also filled with eye-witness types of detail—Mark is generally regarded as conveying the perspective of the apostle Peter, and they tend to add explanation to some of the particularly Jewish aspects of Christ's life because its audience was likely Roman citizens who would have been unfamiliar with that specific history, which itself is interesting since Peter was the apostle to the Jews.

In recounting the significance of the life of Jesus, Mark dispenses with birth stories and gets right into the heart of Christ's message, the foundation of his public ministry, described in verse 15 that we didn't read: "The time has come," Jesus said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" This is the world-changing message on which the ministry of Christ is built. That it intends to change the world is captured in the opening sentence of Mark: "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God." This would have compelled the attention of his original audience, because it was a highly charged political statement. When a new Emperor rose to power in Rome, this was announced throughout the Empire as good news—using the exact term in the original language that Mark used here describing the message about Jesus. Son of God was also attached to the identity of the new Emperor, and though Mark means to convey more about this in terms of how it applied to Jesus, Mark was throwing down the gauntlet to say that Jesus, not the Emperor, brings truly good news while also declaring that Jesus, not the Emperor, is truly the Son of God. This was courageous, risky speech in first century Rome.

Between these two points Mark provides the basis for his opening broadside leading to the launch of Christ's world-changing ministry. Characteristically brief, Mark anchors the role of John the wilderness prophet as the forerunner of the Lord in the historical record of Isaiah who predicted this moment centuries before. In garb reminiscent of Elijah the prophet, John was calling people to repentance and confession of sin as he baptized them in the Jordan River. His message was clear: get ready for the one coming after me—I'm nothing compared to him. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit, meaning that your life will be engulfed in the life and power of God's very Spirit. In other words, my work prepares, and his completes.

Without so much as a drumroll, Mark simply states that Jesus showed up from Nazareth in Galilee, some distance from where John was, to be baptized. From Mark's account we don't know why Jesus came for baptism—none of the other accounts offer much in the way of explanation either. Scholars wrestle with this, offering suggestions, but no-one really knows why Jesus appeared for this. What compelled him to make the journey to where John was? Mark's brevity perhaps suggests that Jesus himself didn't know precisely why he was there, but something about John's ministry drew him there. As we heard in Mollie's reading, when Jesus came up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open—a particularly powerful word describing a breach in the natural order occurring, followed by the descent of

the Spirit—signaling an anointing for service, followed by a voice from heaven that claimed Jesus as “My Son whom I love.” Again, though this term takes on new layers in what we later learn about Jesus, it is initially a political term—the king of Israel was commonly known as God’s son—God’s representative, the one acting in concert with and on behalf of God for the welfare of Israel. It’s not clear from Mark’s account whether everyone heard the voice or just Jesus. From other accounts we know that John witnessed the descent of the Spirit—this was actually a sign to John that clearly identified the One of whom he spoke. What is clear is that Jesus heard and saw all of it—in a very public moment, there was an intensely personal call that deepened his union with God and informed his self-understanding. Whatever God was doing in the world at that moment, God was doing in and through Jesus. The trajectory of the world’s future was forever changed in that moment.

Setting aside the obvious significance of confirming the revelation of Jesus as the promised one in whom the ongoing plan of God for the redemption of the world would unfold, what else connects us to Mark’s account of this? For this I’m drawn back to vs. 5 of the passage—“the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to John.” Why did they do this? And once they were there, they confessed their sins and submitted to baptism in the muddy waters of the Jordan River. Jerusalem was the very center of their lives. The Temple in Jerusalem and the synagogues of their villages were the places where their spiritual lives were nurtured—yet they left these behind heading into the wilderness to hear John. Had these centers of faith lost their luster? Were these people—rural and urban alike—yearning for more of God than they were finding through conventional means? I wonder.

As a child, our family belonged to a local church down the street from our house. When I was in second or third grade, the church built a new sanctuary. I remembered it being huge with concrete walls jutting up four stories high with small stained glass windows at their top and capped by a soaring ceiling with huge chandeliers hanging over the seating. The new organ swelled in that cavernous space—I was spell-bound and awe-struck: I thought that God surely enjoyed the grandeur of His new house. A couple decades later, as an adult and a pastor, I had the occasion to come back to that church for an appointment during the week. While I was there, I walked into that sanctuary again, and it wasn’t nearly as huge as I remembered. I stood behind the pulpit and started calculating the seating capacity—it had room for about 300 folks, and though it was still attractive, the sense of grandeur wasn’t there.

Something like that can happen in our spiritual lives. When we first come to faith we’re filled with awe and a sense of grandeur at what’s happened to us. We can be spell-bound, but as the years click by and we settle into the routines of faith, some of the initial luster begins to fade. A sense of restlessness can gnaw at us as we sense awe slipping away—is this all there is? Routine that holds us steady but fails to excite? Maybe there’s a bit of yearning in all of us for something more. Maybe there’s a piece of us that connects to those folks in John’s day who didn’t leave their faith behind as they ventured into the wilderness searching for more of God. Like them, perhaps we’re looking for the wildness of something fresh where we shake off the routines of faith—as useful as they are—for a deeper connection to the life of God. Maybe this time of dispersed community, where we’ve been isolated from being together in a particular place of worship has revealed the desire for more, not just a return to what we once had—as welcome as that is—but a turning to the place of being alone before God, without familiar routine, intensely vulnerable to the gravity of God’s Spirit engulfing us as the things which are natural to us are torn aside to draw us closer to the heart of God. And in that place freely acknowledging our sin, we will hear God say, “You are my child, whom I love—with you I am well pleased.” It’s risky to get that vulnerable with God—it is as wild as a river baptism, but we come away from it with a renewed call, a new vision for life kindling within ready to burst into full flame as our eyes are opened to new opportunity to return God’s love and in turn to love those whom God loves.

Finding renewal in our faith will help us put the events of this past week and its fallout into proper perspective. Though as followers of Jesus we are not of the world, we still live in it and because of the hope that lies within us we are ever for it. And though we can and should be involved in its mechanics, our primary allegiance in life is to Jesus, the Son of God, the true

Lord of all creation and all within it. Human government as a system is ordained by God as a means of maintaining peace and securing well-being for all within its scope. All forms of human government are inherently fragile—and sometimes its centers fail to deliver the fullness of their opportunities. When our hope for life has been vested in government, we will be disillusioned when the center doesn't hold. That disillusion transpired in dramatic fashion this past week—for some this centered around a person, for others it centered around the structures, for most it assaulted the myth of our national pride that collapsed when frustration vented through action. The center lost its luster. So the question for us is this: where is God at work? Perhaps not as much in the corridors of power as we might have imagined. Maybe, indeed most assuredly God is at work in the wilderness, among the needy, the helpless, the vulnerable, the voiceless. Allow yourself to be drawn to that voice, without knowing precisely how it will develop, but draw near to this kind of wilderness. In the process you may well find heaven tearing open and the Spirit engulfing you in the continual in-breaking of God's kingdom. AMEN