

Empowered for Ministry
Mark 1:9-15
First Sunday in Lent
Sunday, 2/18/24
St. James Episcopal; FF, MN

Let us pray...Heavenly Father, May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock, and my Redeemer. Amen!

My Friends in Christ: Grace and peace to you this morning from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, the great Shepherd of the sheep.

As is Mark's modus operandi, he bunches together three major events in the life of Jesus within the span of seven verses. Now, preachers like me, may be prone to choose one of the three at the expense of the other two, but I suspect that one of the reasons Mark put these events so closely together is due in part to the process which Jesus experienced at the outset of His ministry: Baptism; Confrontation with Satan in the wilderness; and finally preaching the message of the Gospel. We as followers of Jesus receive the validation of the Father and the Spirit which is through baptism, the saving power of God coming to us in a friendly personal invasion; enduring temptation in part, so that Jesus can empower you and I to resist temptation in His power to finally proclaiming the message of salvation through faith in Jesus, which is what we attempt to do at St. James every time we gather for worship. The goal reached in Jesus' death and resurrection finds its fulfillment in our, not only receiving the message of the gospel in faith, but also proclaiming that same gospel not just in words but our actions.

Any thoughts that you and I might have that the life of faith is a relatively easy road is immediately dispelled by the Gospels. The road will be difficult at times, but we are also promised that God is with and in us, empowering us to believe, but also to help others to believe.

Here is a case in point from my own family. My grandfather on my Dad's side sensed that he had the call to become a pastor and teacher. He was a slight man. His growth was probably stunted due to serious and chronic illnesses as a child. His father and his brother were much larger in physical stature than he was. However, he didn't aspire to a career in ministry due to the challenges he would have faced had he chosen the building profession or dug ditches. On the contrary, he believed, through the prodding of the Holy Spirit that he was called to serve in professional ministry, a vocational call no different than the call to become a builder, an engineer, farmer or software developer.

However, Grandpa's road to fulltime ministry was nearly derailed by two obstacles. He sought a Seminary education at a school in Red Wing, MN. But after a period of time, he was asked to leave due to differences in theological emphasis with the powers within the academic institution. Grandpa was not a troublemaker. In fact, he was a gentle soul. But he did have the courage of his convictions and was not about to hide them,

even if it meant finding himself in the crosshairs of the Seminary teachers and administration.

About the same time, Grandpa contracted Scarlet Fever and was bedridden for a few months: no money, no prospects, and I suspect beginning to question whether the call he thought he had received may not have been authentic.

My grandmother came to Red Wing to attend to his needs while he was sick and during his recovery. They were not married at that time, but she took on the responsibility of doing what she could to support Grandpa during this critical time in his life. She sacrificed her own time and ambition to support him in his hour of need. There were not many positives which arose out of this dual challenge in the life of my grandparents, but one of the positives which came out of this ordeal was the solidifying of their relationship with each other, which eventually led to marriage a couple of years later. By that time, Grandpa was able to support his wife and the family which followed through preaching and teaching. The call to ministry was in fact legitimate, despite the wilderness experience which both Grandpa and Grandma went through.

Baptism; Temptation; and Proclamation. That is the journey which Jesus traveled as He assumed His role in the world, and to some extent, we travel the same path. In the baptism of Jesus, God broke through the dimension between Heaven and earth and sent His Spirit upon Jesus to minister to and empower Him for the ministry which lay before Him.

To some, it is odd that Jesus requested to be baptized by John the Baptist, seeing that John's baptism was considered a baptism of repentance. Jesus was sinless, so there was no sin that He needed forgiveness for, nor did He need to repent. Repentance by the way, is much more than saying "I'm sorry for what I said or did." It is a change in direction away from following our own agendas and turning in God's direction; much like steering a boat on the water of a Minnesota lake. Either by steering wheel, or by turning the outboard motor arm in a different direction, our direction is changed, and in this case, we walk toward God instead of away from Him. By submitting to baptism, Jesus identified with you and me in our human condition, and it also was a commissioning for His ministry. Also, in Baptism, Jesus claims us for Himself, forgives our sin, and gives us His Spirit to sustain and to keep us in His grace, a holy possession if you will.

Temptation. There are those who will say that temptation in and of itself is not a sin. It is giving in to temptation that's the problem. I tend to agree. Jesus, the sinless Son of God was tempted and so are we. Nowhere do we feel our vulnerability exposed more than when we are confronted with temptation. There have been times, past and present, when you and I have felt that there was no way we could walk away from compromising situations, yet with God's Spirit within us, we are given the resolve to walk away from the temptation, however unsteady our gait as we walk away.

It was God, the Father's decision that Jesus should undergo temptation. In fact, the Greek word describing Jesus going directly from His baptism into the wilderness

translates that He was thrust out into the wilderness, like being thrown into the deep end of a swimming pool and wondering if you will be able to avoid going under. Yet even in the midst of the cosmic challenge in which Satan threw all of His tactics and manipulation to dissuade Jesus from following through on His mission; God, the Father, and the Holy Spirit enabled Jesus to refute Satan's arguments with Scripture as Matthew 4 informs us. Not only that, but God sent His heavenly messengers to attend to Jesus in the physically hostile environment of the wilderness.

For you and I, temptation is to be expected, not only before big moments in our lives, but throughout our lifetimes. God is not the instigator of temptation, but He does allow for it, which arouses my sense of outrage as to the logic of God. Why wouldn't God just simply allow us to proceed through life without being faced with temptation? Scripture helps us to understand the process of being tempted and resisting temptation. In I Corinthians 10:13, the Apostle Paul wrote, "No temptation has seized you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear." Temptation is a reality which we all face, but in the process of resisting temptation, our character and values are strengthened and our faith in Jesus is deepened.

With a nod to realism, it is safe to say that the good; baptism and the bad; temptation; prepare us for an ongoing life of faith and the strength and fortitude to engage in God's mission here in Fergus Falls and beyond. For pastors and church leaders, the call to mission has moments of delight, and times of discouragement due to conflict or simply the drudgery of routine, which keeps coming at you day after day without so much as a break for a cup of coffee. Yet, all you have to do is look at the Scriptures, in particular the Book of Acts and Paul's letters to see that in the midst of engaging in God's mission, the church and its leaders were always the object of God's love, and the churches rallied around each other, to support and to sustain one another.

To be involved in God's mission is to enjoy the camaraderie within each congregation; even with people whom you disagree with most of the time.

The Lancaster Seminary theologian, Greg Carey reminds us that the kingdom of God is not a place, but a power; a Divine power which flows through you and I because we are Jesus' followers. Ladies and Gentlemen, this church is only part of God's Kingdom. If God's kingdom is Divine power rather than a place, we take this embodied power with us wherever we go, and as we interact with our families and our communities, we are channels through whom God's power to save and transform flows through.

Lent, like Advent is a call to turn our life's direction toward God and to believe the good news about Jesus; not only for ourselves, but to share the good news with others within and outside the confines of the people of faith. May God remind you and I today, to whom we belong. May we rest in that knowledge of salvation by grace through faith, and may we be inspired to share that message appropriately. Thanks be to God. Amen!

