

Lent 1B 2018 Sermon

Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And 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."

And 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.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

In three short paragraphs, just six sentences, Mark tells us of Jesus' baptism, temptation, and his proclamation of the kingdom of God.

First, Jesus is baptized by John, and as he is coming up out of the waters of his baptism, we are told that the heavens are torn apart. Now, if the heavens had simply been *opened*, they could have been *closed* again; but Mark wants us to know that the separation between heaven and earth is ***torn apart*** and cannot be put back together. Heaven and earth are forever intermingled; humanity is forever co-mingled with the divine. And what God says to Jesus, He says to **all** of us who have been created and redeemed in the divine image: "You are my beloved child. With you I am well-pleased." Baptism tells us that we are beloved of God, and claimed as God's own; and God wants us to live our lives out of that identity in Him.

But as we all know, we live in a world where we humans have *distorted* God's intentions, resulting in the sad reality that we have become separated from God and one another – which is the very definition of "sin." Since Jesus became one of us that he might experience everything we experience, he must squarely face this reality of human separateness. And so, immediately *after* his baptism, where his identity as God's beloved Son has been affirmed, Jesus is thrust out into the wilderness to confront the human actuality of separation. We are told that there, in the wilderness, he was "with the wild beasts" and was tempted by Satan.

Fr. John Shea states that the figure of Satan in our Gospel should not be thought of as an individual being, but rather as "... the inner, invisible energy of people, groups, and social and political structures that inflict suffering on people. This adversary of God manifests itself through these people, groups, and social and political structures—and turns them into 'wild beasts' who devour God's good creation. This inner invisible force of Satan and the demons ...actively *keeps* people alienated from God and divided among themselves. **Jesus**, [on the other hand,] actively seeks to *unite* people to God and to one another."¹

Sustained by the love and favor of God and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit which were gifts of his baptism, as well as being sustained by the angels who wait on him in the wilderness, Jesus is able to withstand the temptations of these inner invisible forces. He emerges from the wilderness after 40 days and begins to preach, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe [trust] in the good news.”

The heavens have been torn open, mingling the divine with the human; in his own self, Jesus is divinity and humanity combined into one. Heaven and earth are coming together. “Therefore,” Fr. Shea writes, “[Jesus can say that the] time is fulfilled. The promise of union that lurks in every moment has happened. ...It has happened in the one human being, Jesus. It has yet to happen [fully] in others. Jesus’ mission is to offer to others that *potential* that has become **actual** in himself.”² You and I have the *potential* to become one with God and with one another, just as Jesus is one with God and us.

“But the mere *offer* of the kingdom does not **make** the kingdom arrive,” Fr. Shea notes. “There must be human *reception*, [which] depends on repentance and belief. Repentance entails turning away from ways of thinking and acting that *reinforce* alienation from God and separation from people. These ways of thinking and acting are many and complex, interwoven with one another and often masquerading as true knowledge and righteous deeds. They are deeply ingrained... Turning away, refusing to allow alienating thinking and acting to have influence, takes persevering and attentive activity.”³ Lenten work, to be sure!

One of our major forms of “alienating thinking and acting” is the strong tendency we humans have to judge everything and everyone as good or bad, right or wrong, winner or loser, saved or condemned, in or out, us or them. This is the topic of our Friday night Lenten studies. Despite Stephen Covey’s Fourth Habit of Highly Effective People, “Think win-win,” we humans have this deeply-engrained propensity to think “win-lose:” to be competitive, to compare ourselves and *our* group with others and *their* group. This is what we do when we approach everything and everyone with a stance of judgment, which, if we are honest, we probably do more often than not. Yet God told Adam and Eve from the beginning NOT to eat from that tree which judges things “good” or “evil,”⁴ and Jesus taught us in his Sermon on the Mount, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged... Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?”⁵

Turning away from, repenting from this kind of alienating thinking and acting is necessary if we are to receive the **gift** of the kingdom of heaven which Jesus offers in today’s Gospel reading.

Dr. Shea suggests that one of the major reasons “it so *difficult* to repent and believe the Gospel—[believe] that we are loved by God, and are called to embody

that love in the time and space of earthly life, is because we harbor so many *other* beliefs that do not **fit** into this Good News... [Beliefs such as:] ‘Health and beauty, money and power are necessary for happiness.’ ‘I am identified by my body, personality, and possessions.’ ‘My welfare is more important than yours.’ ... ‘The world is here for us to exploit.’ ‘No one can be trusted.’ ‘There have to be winners and losers.’ ‘They hurt me, so I must get even.’ ‘I can’t feel good about myself unless I’m better than somebody.’ ...

“Of course, we are not always *aware* we hold these beliefs or other beliefs that block us from embracing the good news...

“[So,] repentance entails [first] *finding* and [then] *letting go of* beliefs that compete with or contradict the Good News. Two observations are helpful for this ‘letting go’ to occur. First, [try to] notice where the competing or contradicting beliefs come from. Some of them come from the mindless internalization of cultural assumptions...

“Second, *realize* that we are **holding** the belief. The belief has not been imposed on us. It may *appear* to be a universal truth that we must heed. But the real truth is that we are *holding* [the belief], nurturing it, sustaining it in existence by our attention and obedience. We enshrine it by allowing it to dictate our moods, decisions, and actions. Deeply realizing the *origins* of competing beliefs and **our** role in their continued power allows us to open the grasping hands of our mind. Once we cease to *hold onto* these beliefs, they lose their power and eventually drop away.”⁶

“[But there is *another* reason that] it is so difficult to repent and believe the Gospel— [the Good News] that we are loved by God, and are called to embody that love in the time and space of earthly life: ...[and that is that] the Gospel is about spiritual reality, and how we come to **believe** in spiritual reality is an involved, lifelong process.”⁷

I think that, in the end, we don’t so much *believe* in spiritual reality as we **experience** spiritual reality, experience God and the flow of divine Life. And because we *experience* God, we can say that not only do we *believe in* God; we *know* God. We no longer rely on having learned God’s instructions for faithful living; we come to have the consciousness of Christ, the mind of Christ. We become, as C.S. Lewis said, “Little Christs.”⁸ Acting from our Christ-consciousness, what we do will flow from that inner source without our having to think about what is “right” or “wrong,” or what the Bible says, or the Pope says, or whatever other external authority says. St. Paul describes this indwelling Christ by saying, “...it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me;”⁹ and again Paul says, “in Him we live and move and have our being.”¹⁰

But Fr. Shea tells us that “initially there is a need to have faith in Jesus *without* [yet] having his consciousness of divine love and [God’s] pleasure. The Christian

community and tradition [of which Christ Church is a part] initiates all its members *into* this faith and supports it with strong argumentation and multiple practices. But...¹¹ gradually, over time, *our* consciousness becomes Christ-consciousness; *our* mind becomes the “mind of Christ.”¹²

How do we get there? Fr. Shea suggests that one way is to follow Jesus’ instructions not to store up for ourselves treasures on earth, but rather store up treasures in heaven, for “where our treasure is, there our heart will be also (Matt 6:19-21).”¹³ If you want your heart to be in heaven, Fr. Shea suggests, start “identifying yourself more and more as a beloved son or daughter of God sent into the world to bring love onto the earth. If you do this consistently, your sense of yourself will change... You will see for yourself what once you could only see by trusting in Jesus. ...Your sense of *being loved by God* will enter your heart, the center of your being, the source of your thinking and acting. The Good News will be central to your identity, and you may be surprised to find your decisions and behaviors flowing from this treasure in your heart (see Matt 12:34)...”¹⁴

There is another way that our consciousness gradually becomes Christ-consciousness, and that is through some regular practice of prayer. I have found personally that Centering Prayer is a way to empty my ego mind so that I might be receptive to the presence of God and the action of God within me, which helps transform *my* mind into the mind of Christ.

Of course, these two paths to Christ-consciousness work even better *together!* Letting go of one’s egocentricity both in our *outer* lives **and** in our *inner* lives is perhaps the best way to grow into Christ. But both require regular, ongoing practice; they don’t come naturally! For as Fr. Shea concludes, “... repenting and believing in the good news is not a project for the beginning of Lent, or even a project for the whole of Lent. It is the adventure that permeates all of life. We never finish letting go of false beliefs, and we never finish entering the kingdom of God, embracing and embodying the transcendent love at the center of our being.”¹⁵

AMEN

¹ John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, p. 80

² *Ibid.*, p. 81

³ *Ibid.*, p. 81

⁴ Genesis 2:17

⁵ Matthew 7:1-5

⁶ Shea, *ibid.*, pp. 82-82

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 82

⁸ “Now the whole offer which Christianity makes is this: that we can, if we let God have His way, come to share in the life of Christ. If we do, we shall then be sharing a life which was begotten, not made, which always existed

and always will exist. Christ is the Son of God. If we share in this kind of life we also shall be sons of God. We shall love the Father as He does and the Holy Ghost will arise in us. He came to this world and became a man in order to spread to other men the kind of life He has — by what I call ‘good infection.’ Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.” - C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book Four, Chapter 4, “Good Infection”

⁹ Galatians 2:20

¹⁰ Acts 7:28

¹¹ Shea, *ibid.*, p. 83

¹² 1 Cor 2:16

¹³ Shea, *ibid.*, p. 83

¹⁴ Shea, *ibid.*, p. 84

¹⁵ Shea, *ibid.*, p. 84