

Sunday, August 20, 2017

St. Giles' Presbyterian Church

Mark 1: 9-20

Discipleship and Learning the Dance

St. Giles', our church family, it's so good to have this opportunity to come and share the good news of the gospel with all of you again. Rev. Hilder and his family are away for a couple of weeks on vacation in Toronto, and so I was invited to lead worship this Sunday and next Sunday.

This morning, our sermon is called Discipleship and Learning the Dance. And you've got to be wondering to yourselves, what does that mean? Discipleship is a pretty big church word, but what on earth does it mean when Al says "Learning how to dance?" Is he going to show us some dance moves? Are we going to be asked to dance?

I mean let's be serious here now. I've been a Presbyterian all my life, and I've never seen dancing be part of Sunday worship. Let me ease everyone's minds here. I'm not going to ask anyone to get up and show us your dance moves. AND, I'm not going to talk about interpretive dance in worship service. What I am going to share about this morning though is the DANCE that God invites us to be a part of IF you are part of the church and call yourselves a Christ follower.

But before we begin, let's start with a word of prayer.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for this Sunday morning where you've brought us here to worship you. We come in awe of you. We come wanting to learn what it means to be a Christ Follower. And so Holy Spirit, we ask that you would open up these scriptures to us, teach us and transform our lives so that our character becomes more and more like Christ's. We pray for these things in your name. Amen.

The Beginning

This morning, our scripture reading comes from the book of Mark, chapter 1. And in our scriptures we read about three distinctive events that Mark records for us.

Those three events are

(1) The Baptism and Testing of Jesus

(2) Jesus Announces the Good News

(3) Jesus Calling his First Disciples

And in Mark's writing, you'll notice two things.

The first thing you'll notice is that in the book of Mark, his account of these three events is relatively short. All in all, Mark takes 12 verses to talk about

Jesus' Baptism, Jesus making a proclamation to what his ministry will be about and how Jesus invites the first people to "come and follow him".

The second thing you'll notice about the book of Mark is that even though the book of Mark seems short, Mark is concise in outlining the life of Jesus. The reason why Mark is concise in his book is because he is trying to show his readers WHO Jesus is in the greater story of the Bible. It's sort of a summary so that the original readers who are just finding out about Jesus can know what he did and that indeed it was good news.

Look at how Mark writes about Jesus' first words after his baptism and temptation.

In Mark 1: 14-15,

¹⁴ After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ¹⁵ "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" – Mark 1: 14-15

Mark writes that Jesus went into Galilee. Jesus says, "The time has come! The Kingdom of God has come near! Repent and believe the good news!"

Now the words of Mark 1 verses 14-15 is loaded with language that sound nice to our modern ears. Jesus brings the good news. There's a phrase that he uses that "the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe! These are words and phrases that have

become part of the culture of the modern church. Yet, when we break it down, WHAT does it mean?

What Jesus is saying AND what Mark is trying to point out is that the CORE of Jesus' ministry WAS that he was trying to tell people of WHAT God was doing. God HADN'T forgotten them. God was STILL sovereign and held power over all. AND THAT even though, there was a foreign power, the Roman Empire that seemingly was in CHARGE, that God was still with them.

What's also interesting is how Mark frames this good news. He says The Kingdom of God has come near. What a strange phrase? And also, what a huge break in what our understanding is with regards to how this whole church thing works. Many people understand the scriptures to mean that God is somewhere up in Heaven. And that he looks down on us, seemingly leaving us alone to fend for ourselves.

Yet, the Jewish people had a very different understanding in how this relationship between God and humans was supposed to work.

NT Wright explains it like this. He says, look at how the Old Testament is set up. From the Garden of Eden in the beginning to the Israelite people exiled in Egypt. God is WITH his people. Think about the story of Adam of Even before The Fall. How does that relationship work? The scriptures say, in the cool of the evening, God walks through the

Garden of Eden, looking for Adam and Eve. There is a relationship there, a closeness where God is WITH his creation.

In the same way, does God leave his people to be oppressed by Pharaoh and Egypt? Of course not! God DELIVERS his people. And yes, he sends Moses and Aaron to be his mouthpieces. But ultimately it is God who leads them through the dessert in the pillar of fire. God's power is revealed visually through the fire and we see that God once again is WITH his people.

And so when Mark begins his book, when he is trying to tell his readers about Jesus, he is saying, look everyone! There is good news. God is with us. Jesus is here. HE has begun his ministry. And Jesus begins ALL of this by proclaiming the GOOD NEWS that the Kingdom of God is near! It's not far away! The thing that you are waiting and looking for is right around the corner. AND it is found in Jesus. Mark is inviting his audience to READ this book and to hear the GOOD NEWS.

GOOD NEWS

Good news, then, becomes a pretty important word when reading about the life and ministry of Jesus. And WHAT is good news? Good news is of course something so good,

something worth telling, that you CAN'T stop talking about it. And the telling of good news is something that was huge in Jesus' world.

I'll give you an example.

In this day and age, we have news and information overload. We turn on the television and we can see the news from CNN, CTV, the CBC, and even the BBC.

And to complicate matters some people get their news from social media. We have platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr.

And to complicate matters EVEN MORE, we now have to deal with fake news and alternative facts. We need to check our sources to make sure that the news that we get is up to date AND true! News is important and it is complicated in our 21st century.

But what about in Jesus' day? How was news spread? It was through people bringing a letter, or gathering people together to tell them about the news.

Good news was spread by people who literally ran out to tell others about what had happened. And so in Jesus' day, Rome would win battles and they would defeat their enemies. And then, they would send out runners to tell people what had happened.

[SLIDE]

εὐαγγέλιον

The word εὐαγγέλιον (Ev-an-GELLion) in the Greek literally means “good news” which we have translated to be the word “the gospel”.

And the most famous example of the Greeks using this kind of method to spread good news is from the origins of the marathon.

[SLIDE] - Marathon

Now, when we think of running a marathon, we think about people competing in races like the Olympics or the New York City Marathon or the Boston Marathon.

But the origins of the Marathon, really comes from the Greek legend of the soldier named Philippides. In that legend it says that the Greeks had defeated the Persians at the battlefield of Marathon. And in order to tell the assembly that was in Athens, the soldier ran the entire way, burst into the assembly and exclaimed νενικήκαμεν (nenikēkamen, "we have won!")

In this example, we see the importance of going out and proclaiming the good news. Without the good news or εὐαγγέλιον, we wouldn't have the runners, or the evangelists. And in this instance, when we Mark talks about Jesus, he is proclaiming good news to the people. Repent! Because the Kingdom of Heaven is near. And friends, this is good news.

Jesus' Baptism and the Dance

But let's back it up a bit and ask ourselves what is the good news? We are used to hearing about bad news aren't we? I mean a quick scan of the headlines show us that. Over the past 5 weeks or so we in the province of British Columbia have been hearing about the bad news that are the wild fires. We hear about people being evacuated. We hear about the loss of property.

In international news we hear about bad news. We have heard about things like Charlottesville and the rally by white supremacists and neo Nazis. We've also heard about the rhetoric from North Korea about attacking Guam. We've heard about the terror attacks in Barcelona. Our news is saturated by bad news.

Yet, we find that Jesus here is proclaiming that there is good news that the Kingdom of God is near. Really? Is that true? Yet, we find this example of good news being explicitly demonstrated by the triune God through the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In Mark chapter 1, we find in our scriptures that this demonstration really is being played out in the story of the life of Christ.

What is the first thing that Jesus does before he begins his ministry? John the Baptist baptizes Jesus. Mark, in his writing doesn't shy away from this. If the style of the writing

of the book of Mark is short and concise, why does he include the baptism of Christ? It MUST mean that the baptism of Jesus is VERY important. And the question is why? WHY is it important? It is important because in the baptism of Jesus, the triune God models for us what it looks like to be in perfect relationship with one another.

The baptism of Jesus is one of the most powerful images we have in the Bible. It is powerful because it is in Mark that we see the picture of the three in one, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit on full display. And what does Mark chapter 1 say about all of this?

Mark 1 says this:

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⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Mark 1:9-11

In these two verses, we see that the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit are present. We see that as Jesus is being baptized, we're told that heaven was torn open. And the thing about this particular image is that we're so used to hearing it through the lens of something that is poetic. But when you read Mark in it's original form, the Greek that is used is very earthy. Instead of being "torn open", really the translation should read that it is ripped open.

The difference is kind of like this. As I get older, when I have a birthday or when it's Christmas time, I find myself trying to be very polite. I take the gift, and I tear it open. I might try and make sure that I take the tape and be very gentle with it. I've seen other people open their gift in a way where you can save the paper and maybe you'll use it again. But the language that is being used here of heaven being torn open is like a three year old on Christmas morning. You'd be gathered together by the Christmas tree. And a present is given to the child. And what happens to that present? What happens to that wrapping paper. It's ripped open with excitement and violence.

That's the kind of picture we get here. Jesus is baptized and the heavens are ripped open. And what happens? The spirit descends on him, like a dove. There's excitement in all of this because what Jesus is about to do is big. And what happens next? We're told that a voice came from heaven saying, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Now think about what that image really looks like. It means that the triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit together, they are truly connected to one another. In this sending of Jesus to heal and reconcile a broken world, Jesus' ministry begins with the triune God, fully in right relationship with one another. The Father says that he is pleased with his Son. The Father says I love him.

Notice as well the Holy Spirit. Mark describes The Holy Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove. This description of the Holy Spirit descending like a dove is rare. In fact, there is only one other place in the scriptures where the Spirit is described in such terms. If you look back at Genesis chapter 1, we see this in the second verse of that book. The scriptures say:

1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.² Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. Genesis 1:1-2

That word “hovering”, describing how the Spirit of God was above the waters, the original translation reads “to flutter” or “fluttering”, like a dove. Mark here is taking his readers back to the beginning of creation.

Timothy Keller writes this as he describes the baptism of Jesus.

“When Jesus comes out of the water, the Father envelops him and covers him with the words of love: “You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” Meanwhile the Spirit covers him with power. This is what has been happening in the interior life of the Trinity from all eternity. Mark is giving us a glimpse into the very heart of reality, the meaning of life, the essence of the universe.” - Timothy Keller

By Mark bringing us back to the beginning of creation, what he is saying is look, THIS is IT! The relationship that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit have with one another is what ALL of humanity should look up to. Mark says we are broken, sinful people and that WE have missed the mark.

Even in our prayer of confession this morning, we prayed up how we are a people divided amongst ourselves. We prayed that we are jealous of other people and that we have set neighbour against neighbour and nation against nation. Humanity is at war with itself. Why? Because of the selfishness we have. We are self-centered people. Which means that when this happens, God is not at the centre of our lives.

But look at the relationship that happens with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. What happens? Is there jealousy that happens? No.

Is each part of the triune God against one another? No.

What is happening in this relationship?

The relationship is active.

It pours into one another, in love.

It covers one another in power.

And the relationship is beautiful.

Think about your own experiences. What happens when you truly love another person? You find that person beautiful, more than just the physical sense, but you see them and you want to be with them. You want to love them. You want to see the best outcomes happen for that person. And truly, you would do everything in your power to see that happen.

That's what is happening in the triune God. The theologian Cornelius Plantingus describes it like this:

“The persons within God exalt each other, commune with each other and defer to one another. Each divine person harbours the others at the center of his being. In constant movement of overture and acceptance, each person envelops and encircles the others. God’s interior life overflows with regard for others.” - Cornelius Plantingus

Isn't that beautiful? The way Cornelius describes this ebb and flow between the triune God?

And this is it. By taking us back to the beginning, Mark is reminding us how God intended us to live.

Not against one another.

Not jealous.

Not self-centered.

But overflowing with love for one another.

This is why Jesus says. Repent! The lives you are leading is not the life that God intended for you! Turn away from sin. Turn away from the idols in your life that have distracted you from worshiping God. Be transformed by this love that the triune God has for you, so that you might do the same for others. For the Kingdom of God is near.

Jesus, coming to this world was to show us in flesh and bones what this kind of life looks like. His ministry, lasting only three years was to teach people about this dance. His ministry was to show us how we ought to live. His ministry was to come and save us from the path of destruction, which is in our own sin and our own brokenness.

Sin + brokenness and the temptation

And we see this, really in what happens immediately after Jesus' baptism. Mark records for us that "at once" the Spirit sends Jesus out to the wilderness to be tempted. And if you remember the temptation, what did Satan tempt Jesus with? We're reminded that Jesus is tempted with three things.

The scriptures tell us that Satan first tempted Jesus with bread. We're told that while he was in the desert, Jesus was hungry. Although he was fully God, Jesus was also fully

human. He became hungry because his body, his flesh, like ours was weak. And so Satan tempts him by telling him to change the stones into bread. But Jesus refuses.

Secondly, we're told that Satan then takes Jesus up to the highest point in the temple and tells him to fling himself from it. He says that you can do it, because your Father in Heaven will protect you! God will send his angels down to watch over you! But Jesus refuses and he famously says, "Do not put your Lord your God to the test." - Matthew 1:7

And finally the scriptures tell us that Satan shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and all of their splendour. And he says, I'll give you all of this if you bow down and worship me. And Jesus responds by saying, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" – Matthew 4:10

We've heard of these temptations before, but what do they mean? It means that on the one hand, we see the Father, Son and Holy Spirit modelling for us what the dance should look like. And then on the other hand, we see that Satan is trying to tempt Jesus away from the dance. Those three temptations that Jesus faces is the same kind of temptation that we as humans face as well.

(1) Temptation of the flesh

The first temptation of Jesus, on the surface, is about bread. But really, that first temptation is all about the temptations of the flesh. Jesus even says to his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Things like food, sleep, and clothes are important to us as human beings. But when we place them before God, if the things of this world become more important to us than the worship of God, then we have been tempted away from the dance.

(1) Temptation of the flesh

(2) Temptation of pride

The second temptation of Jesus is a difficult one to understand. If Jesus were to fling himself off the highest point in the temple and God were to send his angels to rescue him, what does that have to do with us? What Satan is trying to do is build up pride in Jesus. Think about it. YOU are so great that God won't let anything happen to YOU. He will send his angels to save YOU. Pride is one of the deadly sins that have been talked about over and over again in the church. Pride is when we become so enamoured with ourselves that there is no more room for God. We become self-absorbed. We become self focused. There is no more room to be in right relationship with anyone else. Everyone else becomes second or third or fourth fiddle in our lives. No longer is God at the centre. We become the centre of our attention.

(1) Temptation of the flesh

(2) Temptation of pride

(3) Temptation of power

The third temptation that Jesus faces is one that should be unthinkable. Satan tempts Jesus by saying, look I have control over all of the kingdoms. Look at how beautiful they are. Your mission is to come and save the world. But if you bow down to me, I will give you control and power over all of it. Your mission would be complete.

But if Jesus were to do this, it would defeat his whole purpose in coming. Jesus says, repent, because the Kingdom of Heaven is near! To bow down and worship anyone other than God would take us out of the original purpose that God created us to be.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism lays this out for us in its first question to the church.

It asks:

Question: What is the chief end of man?

Answer: Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

Our purpose, our quest is to join God in the cosmic dance.

Jesus Calls the First Disciples

The last section that we'll look at this morning is from Mark 1: 16-20.

¹⁶As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.¹⁷“Come, follow me, “Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.”¹⁸At once they left their nets and followed him.

¹⁹When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets.²⁰Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him. – Mark 1: 16-20

And from the scriptures we see that after all of this, after the baptism and temptation of Jesus. After proclaiming the good news that the Kingdom of Heaven is near, what does Jesus do? Jesus goes out to look for people to disciple. The scriptures tell us that he went out for a walk and he went to the Sea of Galilee. And there he found Simon (Peter) and his brother Andrew, working. They are at the lake, casting a net because they were fishermen. And then we're told that Jesus sees James and his brother John in a boat, also preparing their nets. Jesus calls them and they immediately follow him.

In other words, what Jesus is doing is he's going to look for disciples in the places that are in the "everyday". His first disciples were common folk. They were fishermen. They weren't the cream of the crop. They were ordinary blue-collar people. And he calls them and they immediately follow.

Now for a Rabbi or a teacher to do this was uncommon. The usual pattern for disciples in those days was to go through the entire Jewish education system from childhood to adolescence. And only the best of the best would be able to advance and take the next step in their education. If you weren't good enough, eventually you would return to your family and join the family business.

If you WERE good enough, you'd finish your training and then look for a rabbi so that you could sit under their teaching.

What Jesus was doing was the complete opposite. Jesus goes out. He looks for people. He seeks them out. And he calls them to join him. So that he can teach them. So that he can show them. So that they can join him in the dance.

Conclusion:

Friends, when I read Mark chapter 1 and begin to reflect on these events, I begin to dream about what it would be like to truly live how God intended us to live. The Dance

as Cornelius Plantingus describes it is so attractive to me. Maybe I'm idealistic, but the theology that we find in the scriptures is the kind of good news that I want to share with everyone. Yet, when we begin to reflect on our own lives, we begin to see how far we are in seeing how this can become reality. I mean think about even the last week in the news when we hear about Charlottesville and how that young mother was killed. We hear about white supremacy and Neo Nazi's and we know that these kinds of ideals are evil and not part of the Dance that God wants us to be in. The Dance that humans are engaged in is awkward, out of step and in some cases not the kind of dance that we can recognize at all. We are a broken people. We need to repent.

My hope and my prayer is that we will all begin to reflect on this and begin to examine ourselves and look in the mirror to see where each of us are in our faith. Have we been tempted away from the dance? Or are we trying to get in step with the triune God.

Next week, we'll continue on with the life and ministry of Christ and we'll take a look at what discipleship looked like for his followers.

Amen.