

Healing as release
Mark 1.9-15

On the first Sunday of Lent, each year the lectionary gives us the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. So this year we get Mark's version. And it includes Jesus' baptism. Which we heard right after Christmas. But because Mark's stories are told in patterns, when we hear the baptism story today, we see something new because it's in relationship to the temptation story.

To say that Mark tells short stories give new meaning to short! The story of Jesus' baptism is told in three sentences, and the temptation in the wilderness, two sentences. The brevity of the stories can have the reader move through the gospel quickly. But something amazing happens when you slow down and read these stories slowly. The three short-short stories that make up today's reading are full and overflowing with layers of stories. Mark chooses his words carefully, using words that evoke memories and that recall ancient stories.

So, let's slow way down, intentionally looking through the lens of healing and release to see what these three brief vignettes show us about healing in the Kingdom of God.

In the baptism story...well, it's hardly even a story...it's more like a news clip, informing us that Jesus got baptized. But then in the next sentence, Mark's story suddenly becomes intense—when Jesus is coming up out of the water, the heavens are *torn apart*. That's serious drama. Ripped open. But it isn't drama for the sake of drama. The *tearing apart* of the heavens recalls the exodus, when, at God's command, Moses *tore apart* the Red Sea so that the descendants of Jacob could pass through, leaving slavery behind, entering into the wilderness of release.

With that one word, Mark has opened up for us a whole vista of story and experience. And he's cueing us that this Jesus event is significant...right up there with the exodus, one

of his people's foundational stories. Here in Mark, the exodus informs how we understand baptism; and this baptism re-imagines our understanding of God at work in the exodus.

And Mark will use this word again after Jesus is killed, when the curtains in the Temple are *torn apart*. In the wake of Jesus, big things get *torn apart*! God tears open the waters to free us; tears open the heavens to claim us; and tears open the curtain so we have direct access to the Holy of Holies.

But Mark isn't finished. After the heavens are torn open, the Spirit descends, like a dove. And we can't help but remember Noah. And the flood. And the dove that was a sign that the waters had receded, that Noah and his family and the creatures could now leave the confinement of the ark. And we recall God's covenant with Noah and all creatures, that God would never again destroy the earth.

With this dove there's no such promise. Instead, this time we hear the Voice of God say, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

This story of Jesus' temptation begins with God's declaration of love. This foundational story that Mark is telling doesn't begin with destruction and a promise to never again destroy. In this story, in the beginning is love.

So there's this spectacular declaration of love for Jesus. This glorious claim...the Spirit coming down from the heavens and settling on Jesus. And then, in true Markan style, there's no lingering...there's no basking in such exquisite love. Instead, the same Spirit that has just descended, immediately drives Jesus into the wilderness.

With that brief sentence, Mark has given us so much information that I find my head spinning. But...we're slowing it down...way down...so we can get a better look!

Of course there's the initial shock of realizing that Jesus has no agency here. He's *driven* into the wilderness. He isn't led. He isn't guided. He's *driven*. And not by any evil force, but by the Spirit. Perhaps the wilderness isn't what we've thought it is?

Then there's the word *driven*. "The Spirit *drove* Jesus into the wilderness." This word in Greek means to *expel*, or to *cast out*. The Spirit *casts* Jesus *out* into the wilderness. And with this word we hear an echo of an ancient story, a story of Adam and Eve being *cast out* of a garden, *driven out* of paradise. God drove them out of Eden and into a wilderness, into the unknown, the unfamiliar. Is Mark offering us a new understanding of the story Adam and Eve and the Garden? What if leaving the garden isn't what we think it is?!

So, Jesus is being driven out, cast out. And we know that when Jesus returns from the wilderness, one of the first things he will do is cast out demons. Driving out demons is a marker of Jesus' healing. Because Jesus knows what happens when we are cast out by the Spirit of God, he has absolute faith to cast out demons. And his complete trust in God is contagious—it contaminates those he encounters and they are freed to *release* their demons.

Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark gives us no information or detail about the temptations themselves. We only know that Satan tested Jesus. There's nothing about whether or not Jesus had food to eat. What Mark does tell us about Jesus in the wilderness is that he was there for 40 days, that there were animals there with him (just animals, not beasts!), and that the angels waited on him.

The first two details continue to recall ancient stories. But it's the third detail that is particularly interesting, especially for us as we enter into Lent...into healing and release....

The angels waited on Jesus. They served him. They were his nurses, his ministers.

I like Matthew and Luke's details about the temptations. They give me information. And if I know what happened, if we know how Jesus was tempted, then we'll know how to be

when we're in the wilderness, right?! But we don't get that from Mark. That's not his story. The kind of testing isn't important. Not at all. What is important is that Jesus was in a wild place, an uninhabited place, with animals, with other living creatures...but no other human creatures...being tempted. And being cared for by angels.

After 40 days, Jesus leaves the wilderness. And when John the Baptist is arrested, Jesus announces the arrival of the Kingdom of God.

There are lots of things here that keep pulling for attention. But looking through the lens of *healing as release*, there are several things that come into focus. The first is that the Jesus' wilderness experience happens in between two major events: God's declaration of love on the front end and the arrival of the Kingdom of God at the other end. That's the first thing. God's love for Jesus on one side and God's love for all on the other side. The wilderness may be unfamiliar and uninhabited space, but it's enveloped by love!

The second is that Jesus wasn't alone. He didn't survive the testing in the wilderness on his own. Whatever it was that he was cast out into, he didn't have to do it on his own. It is a lie that we have to be strong enough to endure the wilderness by ourselves. In the wilderness, there is no place to hide. We are completely exposed. When we are cast out into the wilderness, we are absolutely vulnerable, completely dependent. We need angels. We need angels to serve us, to tend to our injuries, to our pain, our brokenness. We need angels. We need each other to tend our wounds. We cannot do that on our own. Jesus couldn't do it by himself and we can't either.

A third sighting is the dynamic tension between being *cast out* and *release*. The Spirit did the *casting out*. And Jesus participated by *releasing*—releasing his agency, releasing his control, releasing his independence, releasing his ego, releasing the illusions of his own power and strength, releasing his strategies....

When we find ourselves cast out, it doesn't mean God doesn't love us. It doesn't mean we're alienated from God. It doesn't mean we're being punished. What happens when we let ourselves be cast out...when we release our egos and release demons, release our illusions...what happens is that space opens up within us for God to be at work, *for* us and *with* us. In the wilderness, the image of God gets imprinted deep into our bodies and bones. And when God's love is written into us, we find ourselves opening up. And releasing...the lies, the fear, the shame...releasing...

In the wilderness, Jesus was cared for by the angels. And as he traveled from place to place, he became an angel, serving, tending, ministering. He didn't have to announce the arrival of the Kingdom of God, he *was* the Kingdom. And all around him, God's love torn open the diseased social systems and demons were cast out. This is what happens when God's love contaminates us! The Kingdom of God arrives...and there is release...and healing...