

Lent 1B 2021 Mark 1:9-15

Most of us were probably taught in catechism or history class that part of what made the Protestant Reformation so successful was that Martin Luther happened to be writing at just about the same time that the printing press came into use, so it was easy for his ideas to be mass produced and spread. If you were a kid growing up in the church at about the same time I was, you would have witnessed a similar historic intersection when the What Would Jesus Do? movement coincided with the invention of those mass-produced bracelets. They were supposed to remind you to choose the most Christlike response in whatever circumstances you found yourself. It doesn't work perfectly, because Jesus is Jesus, and we are not, but it's still not a bad question for us to ask as we answer the call to follow Christ.

On this first Sunday in Lent, we always read the story of Jesus temptation in the wilderness. I certainly hope with the weather we've been having that none of you decided to do exactly what Jesus did and try to survive on your own in the wilderness for 40 days. If you have picked a particularly difficult Lenten discipline that you've been working on since last Wednesday, you might already be feeling the temptation to give up. But here is where we see the limitations of asking What Would Jesus Do?: Jesus was tempted and, we assume, didn't give in. That does not mean that we are to pick something tempting and try not to give into it because that's what Jesus did. This story and this season are about so much more than that.

Mark, as usual, gives us the briefest description of Jesus' temptation. Matthew and Luke record his conversation with Satan and the specific tactics that Satan uses to try to get Jesus to abandon his identity as Son of God. Mark just tells us that for 40 days he was out there with Satan, the wild beasts, and the angels. This is the very first thing that happens to Jesus after he is baptized—*immediately*, Mark says, the Spirit drives him out into the wilderness and into temptation. God provides for his needs through the service of the angels, but the Spirit has gifted him for hard work, not to sit back and enjoy his power and position as the beloved Son of God. As baptized children of God, we should not be surprised when we find that the Spirit has gifted us for hard work, too. Following Jesus is not for the faint of heart, but the Spirit has empowered us for the task.

When Jesus returns from the wilderness and John has been arrested for speaking truth to power, Jesus begins to tell the people, *the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news*. If we had started just a few verses earlier in Mark's gospel, we would have seen

that the people were primed for repentance; they had first gone to John who preached a baptism of repentance, so they understood that the world was changing, and they wanted to be a part of it. As we think about Lenten repentance, that's an important detail for us to catch: the people did not just go to John or Jesus to forgive their individual sins. They could go to the Temple and make sacrifices for that. Instead, first John and then Jesus lead the people to repentance as a whole community, a whole society. John and Jesus teach that the kingdoms of this world do not operate according to God's rules, so now is the time for the people to choose to live in the kingdom of God instead.

The kingdom of God about which John and Jesus preach is not a place. It's not a place on earth or a heavenly place reserved for life after death. The kingdom of God is a power—the power by which God has begun to redeem and restore what has gone wrong with this world. The kingdom comes near when John tells the truth, even though his bravery has deadly consequences. The kingdom comes near when Jesus overcomes temptation in the wilderness, turning away from Satan's empty promises to a life of service that fulfills the promises of God. The kingdom comes near when the people repent and believe in the good news.

All the time, but especially in this Lenten season, we, too, are called to repent and believe. But let's make sure we know what that means. To repent is not just to feel sorry for the things we've done or left undone; to repent is to reorient our perspective and then our actions away from the ideals of our broken human society and toward the life-giving ways of God. To believe is not just to repeat the creed sincerely or give intellectual assent to the ideas we've been taught in church. To believe is to respond when God calls, confident that even in new and difficult terrain, God will not leave us to fend for ourselves but will strengthen us for the adventure. Instead of *repent* and *believe*, think *turn* and *trust*. That's how Jesus tells us to live in the kingdom: turn away from the promises the world makes and breaks; trust that God has shown us a still more perfect way.

When the heavens were torn apart, when the Spirit descended and God spoke, something new was beginning. God who had spoken through the prophets was now speaking through the Son. The public ministry Jesus was beginning and the life Jesus would be leading became our clearest revelation of God. Jesus, who is God, lived exactly as God always intended, even when the consequence of defying the world was the cross. Jesus shows us which way to go: may the Spirit guide us to turn in that direction and help us trust that God is with us there.