

Mark 9:9-15

About that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee,
and John baptized him in the Jordan River.
While he was coming up out of the water,
Jesus saw heaven splitting open
and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him.
And there was a voice from heaven:
“You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness.”
At once the Spirit forced Jesus out into the wilderness.
He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan.
He was among the wild animals, and the angels took care of him.
After John was arrested,
Jesus came into Galilee announcing God’s good news, saying,
“Now is the time!
Here comes God’s kingdom!
Change your hearts and lives and trust this good news!”

Mark is a man of few words. Even if you add in the story of John the Baptist it only takes Mark fourteen verses tell the story. We hear that John is the messenger, John baptizes Jesus, the voice from heaven tells us that Jesus is loved, the Holy Spirit descends as a dove, Jesus is driven into the wilderness, John is arrested, and Jesus begins his ministry. It takes Luke thirty-seven verses to tell the story, and Matthew thirty-two.

Apparently, Matthew and Luke thought that the details of the wilderness experience and John the Baptist’s identity as a messenger were important. And we would all agree with them. And yet, here is Mark with a story that leaves us a bit breathless as we try to take it all in. What is Mark up to?

First, of course, Mark wants us to know who this Jesus character really is. As with any good story, we feel closer to a character that we can identify with somehow. For Mark’s audience it was the information that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee. Those simple words give the hearer much information.

If I tell you a story and I want you to understand the character, I might tell you that he or she came from a small town in Alabama, or that this person grew up on an estate in the Hamptons – either way your mind now has some information about the shaping of the person. We know stuff about small towns in Alabama and about life on an estate – right or wrong – that is how our minds work.

And then, Mark wants his listeners to know that Jesus isn't just a boy from Nazareth (or Alabama or the Hamptons) – yes Jesus has his roots among you – he grew up in a small town – a good Jewish boy just like you would expect and yet so much more.

And the whirlwind story continues. Mark does give us some places to catch our breath. Mark begins our text today with pretty ordinary words - *About that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River.* Those first listeners wouldn't have thought that was terribly unusual – they knew about Nazareth and lots and lots of people were being baptized by John. He was a bit of a local phenomenon.

But then, Mark catches our attention. *While he was coming out of the water* – can't you just hear the underscoring music become more dramatic, the lighting begins to change – we know if we are listening that something is up.

And then Mark lets us in on what happens – Jesus saw – not the crowd, not John the Baptist – Jesus sees – the heavens splitting open –the Spirit, like a dove coming down on him and hears a voice from heaven. What a moment.

And then before Jesus or the listeners can catch our collective breath, Mark rushes onward. Mark wants us to know that yes there was a wilderness experience, that Jesus was tempted by Satan, that he was among wild animals – but Mark says – the angels took care of him so all is well. We begin to breathe in thankfulness and gratitude.

I think Mark us up to something quite brilliant in his storytelling. He not only catches us up in this amazing story, there is a purpose to the whirlwind that propels us. Mark wants us to get to and focus on the final part of this text. It is his destination for us and his hope that we will hear it.

Our modern ears are attuned to thinking that Jesus first words were repent. That's not what Mark says. Jesus first words as he begins his ministry according to Mark are *Now is the time! Here comes God's kingdom!*

Jesus says something new is breaking in. Mark and the other Gospel writers go on to flesh out Jesus' vision of God's kin-dom. Repentance belongs to this vision, but it is not where Jesus began.

Can you hear it – *Now is the time. Here comes God’s kin-dom.* This is the pinnacle of Mark’s breathless story. We must hear that before we can fully hear Jesus’ next words. *Change your hearts and lives and trust this good news!*”

Trust this good news. Right now, in Mark’s story of Jesus, the listeners to Jesus’ first words didn’t know about the crucifixion and resurrection story. There was simply this – God’s kin-dom has come near. Now is the time.

That is the good news we hear this morning.

Because God’s kin-dom has come near we have the assurance that transformation is possible. That assurance is what enables us to overcome the shame that we carry in our hearts, of the agony of not being good enough to be chosen for the team, of stopping before we buy into our culture’s promises that if we just earn enough or buy enough that we will finally be good enough.

This is the kin-dom, the grace that transforms us from the fear of reaching out to our brothers and sisters into Living God’s Word with courage. Grace is the assurance that even when we don’t know exactly how to do it, that God will provide the means, the words, the actions to extend that kin-dom of God.

It happens when we deliver eighty-six cans of soup to the Connecting Grounds, when we make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for the hungry, support shelters in our community, take homemade food to college students and support Crosslines. If we step back and look, we realize that somehow those things just seem to come together seamlessly – that is God’s grace – God’s kin-dom come near.

The kin-dom transforms us as we work together to be the church of Jesus Christ in this time and place. It happens when pipes burst in our own building and somehow it all comes together as we look around for God’s kin-dom.

When we hear those words *“Now is the time! Here comes God’s kingdom!”* – when we really hear them = when we let them fill our hearts – then our hearts and minds are changed. And often when we believe this good news other hearts and minds are changed.

Jesus saw something truly amazing as he came up from the water that day. What he saw propelled him onto the journey of sharing what he heard – “You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness.” That is the kin-dom of God in a few words. That is the message that Jesus shares with us.

We are all heirs to this kin-dom of love and grace – a kin-dom that transforms the world. A kin-dom where each person is loved and valued and gives the Creator great joy.

I challenge each of us remember our own baptisms. We Protestants often think about baptism only when we have a baptism in our midst. During this season of Lent invite you to remember your baptism when the waters of a shower or bath surround you, when you slush through the inevitable waters of melting snow, or in the spring rains that will come, when you are doing dishes, or watering your plants or pets.

Ask yourself, what do I hear as I come up out of those waters. If we listen closely, we will hear those same words, *“You are my Child, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness.”*

Then remember Jesus first words *Now is the time! Here comes God’s kin-dom! Change your hearts and lives and trust this good news!”*

And then get moving to transform your lives and the world around you.

Come to the baptismal font this morning. Pour a bit of water into the font, see the water, hear the water, touch the water.

If you are at home, go to your kitchen sink and run the water – touch it, hear it, see it.

Listen as you imagine coming up out of the water – remember that you are God’s beloved child and you give God happiness.