

Good News on the Lenten Journey

Lent 1, February 21, 2021 – Mark 1:9-15

The Rev'd Canon Tom Patterson

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee..."

"Where do you come from?" It is a question I have often been asked; you probably have, too. You may have asked it of others. We are naturally curious about the life stories of people we are getting to know. Their origins - not necessarily birthplaces, but places that shaped them are a big part of who they are.

I think we ask, "Where are you from?" less often nowadays. Modern mobility, education and electronic media have made geography and local culture less important in forming us. We are also more aware that it can be a "loaded" question where there might be discrimination. It is illegal to ask it of job applicants.

Jesus came to Judea, and for a Galilean in Judea to be asked where they were from would have been a "loaded" question! Remember in John's Gospel when Nathanael said, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" To Judeans, it was an isolated backwater out on the far side of Samaria. It was mostly rural and relatively poor, mostly Jewish but partly Gentile. It had a reputation for banditry and rebellion. Nazareth itself was so insignificant that it was not even mentioned in written records until years later. Archaeologists think that it had a few hundred people at most in those days. One writer suggested it could be called "Nowheresville"! ¹

Mark's gospel does not have a stable or a manger, but to say "Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee" also shows his humble origins on the margins of Jewish society.

Something that so captures my attention about "Jesus came from Nazareth" is that it reminds me that he *had a life*, a private, apparently ordinary life, for decades before his public ministry. Matthew and Luke tell us that Jesus and his parents went to live in Nazareth when he was a child; they call it his "hometown". Jesus and his human father Joseph were carpenters, and Jesus would have started learning his trade from Joseph when he was just a boy. He was at least 30 and probably a few years more when he began his ministry. So, all in all, it seems likely that Jesus stayed in Nazareth and worked as a tradesman for nearly twenty years. When he returned to Nazareth later as an astounding preacher and healer, it is clear that the town folk who knew Jesus and his family had NOT seen this coming!

An online video mini-series, "The Chosen", has a quirky way of pointing to the mundane circumstances of Jesus' life before ministry: In one scene, Jesus tells someone that his last project in Nazareth was building a latrine!

Something to hold before us in our own Lenten journeys is that God is able to lift us from the deficits and limitations of our own backgrounds and use us to do God's work.

Now, Jesus' life in Nazareth probably was not "ordinary" all respects. As a 12-year-old boy he spent three days impressing the religious teachers in the Temple. Clearly, he was on a conscious spiritual journey from childhood, and exceptionally

gifted and knowledgeable for his young age. We know Jesus as fully divine but must also remember that he is fully human. Though his origin was divine, as a human being he had to grow and learn and mature. Luke says that after his childhood visit to the Temple, “Jesus increased in wisdom and years, and in divine and human favour.” (2.52)

You and I are on spiritual journeys, too - tugged, prodded, and led by Holy Spirit to draw closer to Jesus and Jesus’ way of living and being. For most of us, probably all of us, this is not a straight line to wisdom and goodness and certainty about who God wants us to be. There may be times when consciousness of God’s love is strong within us and our souls are at peace, where God’s presence shines in Creation and the people around us. There may be times when prayer seems dry, the world seems cruel and scary, and we wonder if God has abandoned us – or if WE have abandoned God. Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross wrote about “dark nights” of the soul, times that clear our path to closer union with God, but are anguishing to endure, even feel like dying. Jesus’ journey probably was like that, too. The gospels say he suffered during his ministry and passion much the way we suffer, so his earlier years probably were the same.

It must have been a huge step for Jesus to leave his home, family, and livelihood. It was a critical turning point in his life. Asking John to baptize him signified his readiness to risk everything, to identify with John’s movement, and commit to a new but uncertain life. It was a very human moment of risk and decision.

The humanity of Jesus is something to hold firmly in our consciousness as we journey through Lent.

In a few verses before today's gospel passage, Mark makes a strong connection between John and the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. The prophets cried out against the injustices of their time; exploitation of the poor, idolatry of wealth and power, and disregard for Torah commandments to love God and neighbours. Neither John nor the prophets called for rebellion by force of arms, but for all people to repent, that is, to change their minds and go in different ways. That angered and frightened people of power and privilege who benefitted from the existing domination systems.

John's baptism in the Jordan was something new – it was different from Jewish rites of bathing for purification before religious observances. If it were about washing away personal sins, why would Jesus have asked for it? One compelling interpretation is that it was a symbolic re-enactment of the of the Israelites' crossing of the Jordan, signifying a new start to living in the Promised Land according to God's commandments.²

Mark and the other gospels say that it was a baptism of "repentance for forgiveness of sins". In the early church, the emphasis was on "repentance" – changing minds to live in better ways, individually and as communities. Later in church history, the emphasis shifted to "forgiveness of sins" - washing away the guilt and shame of personal sins. It became entangled with St. Augustine's idea of "original sin" that became so

pervasive in the western church (but not the Orthodox or Celtic churches).

Luke's gospel is even clearer than Mark's that John not only stood in the tradition of the prophets, but that the repentance he called for was about living justly and kindly: sharing clothing and food with those who have none; tax collectors taking only the minimum required taxes; soldiers not using extortion to supplement their wages. Jesus' repentance was to leave behind his old way of life under the oppressive Rome-Jerusalem power structure and commit himself to live in God's way.

Our own Book of Alternative Services says that one of many images that express the meaning of our baptism today is "liberation into a new humanity in which barriers of division, whether of sex or race or social status, are transcended". Our baptismal vows are pledges of repentance.

Acknowledging the darkness within us must be part of our Lenten journeys, but repentance must be the light to our path to liberation.

"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."

The Greek word translated as "drove" really means "threw", literally, "the Spirit *threw* him out into the wilderness". Jesus was astounded, even stunned by what he saw and heard! He was not expecting the vision that engulfed him.

If any of us were in that same situation, we would have good reason to feel joyful and affirmed - God sees me, knows me, loves me! The Spirit of the Lord is upon me! And yet at that same moment may come overwhelming uncertainty, confusion, and responsibility: This is beyond anything I have known! What am I to do? Am I up to it? Moses and Isaiah could speak to that! You have probably had moments something like this at turning points in your life. I felt a bit of that in the moment I was ordained as a deacon. But nothing like the startling, apocalyptic vision that Jesus experienced. I think the closest I can come to that mixture of overwhelming joy, awe, responsibility, and self-doubt was at the births of my children.

Mark does not describe the temptations that Satan threw at Jesus in the wilderness. One of the ways evil stops us from responding to God's call is to whisper doubts in our ears – not doubts in the sense of our belief in God - but doubts about our own worthiness, our own abilities. Whether we think of it as coming from the Devil or from the dark places within our own minds, there is little that can shut us down as effectively as that voice in our heads saying, “You can't”, “You're not good enough”, “You will fail”. We can be manipulated in to being afraid, and out of fear can grow anger, division, judgment, paralysis, and self-protectiveness. We do not know if Jesus experienced any of that in the wilderness, but it would be surprising if he did not. Wherever those voices of unworthiness and fear come from, they do *not* come from God!

“Jesus saw the heavens torn apart” to open the way for the Spirit. Near the end of Mark, the curtain in the Temple that

separated the people from the sanctuary of God is “torn in two, from top to bottom” to open the way to God for all people.

Now, over and over in the gospels, Jesus teaches us to think of God as our loving parent and ourselves as God’s children. That means everyone, all people. We know Jesus as the only begotten Son of God, but St. Paul proclaims that we also are heirs, adopted children of God. In short, the voice that declared to Jesus that *he* is God’s child, the beloved in whom God delights also speaks to *you* and to *me*.

Contemplative and theologian, Beatrice Bruteau, suggests a Lenten exercise based on today’s passage from Mark. First, LET GO, one by one, of what she calls our “descriptions” or “labels” – things like: where we come from, occupations, family status, gender identity, appearance, what we are good or not so good at, etc. She writes:

“This is the way your consciousness, your ‘heaven’, opens. It is also a way of understanding yourself as a child of God, for God has no label, no name.... Then listen to the Voice. Don’t think about it, just listen to it. feel good, listening to it. ‘Beloved,’ it says. ‘delighted with you,’ it says. Hear that, stay with that, sigh and relax with that. Don’t let yourself introduce reasons why it should not be so. The Voice doesn’t make conditions or exceptions. It’s an absolute assertion of loving you and claiming you as intimate family. Repeat this meditation every chance you get”.³

What a beautiful, nourishing, energizing way through Lent!

“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.’”

“Good news” is a beautiful light to hold before us in our own Lenten journeys and in our lives together. “Repent”, Jesus said - turn and go a different way. Turn away from living in fear and division, of hating, discriminating, or excluding, of selfish individualism, of addiction to power and materialism, of waste and destruction of Creation. Repent, and make the good news real on earth, because God loves and delights in all God’s children – no matter where we are from!

¹ Myers, Ched. Binding the Strong Man, A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus. (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York). 128

² Colin Brown, referenced by Michael Thompson in “The Baptism of Jesus: from John to Jerusalem” in “Ministry Matters”, Anglican Church of Canada, February 17, 2021

³ Bruteau, Beatrice. The Holy Thursday Revolution. (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 2005). 54