

## Epiphany III Year B 2015

We are now reading in earnest Mark's gospel... now that we are wading into year B of the lectionary... We have gotten past the lofty passages from John's gospel speculating as to who the person of Jesus is... Now throughout Epiphany and Lent we will read from Mark's gospel, until we encounter John again in Easter... and then we'll return to Mark for the season after Pentecost. So a brief refresher course on Mark, so that we will have a sense of the context of this terse and brief piece of rhetoric that we call the Good News according to Mark.... Mark, of course, is the earliest gospel to be written... written around the time of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Roman army; and the burning of the city in 70 C.E. Around this time, a generation removed from the life and ministry of Jesus, there was a fairly organized insurrection among Jewish citizens of the empire...acting out against Rome's oppressive tactics of governance... their excessive taxation, and brutal occupation.... and Mark's community of Jewish Christians within which this gospel was written would certainly have been suspect to the Roman authorities.... The future of the occupied Jewish people was at best uncertain.... Certainly in danger.

Warren Carter, a formidable New Testament scholar calls this gospel an "Epiphany of injustice." One third of it is dedicated to the narrative of the arrest, mock trial and railroaded crucifixion of Jesus at the hands of the Romans and the complicit Jewish priestly leadership. And the rest of the gospel is decidedly dark as well. The disciples never quite get what Jesus is trying to teach them... and what they learn, they are forbidden to tell of it. Even Jesus' family is suspect. At one point in the narrative they speculate as to whether Jesus has quite lost his mind. The gospel ends with the disciples having deserted the fellowship. The women who find the tomb empty are described as terrified... The final words of this gospel are, "and they told no one for they were afraid... That is the backdrop to this gospel.... A backdrop of darkness and uncertainty and fear.... There is nothing sentimental about it...no angels, no shepherds, no wise men...no sugar coating... It is terse, honest, direct... It leaves much to the imagination... so much so that Luke and Matthew amend Mark's version greatly in their gospels.

But despite this stark darkness as a backdrop, Mark calls what he wrote, Good News... Within the lines of this gospel is contrast to the dark... Hope, if you will, in the face of injustice and violence and despair... It is as if Mark took his cue from Dante, 1400 years before his time, that in order to see the light of hope one must first contend with the dark... that the way up is the way down... that in order to experience joy one must experience utter

loss... people in AA call it hitting bottom... Up against that reality Mark is holding up for us the way to life... He calls it Good News... in the face of shame and degradation and violence and injustice, in the face of the way of a broken world, Mark is telling us of a way that is full of meaning and purpose... for Mark it is the way of the Baptized....Baptism, the principal theme of Mark... That's what the prologue is about; letting us know the principal theme... And the way of the baptized is the way of resurrection, another critical theme in Mark... You will remember that there is no resurrection appearance per se of Jesus in this gospel... but instances of resurrection are shot through this gospel... resurrection that appears in the commonplace, in the mundane corners of daily existence... resurrection that is particular in time and place...healing, welcoming, feeding... honoring, nurturing the community... love in the dark...I am talking about resurrection as a present reality that is in no way supernatural... but the way life is, if we but choose see it that way...always a choice... The Greek word for resurrection literally means, as you've heard me say before, it literally means to stand with dignity.... To stand knowing one's worth... to stand filled with gratitude... to be at peace...to stand resurrected in the face of fear and violence and evil... that is what Mark offers us.

We read today about the disciples leaving their jobs to follow Jesus. And the tradition has treated this story with a romantic sentimentality... peaceful contented fisherman, so-called, until they dropped everything to follow Jesus, the son of God. But Mark insists that these disciples had very little faith... They were living a dangerous life... commercial fishing one of the world's most dangerous professions, at least according to the Travel channel.... They are in jobs that are grueling, dangerous, uncertain... and to make matters worse they were subject to an unbearable tax from the empire... their lives are barely, if at all, sustainable... They, the disciples, are in fact a symbol for the disenfranchised... the ones beat down... and the drama of this fast paced narrative is that they choose life....They choose life amid the dark... They are saying no to a life of despair and indignity, and yes to a life rich in hope and meaning and purpose... yes to a life of compassion and healing and welcome... they are saying yes to their true humanity, which is in short, to live for the good of the whole.... The alchemical truth of God's design of the universe... They are not subscribing to a dogmatic belief system... They are saying yes to life itself... that their fulfillment is found in fulfilling others with a life of dignity.... They are told they will be fishers of people... that their labor is truly, rightly focused on bringing life and dignity to their neighbor, bringing resurrection life to the world they inhabit... that is the formula if you will of the gospels, that we

find our fulfillment, our true calling in honoring the worth of others.... that our very genius as humans is that we contend with the dark by bearing hope and light.

We have discovered I think, that the pursuit of happiness and wealth, as represented by the so-called American dream... the American dream that espouses a hyper-individualism... We have discovered that to be an illusion... We are the most addicted culture in the world... and I think that is because we have been taught insidiously that we don't really need each other... We glorify the self made man.... We are more than anything, in our post-modern world... lonely, exiled, lifeless.

Mark is teaching us that true joy, true happiness lies in giving our life and labor for the good of the whole... that for our own sake, we are to empower the disempowered... we are to find the lost... we are to welcome the stranger... with the exertion it takes to fish we are to bring dignity to the shamed.... And that means that our faith is public... that it belongs outside these beautiful doors.... That we do take a stand in matters of injustice and wrong... This is nothing new... Christianity since its beginning has been a public witness... It doesn't belong shut up in beautiful buildings... It belongs in the world... The people of faith, fishers of people, belong out in the world righting wrongs, witnessing for dignity and well being for those who have none.

In the beginning God said yes to a world God calls good....God has made the choice... God's world is a world in which resurrection is more than a promise...It is the way things really are. It is for us sisters and brothers now to say yes... to drop what we are doing... and claim our lives for the truth... We are to be expert fishers of people, so that all people may know that they have worth, that they are loved.

Throughout his gospel Mark uses the word 'immediately' to catalyze his narrative... Mark is not interested in some future utopian dream world... nor is Paul. Mark sees God's gracious reign at hand, breaking into our world...the wrong being set right... So know this, God's world becomes at our dropping our nets and following in the way, God's world depends on it... God's world comes into being at our saying yes... to our choosing life in the midst of death's violent darkness...It is always a choice.... It is just a matter of saying yes.... So... courage dear people of God... courage for the choice you must make...courage for the choice of yes.