

Proper 25 Year B 2024

“The beginning of the Good News,” Mark’s Gospel begins. Perhaps the most difficult concept to get our minds around in the Gospel of Mark, at least for me, is Mark’s audacious proclamation that the Good News of God has begun.... Not will begin; but at the Baptism of Jesus... It has begun... Despite the world looking much the same as it always has... We have been conditioned to believe that God’s kingdom is some future utopia, a world purged of its evil, and its suffering. But alas, things are still the same. The world, it seems, is always falling apart. But Mark the evangelist announces that the freedom to live at peace in the world as God intends it to be, is now realized. None of the other Synoptic Gospel writers make such an immediate claim. For Mathew, and Luke, God’s kingdom is somehow caught between the now and the not yet Not so with Mark. The kingdom for him is a present reality. Fully present. The Kingdom for him is a matter of seeing it; and seeing it comes from the practice of it... Mark describes God’s kingdom not as one of all sweetness and light, but a world of contrast, of ambiguity; of tension... of reality. Could it be that the so-called kingdom of God is manifest in the world, just as it is? Mark offers a dynamic contrast between the way of Love, and the freedom that Love engenders, to the ways of a world broken and crippled by evil; evil that comes through the abuse of power. That’s Mark’s issue: Love face to face with evil manifest in the structures of power; and that tension is the milieu within which the world lives. For Mark it is a struggle of historical and cosmic significance... a struggle that will never end, but a struggle that is at the heart of the kingdom of God. It

is for the Baptized to engage the struggle; to be present to it... to heed the call of Love... because without Love, this world indeed falls apart.... Mark is telling us how to live in the kingdom of God; amid the contrast between dark and light. He is describing responsibility and vocation. If the world is broken and ailing, then healing is our vocation; and healing is engendered by compassion, empathy, kindness, and justice. The world and our lives in it are process; and we infuse the process with Love... such is God's kingdom, a world crying out for healing and wholeness.

In our gospel reading for today we find Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, fate haven taken hold... He has spoken of the inevitability of confronting the powers that be in Jerusalem three times in Mark's narrative, but here finally in the 10th chapter, he begins in earnest....The air is electric.... Jesus has been teaching along the way... and Jericho is the last stop before climbing some 3000 feet through the Judean desert, up to Jerusalem... by now in Mark's narrative, the crowds around Jesus have picked up... the word is out about this preacher from Galilee... some were thinking that he would lead a revolt against the Roman occupiers... most followed him because he spoke with artful and resonant authority... and he had a decided gift for healing... the crowds were in a frenzy as Jesus and his disciples left Jericho for Jerusalem... they jostled for his attention... they wanted something of what he had... this speaker of truth... this one the demons knew by name... this one who crossed the intractable boundaries of social convention in the name of Love.

And then amid the frenzied action Jesus stood still, we are told.... Because he had heard a dissonant voice cry out ... a dissonant voice, but true... The crowd tries to shoo the voice away... but the blind beggar insists on an audience... and Jesus calls him... tells him to stand up... and the man is told to take heart... to take heart... which literally translated means to take courage. And we are told that he was immediately healed, and that he followed Jesus on the way.

We only have three more readings in Mark as year B of the lectionary comes to a close. The first Sunday of Advent we'll begin our readings in Luke... so, one more time, a reminder of the agenda of Mark's Gospel... You remember no doubt that this gospel is a narrative about what it means to be baptized... Jesus the one to be imitated.... The chief, unifying theme being that the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve... that worldly power is corrupt and abusive and violent, and that it denigrates and shames... that self-interest as an end unto itself robs the dignity of the less privileged... and that in God's world true power is found in sacrifice and self-giving; that God's power, the power of Love, given for the sake of the good, transforms and renews and restores... and that no manner of evil, no powers or principalities, can stand against it.

Now as a philosophy that is all well and good... But Mark is speaking not of a philosophy but of a practice... a practical means by which God's power of love is let loose in the world.... there is no magic to it, nothing supernatural... In fact, this life of God, this life of the Spirit in our world happens in the mundane, in the particular... amid

the random iterations of human commerce.... God's majesty, as it were, is found in God's radical presence in the everyday.

In our gospel reading today, the lynchpin of the story, the moment of truth... Jesus stands still... Jesus stops to pay attention... I think Mark is being instructive here... At the heart of the practice of the faith is the art of paying attention... prayer if you will... prayer being the art of paying attention... The Buddhists call it mindfulness... the Hebrew scribes of Proverbs call it the way of Wisdom... that is why indifference is an evil... because indifference doesn't demand our attention; and not paying attention leads to complicity.... And if we're not paying attention, and complicit with the status quo, then we are loathe to act.

And not only is this gospel about the identity of the baptized, but it is also about the authority of the baptized as well.... The baptized for Mark are people of conscience... people who pay attention to their world... people who strive to see the world through the eyes of God... people who seek to love as God loves; who seek to act on God's behalf... and such a life bears authority.... Authority being: of the source;... speaking from our true nature... Truth has energy... authority... Truth has resonance... * But let us not miss the greater thing here... There is another authority of which Mark speaks; the greatest authority... an authority often ignored... and that is the authority of the lost, the authority of the blind, the authority of the beaten down... the authority of the ones shamed and bullied, and ignored.... The authority of the victims of indifference... That

voice has resonance too; because that voice is the very voice of God ... if you want to hear the voice of God listen to the cries of the desperate of our world... Blind Bartimaeous cries out with the authority of the lost... he cries from the depths... and there is no way Jesus won't hear it...Why?... Because he is paying attention to the passion of God in the world.... Bartimaeous cries out like all the lost of our world... and one who was paying attention heard him... and bid him take heart. That is not magic... that is the restorative and redeeming power of the love of God.... So to whom do we listen in our own day? The voices are all around us; the dissonant voices; the voices of the oppressed, and despairing: The voice of the kid in the housing project trying to sleep amid the sound of gunshots; the voices of the sexually harassed and abused women to whom no one will listen; the voices of the millions declaring bankruptcy because of medical bills impossible to pay; the voices of the incarcerated who serve exaggerated sentences because of the color of their skin; the voices of the thousands making their way through Central America and Mexico.... Families: men , women, and children who are fleeing poverty and violence in their home countries, seeking a dignified and sustainable life.... We are told that this is a national emergency; that our security is somehow threatened by these people. The emergency is that these people speak with the voice of God... and no one is listening. Shall we hear them? Shall we stand still and listen to the innocent souls who suffer violence perpetrated by the powerful of our world? Gaza, Lebanon, Yemen, Sudan, Ukraine. Who will stand still for the voice of God?

This gospel is only 16 chapters long and it rushes inevitably to the cross... only to find no one in the empty tomb other than a young man telling the second hand news of the resurrection... pointing the way for the terrified disciples to Galilee... pointing the way back into the randomness of humanity... back into the everyday wherein, for Mark, despite the darkness, the daunting contrast, life is shot through with resurrection appearances. There are eight occasions in Mark, if you're counting, wherein one is told to stand, to rise up... Our reading today is one such example... the blind man is told to *stand up*... the root word in the Greek for resurrection.... To stand up and take heart and experience the healing power of God's love... This is Resurrection that is real and resonant in the undulating pathos of the human experience; not a bit of ancient fantasy or magic, but a reality present in the day to day... That is our charge brothers and sisters... to hear the voice of the wounded and the lost... to pay attention to the ones absent from God's table of plenty and honor... and to bid them stand up and take heart.... That is what resurrection life is.... plain, mundane, and simple... that we are all meant to stand restored... with hope and courage and dignity.... Stand still....in the random particular of humanity, stand still.... Pay attention... listen for God's voice pining for love.... and be the Love God promises for the world.