

Mark 1:9-15

The First Sunday in Lent

February 18, 2024

“So, what did you do for Valentines Day?”

“I rubbed dirt in people’s faces and told them they’re gonna die!”<sup>1</sup>

The coincidence of Valentine’s Day and Ash Wednesday this year made for some great Facebook jokes. A dusting of ashes and a reminder of mortality are not the greatest romantic gift of all time. It’s probably not a winning move on *The Bachelor*.

On the other hand, maybe it is a great gift to give a life partner. If we share our greatest dreams and fears with each other, maybe it is a loving gift to sit down with your partner and say, “Hey. We’ve probably got ten (or twenty, or thirty, or forty) years left. Are there any changes you need to make in your life to align it more with your dreams and values?”

That’s the sort of gift that Israel needs. The great mythic stories of the nation’s founding – the promise to Abraham, the descent into Egypt, the Exodus, the parting of the Red Sea, the anointing of King David: these are all far in the past. The later kings were much more life-sized figures who played the hands that Israel was dealt with vary degrees of skill, as it was kicked like a political football back and forth between a series

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1 A popular joke on Facebook.

of invading world powers. The later story of ancient Israel is a struggle to keep alive its distinctive witness, as a particular people called by single God of mercy and of justice.

Maybe that's why John the Baptist's message resonates so much with the crowds from Jerusalem. They know that history has gone off the tracks. In his wilderness location, in his camel-hair clothing and his locust-and-wild-honey diet, he embodies a rejection of business as usual, a rejection of compromising and accommodating to the powers that be. Maybe in his demand for repentance and for baptism they hear the echo of a time when being a Jew meant something; a recovery of dreams long surrendered; a reminder that they are children of God.

Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee, a young man from a backwater village in a backwater region, is among those approaching for baptism. Unlike other writers, Mark tells us absolutely nothing about him until this point. Maybe Jesus shares this sense that great possibilities lie dormant, ready to be rediscovered.

Maybe you feel that way, also.

As we grow and develop across our lifespan, we form dreams and visions of what our life could be. We form ideas about what our life's purpose. Some of these are offered to us by friends, family, and society. Some of these, we come up with ourselves. And some of these are offered to us by God, who likewise envisions lives of fullness and purpose for us.

But life also involves making choices. We make choices for ourselves, and as others make choices for themselves, they impact the choices available to us. Every choice opens some doors and closes others, affirms some dreams and surrenders others. All we can do is make the best choice at any given moment. We move through life making choices, and at some point we will have that realization that our time on earth is limited, and that we have moved rather far away from the goals we once had. At that point we either realize that those goals no longer fit, or we decide to rededicate ourselves to them.

Either way, for things to change, something has to die. The greater the dream, the change in direction, the new beginning, the greater the ending that is required.

That is why Lent begins in death, in Ash Wednesday.

That is why Lent begins with the baptism of Jesus. As he goes under the waters of Jordan, in the words of the hymn “he leaves the hidden years behind, the years of safety and of peace.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus leaves behind his obligations to the priests, to the Temple in Jerusalem, to king Herod, and to Rome.<sup>3</sup> He becomes the first citizen of the new kingdom of God: a metaphor carefully chosen to highlight the distinction between the

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2 Stanbrook Abbey, “When Jesus Comes to Be Baptized,” in *Voices United: The Hymn and Worship Book of the United Church of Canada* (Etobicoke, Ontario: United Church Publishing House, 1996), 100.

3 Stanley P. Saunders, “Mark 1:9-15, Exegetical Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008)

Way of God in Christ and the ways of earthly kings. Jesus takes up John's call to be baptized, to repent of sin, and to walk in a new direction. He preaches the kingdom.

But despite all this talk of newness and death of what is past, this change does not imply a wholesale rejection of what has gone before. The Way of Christ is the Way of God, and this God and Her people Israel have a history. The kingdom of God is a renewal; a rediscovery; a reaffirmation of God's ancient covenants. The God who is doing a new thing is the same God who called Israel out of Egypt to begin with.

When Jesus sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove as he rises out of the waters, we hear an echo of the Spirit of God moving over the waters of Creation at the dawn of the world. When the voice of God says, "You are my Son," Jesus, a Jew, hears the royal coronation language of Psalm 2 in which God says to his anointed king, "You are my son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession." When the voice says, "with you I am well pleased," it reiterates the language of Isaiah 42 which envisions God's chosen servant as one upon whom the Spirit of God will rest, and as one who will bring justice to the nations. When Jesus goes into the wilderness immediately after his baptism, he spends forty days in preparation, facing all of the temptations that might distract him from his purpose. When they escaped from Egypt, the Israelites spent

forty years in the wilderness, deciding who to be and how – and whether – to embrace God’s dream for them.

Mark is telling us that when God begins a new thing, it is always a renewal of old patterns and promises. The new is not restricted by the old, but it is nourished and informed by them. God does not forget his promises, but renews and refreshes them for new times. God is faithful.

In Ash Wednesday, then, we are called to remember our mortality. The limited span of our days give us urgency and a need for purpose. The promises and covenants of God provide us that purpose and a path towards it. Endings lead to new beginnings; death leads to resurrection.

Diana Butler Bass says that change begins when people becoming disillusioned by the status quo. Eventually this leads people to abandon systems and institutions that no longer work. Once this happens, some of us begin to imagine new possibilities, and then dare to put them into practice. Finally, the new possibility becomes the new normal as the establishment gets on board.

This is true of people; this is true of churches. The common denominator is that those uncomfortable first two stages come before the next three. Resurrection begins in death, but resurrection is coming. Bass believes change is coming to the church. We are living with the second stage, but already people are dreaming about new possibilities,

and our United Church of Canada is putting them into practice with a vision of Deep Spirituality; Bold Discipleship; and Daring Justice. Through this season of Lent, we will explore what each of these looks like, and how our scriptures, tradition, and history are all resources for renewal.

Renewal in your life, renewal in my life, and renewal in the life that God in Christ calls us to share: all of these are possible, and it all begins with this: “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” It is the truth, spoken in love, and the truth will set you free.