“Dying to Live”
Mark 1:9-15

Our theme for the season of Lent is the same as my sermon title today: Dying to Live. This phrase captures the pattern of salvation and the nature of reality itself. It’s hard-nosed and hopeful both. As we follow Jesus in this season that leads to his death on the cross and being raised from the tomb three days later, we will find that dying to live applied even to him as the Son of God. There can be no escape: If we are dying to live, we must die to live.

It may not seem obvious in our text today from Mark, but that is the heart of what’s going on in these three successive scenes. First, Jesus goes to be baptized by John in the River Jordan. Then he goes into the Judean wilderness to be threatened by wild beasts, tempted by the Devil and fed by angels. Finally, after John’s arrest, he goes to Galilee and begins to preach the good news that calls for repentance.

Let’s look at each in turn. Jesus leaves the hinterlands in the north and meets up with John the Baptist at the Jordan River in the shadow of Jerusalem, just north of the Dead Sea. It’s a tourist site now and people from both sides of the river go there to be baptized. The last time I was there, I was speaking to our group in all earnestness about the meaning of Jesus’ baptism, when a fly got the last word. It flew straight into my mouth and right down my throat. Thus endeth the lesson, don’t you know?! I don’t know if God was trying to tell me something, but one thing I take from that place—and yes, from that fly—is that we shouldn’t romanticize Jesus’ baptism.

Jesus went down to be baptized. Now, that’s a topographical and a spiritual statement. The Jordan Rift Valley is the lowest place on earth—nearly 2,600 feet below sea level. Jesus went down there. The lowest place he could go, in the waters that flow into the Dead Sea. Think of that—the Dead Sea. But he also went down another way, a way that delights Baptists like me to say. Mark says at the beginning of the Gospel a few verses earlier in describing John’s ministry that many were baptized by him in
the Jordan. When Jesus goes down to be baptized, Mark says he was baptized into the Jordan. It’s a subtle prepositional difference and not something that should divide our churches over baptismal mode. But his point seems to be that Jesus went all in. He went all the way down. His baptism was a descent into death, his full and complete solidarity with us in our death and dying.

You may not realize it, but my son is going to die today. That’s the shocking way the preacher, Stan Saunders, introduced his son’s baptism to the congregation one Sunday. Of course, he went on to say: Oh, and he’s going to be brought back to life, and it will happen so fast that we won’t even be able to tell what’s happened. But be very sure, he will cease to exist under the powers of this world and will be transformed to a new and different kind of existence.¹

This is the big thing that happens in baptism that we can easily miss if we blink. We are buried with our Lord Jesus in baptism, I say as the dying person goes under. And we are raised to walk in the newness of life. Dying to live. That’s faith.

What we are dying to is an order of existence that holds us hostage to its exploitive powers. It makes us slaves instead of free people. It makes us something less than what the voice from the torn-opened heavens spoke, saying, You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

This is the right perspective about Jesus, about you, about the world. And it takes the heavens being torn apart for us to see and hear that who we are is a gift, not an achievement.

I hope you were able to see the new PBS documentary series this week called The Black Church. Dr. Henry Louis Gates narrates the history of the Black church in America in stunning and stirring detail. I was struck by one moment when in talking about how the Black church formed as a way of asserting the full humanity of Black people after slavery, you could see how it was the only place in their lives where they could go to learn and to remember who they really were. And sadly, that is all

¹ https://mailchi.mp/christiancentury/sundays-coming-premium-351720?e=bd4d3869aa
too true even today. One man said: *We learned [from church] that we are not what society told us we are; we belong to God.*

And there it is. When the heavens are torn open, you can see the truth the world doesn’t want you to see—the truth that you are God’s beloved child, in whom God is well pleased. No matter what society tells you, no matter what your boss tells you, no matter what your coach or teacher or parent tells you, you are a beloved child of God. This is an alternative way of rendering the world, and you can live in it as such, but only if at the same time you are willing to die to the world that tells you otherwise.

Then Jesus goes into the wilderness for 40 days, just as Israel had been in the wilderness for 40 years. The parallels are obvious. Actually, Mark tells us that the Spirit drove Jesus there. If you sometimes wonder what you have done to deserve the wilderness you are going through, think of Jesus here. He has just heard the most important word about his divine sonship, and immediately the Spirit takes this blessed one and drives him into a period of social isolation, physical deprivation and spiritual temptation. Oh boy, isn’t the Christian life a joy!

Well, yes, but it’s not without suffering. Jesus has made one dramatic gesture of dying to the world and living for God in his baptism, but it had to become a pattern, not just an event. He had to learn faithfulness through suffering, as we all do, too.

Mark says wild beasts were there with Jesus, as was Satan, tempting him. Also, angels, though, waiting on him. Now, there probably were lions and bears in that region during that time, so Jesus could have felt the terror of their prowling about. But I think the symbolism is even more important here: wild beasts represent the untamed powers of the world that constantly make us live in fear of dying, a fear we have to face and overcome if we are going to live.

We have all felt some of that this week, haven’t we? How much more can we bear? Coronavirus, cold, snow, power outages, water damage. Now, I am not going to tell you that every one of these was avoidable, although I believe most of them could have been better mitigated. We have a giant revelation of what
happens when we fail to take care of one another and instead take shortcuts for profit that leave us with poor government when we need it most. The heavens were torn open this week and we could see the things that had been hiding in plain sight. The way we choose the easy way instead of the right way.

The extended suffering of this week brought home that our hope is not in the systems of this world. Unlike Jesus in his day, we have more agency to change things, to make politics and everything else in our common life more humane. But these powers will always threaten us, while the angels wait upon us. That is, God knows who we are and goes with us into these trials. God never leaves us on our own to face the wild beast and the Devil. And I should point out that this past week was always filled with angels showing up everywhere, waiting on those who were most afflicted.

Our souls are shaped by this pattern of accepting death, resisting temptation to cheat it, and trusting God to meet our needs. And this prepares us for what is to come when we get through it.

There’s an old Negro spiritual that begins:
Now Lord don't move my mountain
But give me the strength to climb
And Lord, don't take away my stumbling blocks
But lead me all around.

What is the point of Jesus’ time in the wilderness? Maybe just this: Jesus needed to experience what we all do if we are to be useful to God. He needed to learn the difference between being broken and being broken open. The one makes you bitter, the other, better. The one straps you to a life of fear, the other frees you to a life of faith.

Mark tells us that after John was arrested, Jesus took that as his clue that it was time. Sometimes it takes things like this to help us see that the time is now. We don’t get to schedule our own ministry. The times tell us.

Some of you have taken to the streets or to social media and become active in protests and politics because of things like the murder of George Floyd or Breonna Taylor, the revelations of sexual abuse that gave rise to the #MeToo movement, or the Capitol riot that showed so
clearly the violent underbelly of white supremacy and Christian nationalism. Time’s up. The time is fulfilled.

This is the good news, Jesus says. He sees all these things and instead of just seeing what is wrong, he sees God’s in-breaking justice at hand.

What is the right response to all of this? Jesus says we should repent and believe the good news. He might as well have said we need to die to live. Just as he did. Amen.