

A Special Beginning

Mark 1:9-15

How many of you are members of a fraternal organization? If so, you know the process of beginning a relationship that associates you forever with a movement, a society, a group hopefully known for its good works. When I was in college I joined a sorority. I was in my second year, second semester when I sought out the group I wanted to be a part of. I met the members and stated my interest in becoming a part of their organization. Shortly afterwards I was notified in their interest in me as well. There were interviews and explanations of what was expected of me. I paid my money and began the process of pledging. For the next 6 weeks I learned the history of the organization and got to know the women who were joining with me, as well as the ones that were already members and those who were the founding members of the chapter on the campus of the University of Missouri. There were late night sessions and much to learn. The goal was to emotionally attach me to the ideals and standards of the organization. It was a special beginning of a relationship and a social services mindset that is designed to follow me all the days of my life.

Sometimes, the key to the meaning of a Gospel passage is found in the way it begins and in its dramatic frame. Structurally, our scripture narrates a textbook rite of passage: the candidate is singled out (vv. 10-11), then taken for a proverbial length of time into a transitional space where old identities dissolve and new ones are forged (vv. 12-13), before being thrust back into society to occupy new roles (vv. 14-15). Unlike in Matthew and Luke, Mark's Gospel does not detail the ordeals to which the candidate was subjected. We are told only that Jesus was tempted by Satan, that he was with the wild beasts, and that the angels waited on

him (v. 13). Certainly Mark was observing the ancient convention still honored in fraternity hazing: these are secrets known only to those who have already been initiated!

More importantly, Mark is using this stark story at the beginning of Jesus' ministry to preview the rest of the Gospel, in which Jesus was the wild beast who refused to be domesticated into the household of conventional religion. Jesus' disruptive taboo-violating ministry of touching lepers and bleeding women, of healing on the Sabbath, of eating with tax collectors and sinners, turned his earthly career into liminal space and time for all those with whom he interacted. As we hear this scripture we are shown how—like boys refusing to become men—the scribes and Pharisees and even the twelve disciples resisted the transition by refusing to let go of their old identities. It is easy for us to sympathize with those with whom Jesus interacted because we know that we would have done the same in their situation. All of us know in some ways what it is like to be forced into a rite of passage and to struggle through the tensions of holding on and letting go.

This is exactly where we belong on this first Sunday of Lent. But if many Gospel characters show us how *not* to respond, Jesus is the Master we are called to follow. We need to look and know how Jesus negotiated those forty days in the wilderness. Because Mark did not explicitly say how Jesus handled his situation, he put us in the position of other members of society, left to guess what went on from what Jesus said and did afterwards. Because Mark did intend to provide guidance for our own transitions, he filled his gospel with sufficient clues to do that job.

As Jesus began his special and unique ministry he was strengthened and equipped on his journey. He left us examples. The first came in the Beelzebub controversy (3:22-30), which showed what *the result* of the initiation ordeal must have been. When Jesus casted out demons (1:21-28, 32-34), Jesus' enemies

charged that he did it by Beelzebub's power (3:22). Jesus responded that it was impossible to plunder a strong man's house without first tying him up (3:27). The outcome of Jesus' temptations—of our own wrestling for kingdom identities—was not to be a pact with the powers of darkness. Rather, Satan must be bound!

The second clue articulated *the shape of the vocation* Satan was trying to talk Jesus out of. At Caesarea Philippi, Peter identified Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus countered with the first prediction of his passion and resurrection. Peter rebuked Jesus, and Jesus rebuked Peter: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (8:29-33). Satan was trying to get Jesus to keep his eye on earthly advantage. Whatever else happened in the wilderness, Jesus let go of human things and refused to grasp ready-made savior roles. Instead, Jesus discerned a *wild* calling that exploded horizontal plots by passing through the disastrously bad (crucifixion) over into the unimaginable, supranatural good (resurrection life).

A third clue warns of *the importance of spiritual wrestling* and *describes its dynamics*. Mark's Gospel implies that Jesus bound Satan at the beginning. But in Gethsemane (14:32-42), Jesus prayed for strength and clarity at the end. For three rounds, Jesus wrestled and prayed: "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want" (14:36). Then Jesus rose resolute and journeyed through his passion the way he earlier marched into ministry. By contrast, Peter's confession was half-baked. Because he would not let go of it enough to enter into what Jesus was saying, Peter was quickly co-opted into speaking for Satan. Even at the transfiguration, the inner circle of disciples was too hard-hearted and closed-minded to take in the meaning of either crucifixion or resurrection. The disciples fixed their eyes on human greatness all the way to Jerusalem. Because Peter did not submit his conception of vocation to

the test of prayer, but slept in the garden, he was unable to follow Jesus' example. Peter yielded to temptation in the courtyard and denied Jesus all three times.

The somber moral of Jesus' special beginning and ministry is that divine vocation is both amazing and dangerous. Up front, it signals divine favor (1:11; cf. 9:7). But divine vocation immediately thrusts us into liminal space. Unless we are willing to let old identities dissolve and allow ourselves to be reshaped into crucifixion-resurrection disciples, our sense of divine vocation is fraught with demonic potential. The experience of Jesus' first disciples stands as a warning: because the Twelve could not loosen their grip in advance, Golgotha became the liminal space where their old meanings crashed and burned, leaving them no choice but to despair or to beg for new ones.

Implicitly, Mark's Gospel also makes Lent the norm for Christian life. However it may have been for Jesus, resolution for us cannot be "once and for all" immediate, but a matter of surrendering our imperfect conceptions and wrestling for God's meaning afresh every day. These spiritual gymnastics strengthen us for major trials by deepening our acquaintance with the God who calls us. Things may go so badly for us that we lose sight of divine favor. Jesus' regular prayed *experience* of divine favor enabled him to remain resolute. **Marilyn Mccord Adams**

What Jesus heard from God in his disruptive, life-changing experience at the Jordan, and what he struggled to affirm in the wilderness, was a message of sublime wonder: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." He heard an affirmation of his unique being and significance *from God*, that is, from beyond finite, historical existence. It was a word transcending human origins, rooted in eternity, absolute, and unconditioned by the frailty, uncertainty, and contingency of human relationships or historical circumstance. He learned that he was unconditionally *God's Beloved Son*.

But is it not precisely this message that we ourselves are privileged to hear and to learn in the gospel of Jesus Christ? Granting theological primacy and uniqueness to Jesus as God's Beloved Son, must we not also claim, in response to him and through him, that in our own unique and different ways we too are sons and daughters of God? Must we not also recognize that through him we too have been given a name, an identity, and a worth and dignity as human beings that is rooted and grounded with all the saints in the eternal, unconditioned, unalterable being and love of God? If we can hear this voice, which transcends all earthly voices, anchoring our existence, identity, and worth eternally in God, can we not also hear the challenge to *believe* it, to *live* it, and to *declare* its truth for every woman and man who is, was, or ever shall be?

Especially during the season of Lent, shall we not also then be prepared to bear the cost of our divine name and mission as Jesus' disciples, in the confident hope of our ultimate divine affirmation in the resurrection power and love of God? "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God" (says the apostle Paul). "When we cry 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom. 8:14, 15c-17).

Is this not also the meaning of the imagery of the heavens being "torn apart" in Jesus' visionary baptismal experience (v. 10)? This powerful verb Mark uses only here and at the moment of Jesus' death (15:38), when the temple's curtain is torn in two—marking the radical overcoming of the veil between heaven and earth in the being and work of the Christ. For in this "Beloved Son," crucified and risen, are we not *all* declared to be God's beloved children, and thereby called and empowered to live and serve in the newness of life that is ours in him? **Rodney J. Hunter**

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