

***9** In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. **10** And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. **11** And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." **12** And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. **13** He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. **14** Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, **15** and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."*

I've always enjoyed roller coasters. The anticipation that builds as you struggle up the first big hill, the feeling of weightlessness as you soar over the peaks, the heaviness as you reach the bottom and face the twists and turns that will get you to the next hill. It always frustrated me, though, how short the ride is...so many thrills...so many ups and downs...so many different feelings and experiences...and it's all over in a few minutes.

Yesterday, I sat in a funeral chapel with my dad's side of the family as we spoke words of celebration for my uncle Kenneth who passed away this week. My uncle was soon to turn 83. I don't get to see my extended family often, so I sat and marveled at the fact that there were now four generations filling the family section. Our parents, the cousins I had once been so close with, their children, and now, their children are having children. As the minister delivered my uncle's eulogy, I was snuggling on my six-month-old cousin, Jackson, who was napping peacefully in my arms. It's a strange thing to be able to look over a room and recall the family traumas and celebrations we had endured together, but to see all of us pitching in to care for a new generation that knew nothing of those days but would be creating days of their own to gather and celebrate. Eighty-three years goes so quickly...how short the ride seems...so many thrills...so many ups and downs...so many different feelings and experiences...all moving so very quickly.

Some people don't like Mark's Gospel because it fails to give us details and good rich stories. Mark is a "just the facts ma'am" kind of Gospel. Yet, this little section explaining the beginnings of Jesus' earthly ministry is a powerful one as the author, in a few short verses, takes us on a roller coaster ride.

Mark doesn't give us much time to ponder the meaning of these events, he rushes us from one to the next: We shoved into the waters of the Jordan, only to be driven out to the wilderness, only to be dropped onto the dusty road that will travel to the cross and left there...reflecting on time fulfilled and how such a short journey can be good news.

I think we should give Mark some credit, though, for his quick paced simplicity in telling these stories. When we look at these three movements of Jesus, we see the roller coaster of life...the whirlwind journey that passes all too quickly, that is filled with the ups and downs that we know as celebrations and struggles, good times and hardships. Jesus is one minute celebrating a commitment to live in God's love, through his Baptism. The next he sits in the wilderness, among the wild beasts, facing temptations

to dry off those Baptism waters and live for himself, rather than live for God. The next, he has picked himself up and taken his first steps toward the cross...toward the sacrificial gift of loving the world as God loves the world.

Even though Mark is describing the life of the Messiah, it is a life that feels familiar to us...the baptized, who have heard God's affirmation of love and belonging...but who also knows that in the middle of those affirmations and our obedience to serve God's purpose in the world are the temptations that steer us off course...the temptations that distract us enough to miss the mark and require some tending too before we can get back on target.

I hope you notice, however, that Mark isn't just giving us dry facts of how Jesus came to the road toward the cross. I hope you notice that Mark is telling us something profound that will be needed for the journey. He is telling us that in the high places where our faith is strong, and our commitment bold, God comes near. God is there to speak affirmations and love, to claim us as God's own and show us the joy of belonging. He is telling us that when we are in the wilderness, hungering and thirsting, threatened by the wild beasts that stir anxiety and worry, that that present danger and destruction...God comes near. Even in the struggle, heaven tends to us...God cares for us...we are not left behind. He is telling us that even when there are terrible things happening in the world around us, God comes near. There are still opportunities for the kingdom of God to be had hand, for God's love to shine forth as good news, for those of us who follow Jesus to have purpose in bringing that good news into reality in the world.

As we nurture these little ones that we Baptize into faith, let's remember these words of hope from Mark...as we watch them grow, as we see them face the challenges that come, as we see them find their calling and their purpose...at every step, it is our job to help them see that God comes near. God is right there with them, right there with us, at every climb and every fall, every twist and every turn. God comes near.