

Feb 18, 2024 First Sunday of Lent

About that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."

At once the Spirit forced Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among the wild animals, and the angels took care of him.

After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee announcing God's good news, saying, "Now is the time! Here comes God's kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!" -Mark 1:9-15

These verses in Mark don't read like a biography or even a novel. They read like texts. Jesus from Nazareth baptized by John claims to hear a voice from heaven. LOL. Jesus forced into the wilderness with wild animals and maybe Satan? John arrested. Jesus says "Here comes God's kingdom!" and "Change everything!" Image those words with some emojis around them. These verses have an incredible amount of urgency in them. There is some cosmic disruption happening in all of the three little snippets of story we read here.

First, in Jesus' baptism the Spirit rips through the divide between heaven and earth; a voice from heaven declares Jesus as God's beloved one. Disruptive. Second, the Spirit forces Jesus into the wilderness where he faces some kind of test and temptation. No details. Disruptive. Third, Jesus proclaims that now is time for God's reign which will disrupt our hearts and lives. Literally disruptive.

There is nothing in Mark's sparse wording that is not important. Something that we might miss in the English translation, though, is how much Mark is referencing the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. Isaiah, Joel, Samuel, Ezekiel, Psalms, Exodus. Mark is firmly placing the story of Jesus alongside the Jewish scriptures. For example, the Jordan River features prominently in Israel's history. Forty days in the wilderness reminds us of the 40 years the Hebrew slaves spent in the desert. We know that Jesus was a Jew and Jesus' first followers were Jews, and Mark wouldn't let his readers forget it. Mark is not just looking to the past. Mark is also foreshadowing Jesus' ministry and death. The verb used for the Spirit 'forcing' Jesus out to the wilderness is the same verb used later to describe Jesus 'forcing' spirits out of people. This is a truly disruptive Holy Spirit. The short phrase "John was arrested" foreshadows Jesus' own arrest. After all of this, Jesus proclaims "Now is the time! Here comes God's kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!" Disrupt your life. Something is happening.

You may be more familiar with a different translation of this verse that says—Repent and believe in the Gospel. That verse is often used on Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, when someone makes the sign of the cross in ash on your forehead. Repent we are told—Change your hearts and minds. Believe in the Gospel—trust the good news. God's reign is coming. The change in our hearts and minds is I think calling us to turn our minds God-ward instead of fixing them on earth. Often we get caught up in our own understandings of what the world is and how much it can change, very little. We get complacent and forget the urgency of the good news that God is with us and that God's reign is coming. I hope I don't sound like a doomsday preacher holding up a sign that says "the end is nigh." If anything, the beginning is nigh. Or maybe, disruption is nigh.

This is the first Sunday of Lent, and the disruption is nigh. Lent is a disruption. Lent is a time to question ourselves and our world. In a culture that sees sin as just personal actions, we disrupt harmful systems. In a culture that distances itself from death, we disrupt this by choosing to focus on it occasionally. In a culture that lifts up selfishness, we choose to disrupt by serving others. In a culture that encourages perfectionism, we disrupt by repenting, admitting we are not perfect. In a culture that tells us to accept the status quo, we disrupt by imagining what a different kind of world will look like.

There are ways to be disrupted and disruptive during Lent that are helpful to our spiritual journeys and ways that are unhelpful to our spiritual journeys. Let me give you an example of an unhelpful disruption. Picture it, Springfield, Missouri, 2009. I'm in college, and it's the day before Ash Wednesday. It's lunchtime, and around the table sits my group of friends, most of whom have never participated in Lent because they were either raised non-religious, in a different religion, or in a church that doesn't do Lent. Except for my friend Adam who is a self-proclaimed lapsed Catholic. He was surprised some Protestants do Lent and even more surprised that we do Lent differently than Catholics. The focus is not giving something up but rather being intentional about something for six to seven weeks. For some folks that is giving something up. For some that's taking on a devotional reading. For some that's making time to pray every morning. I'm rattling off these things to Adam who is just staring at me blankly. "You know," he says, "I bet you couldn't give up forks for Lent." I cannot emphasize to you enough how much I regretted what I said next—I can totally give up forks for Lent.

The bet was placed. I wouldn't get anything if I won except the pride of having risen to Adam's challenge. None of my friends thought I could stop using forks until Easter, but they

wanted to see me try. The next few weeks were ... disruptive. I came up with what was a decent work-around—chopsticks. But I couldn't eat with someone without explaining why I was carrying chopsticks around and using them instead of forks. People looked at me weird when I told them it was a bet, so I came up with a spiritual sounding reason to tell people. I'm being intentional about what I'm putting in my body, I told everyone. Then a bunch of people thought I was on a really weird diet and I started getting uncomfortable questions and comments about my body. I was not trying to lose weight! I was trying to win a bet. Things worked out until one night at the church I worked at as a young ministry intern we had a gathering where a parent didn't bring the usual pizza but instead brought homemade spaghetti. Very thoughtfully, they had brought both a meat sauce and a vegetarian sauce. But the type of sauce wasn't the issue. The issue was that I couldn't use chopsticks to pick up slippery spaghetti covered in sauce. Since we usually ate pizza, the group hadn't seen me using the chopsticks before and started asking questions. After explaining things to the youth, one middle schooler known for their honesty declared "that's just dense." I couldn't disagree.

When Easter morning dawned, I gave thanks not for Jesus' resurrection but for being able to eat the coffee cake at coffee hour between services with a fork. I had disrupted my life during Lent, and the experience taught me nothing. I should say, at the time the experience taught me nothing. What I've learned reflecting on that particular Lent is that disruption for the sake of disruption isn't meaningful. Giving something up for the sake of giving something up isn't meaningful. Disruption without intention isn't meaningful.

A great reflection on this comes from Dr. David Jacobsen, professor of preaching at Boston University School of Theology, who when reflection on the temptation of Jesus in Mark wrote,

I think this Markan apocalyptic vision of the temptation of Jesus disrupts our meager Lenten practice.... The Markan temptation is not just leading us from a chocolate to a temporary non-chocolate existence for seven weeks. It calls us, rather, to envision a kind of holy disruption grounded in the longing for God to set things right...

“Holy disruption grounded in the longing for God to set things right.” Change your hearts and minds trust this good news—God’s reign is coming. Let us intentionally practice for God’s reign this Lent and always. Amen.