

Today's Gospel story really feels like the SparkNotes version of a whole lot of things happening in Jesus' life and ministry.

We begin by hearing about Jesus' baptism, a significant marker of God's promises made real for the human and divine Christ. And after Jesus comes out of the baptismal water in the river Jordan, the heavens are torn apart and the Holy Spirit descends like a dove! If I personally were a witness to such an event - heavens being torn apart and the actual Holy Spirit descending like a dove - I would have zero chill about telling the story! Just glossing over these major events with 15 words does not do their impact justice. And with that heaven-tearing, Spirit-descending event comes words of God from heaven, proclaiming Jesus as the beloved Son, that God is well-pleased with his Son, and that God is truly with us.

Though these are significant moments in Jesus' life and ministry, it is the impact they had on Him that are of greater importance. These moments of baptism, these beginning, foundational moments of Jesus' ministry, ordained and affirmed by God and the Holy Spirit, frame how things are to progress going forward. While it's important to recognize significant moments, in Jesus' story and our own, there are times when we can't pause in that moment to linger on its implications and significance. Sometimes we barely have a moment to linger or process before we are immediately thrown into doing something else, moving onto the next thing, keeping on keeping on with a sense of urgency and hustle.

I imagine this is what Mark, the Gospel's author, experienced in recounting these stories. Mark is the oldest Gospel, age-wise, and was the first comprehensive story of Jesus' life compiled after his ascension into heaven. I imagine Mark was hustling to get this good news of Jesus out with that sense of his famous immediacy. When he took a moment to linger on "the time is fulfilled" and "the kingdom of heaven has come near", sharing the good news that this was, did have a sense of urgency. Sharing the good news of Jesus and taking time to dwell in and on it, was especially important in the moment Mark lived in. No one knew what to expect after Jesus ascended. Christians were being persecuted left and right by the Roman Empire and they needed these good words, this good news, these

affirmations and promises of love from God in Christ Jesus to make it through. Was Jesus coming back soon? What were they to do after their leader, shepherd, and savior was gone?

Maybe they could see what happened with Jesus, being immediately cast into the wilderness after his own revelatory moment with God, as something almost comforting. Almost like they weren't totally alone in their struggles and hardships and fear. Almost like the promise of God really was real, for them, in their humanness and humility and heartbreak, given by that Holy Spirit which descended from heaven and continued to come alongside them. Almost like they knew the wilderness wasn't the end of the story.

We are in a season of wilderness and trials these days, dear friends, and the foundational events for this story, for this season, matter deeply. When we think back to this season and tell the stories of how we made it through a life-altering, heartbreaking reminder of the fragility of our human lives, how do we want that story framed? What do we want our SparkNotes to read like? Will we remember the immediacy, the frustrations and pains and life-threatening illness? Will we remember the ways we banded together and made community in creative and life-saving ways? How will we remember God's work and movement and creative power in this time?

It always comes as a welcome reminder to realize that the time of Jesus' torment in the wilderness actually came at the beginning of his time of ministry, and not at the end, leading into his death and resurrection, as we associate them in our modern church calendar. Jesus went through this incredible trial, not eating for 40 days with only his own faith and a sheer force of will and life given by God to guide him through, at the very beginning of his time of ministering, healing, teaching, preaching, raising people from the dead and indeed giving us the inspiration for what a God-centered, life-giving life can actually be. This season of wilderness did not hold him back. Perhaps it did define part of Jesus, allowing for a level of empathy and understanding for the human condition that impacted his ministries. But the wilderness was not the final thing, the time of trial did not

close the door on the good news and ministry and life yet to come, Jesus repented, took on a new path centered on the good news of God, and proclaimed that the time had come and it was time to bring the kingdom of heaven even nearer on earth. And we too can lean into this wisdom, this calling to repentance and good news centered on God, even in the midst of our own trials.

And as we embrace the Lenten season that is now upon us, we can be assured that this time of reflection, contemplation, fasting, and prayer, is truly just the beginning of our journey of faith. Even in our seasons of wilderness, of uncertainty and pain and questions and new normals and tough choices and just the mundane nature of surviving day to day, the good news of Jesus, proclaimed by God in heaven, is for us and with us. The time has come, dear friends, to repent from what keeps us separate from God and instead embrace this good news of Jesus Christ. Embrace the opportunities to heal and love, learn and listen, teach and understand, proclaim the life we find in Jesus in all the ways we are able. The good news of Jesus saving our lives every single day, leading us from death to life has never been more urgent than in our world today.

I pray with that holy sense of immediacy, that we can through our thoughts, words, and deeds, bring the kingdom of heaven closer for all people. I pray that we can be bold and brave enough to change the narratives of this season to ones of hope and community, joining together as one holy and beloved body of Christ, created by God. And I pray that every single one of you, beloved siblings in Christ, knows deeply in your spirits, that the promises of God's love in baptism, in Jesus Christ made real, and in the Holy Spirit of peace and action in our world, are for you, each and every day. Even when the SparkNotes of your season seem pretty bleak, you are loved. And the good news of Jesus Christ, that God will love and forgive and save us from our sins, just as we are, no matter what, will always win, always be for us, and always guide our paths, through any time of trial. Thanks be to God, Amen.