

Genesis 9: 8-17
1 Peter 3:18-22
Mark 1: 9-15

An Appeal to God for a Good Conscience
February 22, 2015
Mary R. Brownlow

When I read the Bible, I take it seriously, but not literally. That means that I use the lens of my reason. I also use the lens of my imagination, with an ear for poetry and an eye for symbol. When I do this, I find that the Bible breathes a bit: it is not a rigid armor against the world, nor a mighty fortress keeping “them” out and “us” in. It’s a living library of wonderful stories and images and inspiration. And, every time I read a passage, no matter how many times I have read it before, something new jumps out at me. That what a living, breathing, library does. Sometimes it is the juxtaposition of one story with another. Sometimes it is noticing who said what. I still have so much to learn, and, happily, God is still willing to teach me something through this book.

For instance, this time I noticed something about the very familiar first chapter of Mark. We have heard some of this before in the last two months or so. John the Baptist preaches, John baptizes Jesus, Jesus is driven out by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days, and then he goes up to Galilee, preaching about the “good news of the kingdom of God.” I knew the timeline, and maybe so did you. But this time I noticed the phrase, “Now after John was arrested...” and it all took on a different character to me. This was not a purely spiritual ritual, not a purely spiritual retreat. We are talking politics here, dangerous politics. As soon as John gets into trouble with the authorities, Jesus starts to preach, and uses the word “*evangelion*” or “good news” and “*basileias*” which means kingdom or empire. We have become so used to the Christian religious use of these terms that we might think they were invented by Jesus. But now I think, in response to John the Baptist’s arrest by a puppet king of the Roman Empire, Jesus was co-opting these terms as a verbal assault on that empire. Perhaps he had heard this pronouncement from Rome, ordering that everyone celebrate the birthday of Caesar Augustus:

“Whereas Providence ... has ... adorned our lives with the highest good: Augustus ... and has in her beneficence granted us and those who will come after us a Savior who has made war to cease and who shall put everything in peaceful order ... with the result that the birthday of our God signaled the beginning of the Good News for the world...”

- *Calendrical Decree from Temples of Rome and Augustus in the Province of Asia*]

The brutal Roman Empire, with its brutal *Pax Romana*, was using doublespeak that would have made George Orwell proud. The decree tells the subjugated peoples to worship their conqueror as a Savior. How bitter that decree must have sounded to the Jews in Judah and Galilee, as they were forced to pay taxes to keep the occupying army supplied. How bitter for Jesus to hear that the baptizer had been arrested. The Gospel of Mark does not give us the three temptations from Satan. It just says that Jesus was tested during the wilderness time. His baptism was a wonderful affirmation from God. But it was only the beginning. The same Spirit that descended like a peaceful dove at the River Jordan becomes a driving force, thrusting him into a time of deep personal decision. Forcing him into an incubation period of sorts, when his faith and purpose are tested, his will to confront the empire was forged. His interior struggle became an exterior struggle. He chose to put **his** Good News, about **God’s** Empire, right out there for the Galileans to compare with that of

Rome. It was a dangerous strategy. I think he knew, as soon as he started speaking, that he was headed to his execution.

If I take the Bible seriously (but not literally) I think about where baptism leads. Or, if we are baptized as children, where does confirmation lead us? Or, if we are confirmed as teenagers, where does a return to the faith community as an adult lead one? If I take today's Gospel seriously, eventually baptism will lead to some great push of the Spirit, confronting us and shaking up the status quo. We will be tested, whether it is through a physical or an emotional or a mental process. We will come out on the other side of ritual changed, turned around (which is what the word "repent" means) and ready to speak and hear good news. We will be ready to confront the injustice and sorrows of the world, to name Empires for what they are, and to offer an alternative to business as usual.

The first letter of Peter has some beautiful passages, but I have to let you know that I cannot quite swallow the entire thing. Earlier in the third chapter (we started at verse 18 today) we learn that wives should submit themselves to their husbands, that they should not braid their hair (!) and that men should honor women as "the weaker sex." Them's fightin' words, to me. I understand that the first letter of Peter was written in an era when society was different, when relationships between men and women were rooted in traditional, tribal roles, when slavery was legal, when dictatorship was the norm. I know, but still...the thing about the braids is such a slap in the face.

So, because I take the Bible seriously, and not literally, I read the second half of that second chapter, and I was struck with the 21st verse, which gives a brief insight into, of all things, baptism: "Baptism...now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience." That's interesting: baptism as an appeal to God. We know that baptism is usually described as an outward and visible sign of the grace of God. We are affirmed, just as Jesus was, as beloved ones. But we are also baptized into the life and death of Jesus, and the same Spirit that drove him to develop an understanding of his mission works within us. Few of us travel to a desert wilderness immediately after being baptized. Perhaps the workings of baptism show up in us, sooner or later, as the formation of conscience. We consent to this formation, in fact we appeal to God to create in us hearts that are open to transformation. It is a testing time, it is a learning time. It can last 40 days or 40 years. It is never really finished, this appeal to God. It can lead us to dangerous proclamations about the kingdom of God. It can lead us to heal and care for strangers. It can lead us to break bread with our enemies. All the sorts of things Jesus did, "in order to bring us to God."

Earlier I spoke about Jesus co-opting some words that belonged to the empire, using them to speak a new truth. Since I take the Bible and religious language seriously, but not literally, I try to be tuned in to ways some deep spiritual realities have been mis-named and mis-used to create hate instead of love, oppression instead of justice, war instead of peace. It happens in every tradition, I expect. The Crusaders displayed their piety by killing every man, woman and child (many of whom were Christian) in the capture of Jerusalem in 1099. The early European settlers of this country displayed their devotion to Christ by treating Native Americans worse than animals. The temptation to let our own desires trump the lessons of Jesus is so strong. And the same tragedy is repeated in other traditions. Take the word *jihad*, the Arabic word for "struggle." It is in the news all the time now: we hear about "jihadists" as holy (or unholy) warriors. But scholars of Islam say that these violent expressions are a Lesser Jihad, while the inner spiritual struggle, the struggle inherent in developing a conscience, is the "Greater Jihad." One struggles with oneself first of all, and that

struggle leads to promoting peace, harmony and cooperation, and charity to the less fortunate. They would say that Jesus' time in the wilderness was a jihad of this kind, and that his message, the good news against Roman business as usual was birthed in the struggle.

This is the first Sunday in Lent, and I want to take our Scriptures and our baptisms and our wilderness experiences and our struggles seriously. I want to look at Lent as a season for journeying into transformation, and baptism as the beginning of the journey. I want to take a hard look at what is wrong with the world, and a deep gaze into what we have been given by a gracious God. I want to appeal to God for a good conscience – knowing that it does not always come easy. I want to be able to name the ways powerful words are mis-used to hurt God's beloved children. I want to prepare for Easter, when Jesus' proclamation of Good News takes on new power. I want to be ready for what God has to offer. If this takes starting from the wilderness place, so be it.

In the wilderness, a time of testing is almost sure to happen. We are thrown back on our own resources, our spiritual reserves. We find out what stuff we are really made of. It is liberating, it is transformative, this truthful look at our inner selves. Jesus was given a stamp of identity in baptism: the beloved of God, the one who had God's favor. In the time of testing, facing a persuasive inner or outer adversary, he could claim this certainty. He may have felt isolated, out there in the desert, but he was not alone. He was bound in covenant and blessing to the source of all goodness. We are given a stamp of identity in baptism as well, and as beloved ones we are drawn into the struggle and the compassion and the power that marked Jesus. This Lent, we can claim our identity. Hear the Good News, and be the Good News. Amen.