

Auspicious beginnings?  
Mark 1:9-15

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How many of you have ever been sick? How many of you enjoyed being sick?

I cannot say that I have enjoyed being sick, when I've been sick. I probably embody the myth that men are among the worst of patients. My wife is a model of virtuous suffering in comparison with me.

Nevertheless, some of the most valuable times in my life have been when I was sick. Not all of them, mind you. But some. I think about this in the Spring, around Lent, a time when I guess many of us get sick for a variety of reasons: viruses, change of temperature, when we are busy with Church activities, etc.

What being sick has done to me is always, whether I was willing or not, brought me to a stand-still. I'm a very active person, and I believe that I have good ideas and lots of energy. So, I charge ahead, ready to get my hands dirty and full of thoughts as to how we can do things differently.

These are good things, right? Even as a Christian. I pray, I ask God to lead me, I wait for God to move me, and then, when I sense that I have a green-light, I go ahead.

But, in the midst of that charge, getting sick has stopped me in my tracks.

Or, how about this situation: Have you ever been driving along a road that you travel frequently, zipping along at 50, 60, 80 miles an hour, hurrying to get to a service, to a meeting, to a member of your church, to your family. And suddenly, there is a line up of cars on the road and you have to stop. You react. You're frustrated. You say, "oh no, I'm going to be late", or you say worse! As the delay continues, you get angry, wondering what is going on and why can't the construction or the accident or whatever get cleared away more quickly. As the delay drags on, you get out of your car, perhaps to see if you can help, more often to see what is going on. When you say that there is nothing to do, you make alternate plans: can I turn around, head the other direction, get out of this hold-up. Then you realise that you can't, and that there's nothing you can do.

The reading from Mark is right at the outset of Mark's Gospel and has all of the characteristics that you will find throughout the rest of the Gospel: abrupt sentences, "straightways", short staccato bursts of information. Kind of like Hemmingway.

But, in the reading here, these short bursts of information reveal a Jesus who doesn't do a lot but who, like me when I'm sick or you stuck in traffic, appears, passive in the hands of larger forces. Other than getting himself to where he is going to be baptized (1.9) and back to Galilee where he has come from (1.14a), Jesus is, as it were, stuck in traffic, flat on his back, subject to other forces. He is baptised by John; someone opens the heavens (or they open themselves – like a door shutting or a window banging closed); the Spirit descends upon him; the Spirit drives him into the wilderness; he is tested by Satan; he is apparently preyed on by beasts; the angels minister to him. This is definitely no macho Hemmingway hero.

Furthermore, we are given no reasons for what happens. This is especially noteworthy in contrast with the other Gospels that often do explain why Jesus does what he does. But, here? Nothing. Why is Jesus immersed? Why does the spirit descend? Why does the voice come forth? Why does the spirit drive him into the wilderness? Why does Satan tempt him? Why do the angels minister to him? We say to ourselves: why did the sickness come to me? Why did he have to get sick, since he's got a family and exercises and keeps well? Why am I lying on my back feeling so rotten? Why did I have to take this road and get stuck in traffic? Why me? As in Mark, as with Jesus, there are often no reasons given for Jesus' passivity, for his suffering.

"Passive" is a word that is derived from the Latin word "passio", which meant "having something done to you". It's from that word "passio" that we get our word "passion". Isn't it interesting that we usually confine our understanding of Jesus' "passion" to the end of his ministry. But, in Mark, we see Jesus' "passio" at the very beginning of his ministry. In fact, what I want to suggest to you this morning is that it is important not simply that Jesus' ministry ended with his suffering, but that it also began with his suffering. What an inauspicious beginning to what everyone, including John the Baptist, surely must have thought would be the appearance of the new king of Israel, who would actively ride on Jerusalem and cleanse the land from all foreign pollution. Boy, were they wrong! And no reasons were given!

But, before we get to that, it's necessary for me to make a slight correction to what I have said thus far. I have said that Jesus is passive with the exception of his appearance at the Jordan and his return to Galilee. That's not entirely correct. There are two little actions that Jesus does in the middle: after he was baptized, he got out of the water and he saw. Now, he got out from under the water (which is what the text means since baptism means going fully under) and then he saw. What he saw was the sky ripped apart and, through the rift, the Spirit coming down upon him. A very little action in the midst of much "passio". But, so important.

If you and I go through the Bible dictionaries, we will find all sorts of tough words defined. These words are words that we really can't understand without help: place names (like Galilee), identities of historical characters (like Herod or Pilate), major theological concepts (like sin or repentance). But, there are a lot of words that we think that we understand that we will not find defined there. Words like "see", as in "he got out of the water and he saw". So we pass these words over. Surely they're not very important, we say to ourselves.

Stuck in traffic, flat on your back in bed, what can you do? In the midst of the story about Jesus, there is only one real action that Jesus does. Jesus never speaks, or even appears to move himself. But, he does see, that is, he gets it! Even when apparently no one else around him did! He alone sees and gets what the sound from heaven is saying.

Here I am on my bed; there you are in your car. I can't move and I am so miserable. You can't really move either, at least, not very far, and you are so frustrated. The doctor pokes away; the rain pelts the car. So much to do. But now things are really bad. People depend on me. I need to get back to work. This is not a good time to have other forces make me do what they want me to. Jesus had a lot of things to do, and a long way to go. All good things. All in time. All at the right time, God's time, God's hour. But, not now. Now is a time "to be done to", to be passive, and in being passive, it is a time to see, to get it!

You and I know how important it is to be still and let God speak. But, what will it take for it to happen? What will it take for you to realize that God is speaking to you even now? You're already planning your

Sunday afternoon activities, your work week starting tomorrow, your next set of errands that you have to do, even planning for the next service, the next music, the next thing that has to be said.

To be still and to let God speak gives us an opportunity to “see”, to “get it”, that when the voice comes from heaven, you will “hear it”, unlike the crowd who thinks that it’s just thunder. A voice that declares this Jesus to be a king, yes, God’s own son, just as Ps 2 declares of David, but also a servant, my chosen, in whom my soul delights, and who, as a servant, will go and do whatever I tell him, passive to my command but active to do it. Sometimes it takes being made passive to have an opportunity to see.

And it continues because Mark shows us what straightway follows Jesus’ seeing and hearing, Jesus’ getting it and knowing what is required of him. Immediately following the vision and voice, this one who is declared son is driven by the heavenly spirit into the a desert place where God is not to be found, not even the voice of God, but only a shadowy figure called Satan, the Accuser, who will test him.

Why? Driven into the wilderness by the Spirit, Jesus represented a challenge to Satan. As throughout the Gospels, the mere presence of Jesus in Satan’s land, the unredeemed wilderness, is viewed as a challenge, like the mere entry of Jesus into the Gerasene land or into a synagogue where demons understand themselves to be rulers. They immediately ask him: What are you doing here? Do you hope to destroy us?

Satan is identified with the wilderness in the same way that Americans are identified with the US and Canadians with Canada: it is his land; he sets the rules; he decides who lives and dies, and who comes and goes. He does so to defend his land and his goods against the obvious threat posed by strangers. He sets up border guards (demons) and keeps out undesirable aliens who might affect his well-being. They might be terrorists against him; they might be people who are too powerful and who will subvert his power.

Such a threat is posed by this stranger, Jesus. But, Jesus didn’t choose to come there; he was driven there. Driven into that unredeemed land where beasts still prowl and where the Kingdom of God is not even visible on the horizon.

But, even there, according to Mark, Jesus remains passive. He does nothing, says nothing, takes no action. Jesus does not swagger into the desert, ever the activist looking for a fight.

And then, as suddenly as it had begun, the challenge or test is over. But, who won? At the end of this challenge, the wilderness appears to remain unredeemed. Satan neither disappears in a puff of smoke like the wicked witch nor does Jesus come of the wilderness carrying Satan’s emblems of battle as the Roman armies would have done, having vanquished their enemies. At the end, there is no definitive victory. Jesus, still passive, simply receives aid from angelic ministers.

And then, and only for the second time in this whole story, does Jesus really take his body into his own hands and he makes his way to Galilee. It is there that we will hear him speak for the first time. What we hear him say is that the roller coaster car has stopped plunging ever downwards through one blow after another. What we hear him say is that we are now at the bottom of a hill, and there is a very long hill ahead of us. Behind him, lies the whole wilderness, still unredeemed Satan-land, very much not the Kingdom of God. Before him, the kingdom has only drawn near: "The time has come, the kingdom of God has drawn near. Start repenting and start believing the good news." It looks like time to start climbing. Recovery from sickness may take a long time. Clearing the traffic jam may take time. Getting

over the wounds of terrorist attacks, the most profound and unexpected “being done to” that I can imagine, takes time.

We do not like passivity. It means not knowing what is coming next. It means being out of control. And we like control. In our activist, independent,, individualist worlds, we want action and we want to be in control of it. We want to set the agenda, we want to do the talking. We want to be in control, establishing mission statements and vision statements, setting the pace and setting the direction. But we really aren't in control and we don't know what tomorrow will bring. Only God does. And so the only preparation for what is to come is to learn with Jesus how to see and to listen. Before we speak, before we say anything, it is important to see and hear.

When my wife and son and I went up the south tower of the World Trade Centre on August 11, 2001, we probably knew intellectually what could happen in a building like this; did we or anyone else expect what did happen exactly one month later? When I lived in Spain for 10 years, I knew what could happen there, with all of its tensions, with all of its promise and its past; did I or anyone living in Spain on March 10, 2004 ever expect what did happen on March 11, 2004? Many Dutch probably realized on May 9, 1940 what could happen to their country; how many were knew exactly what it would be like on May 10, 1940?

As the letter of James says, none of us knows what tomorrow will bring. We can make guesses, and we can prepare as best we can. But, we don't know what will happen exactly or how it will affect us. Whether we will snap or bend with the blows and not break.

Therefore, none of us knows what words will be appropriate tomorrow. Yes, there will be a time to proclaim that the kingdom of God is near, and that it is time to repent. A time would come to act. But remember Jesus: even after he had seen, even after he had heard, he said nothing, even after he sees where is being led.

To anyone who looked at Jesus during these first days, from his baptism until his return to Galilee, these may have looked like “inauspicious beginnings”. But, these were auspicious days because the worst, and the best, was yet to come. And Jesus teaches us how to prepare for our own auspicious days: learn how to see; learn how to listen.

We are surrounded by so much talk: preaching, counselling, prayers, meetings, lectures! So much talking, so many words, and yet so much ill-preparation for the challenge that will come from those who want to take away our birthright. What is important today is not more talk. What is important is that you and I, here present, look up and see, that we “get it”, that we see what really matters. What will we see? I can't tell you all that you will see, but I can tell you this: at the very least what you will see and hear is that our Father calls us by our name, that he delights in us, and that he will not let us go, no matter what tomorrow may bring. What you see and what you hear will be so important that it will sustain you through what is to come.

Be still. You will be driven where you do not want to go, to a hill where each of us must go with our cross. But, see, the Kingdom of God lies before us. It is at the end of the uphill road that lies ahead of us. Life up your eyes? Can you see?