

Lent 1

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The Rev'd. Canon David W. Lovelace

It is important as we hear the Scripture read to understand the context of the passage and the events being described. The Gospel writer Mark begins his account of Jesus' life by telling us of the Messianic prophecies. The first time we meet Jesus is when he comes to the Jordan to be baptized by John the Baptist. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descended like a dove. He heard a voice proclaim, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

This is absolutely incredible. For centuries Israel lived in the hope that one day God would send the Messiah to bring the kingdom of God to fulfillment. Most people expected the Messiah to be a powerful king, a charismatic leader like King David or a strong warrior who could lead them in battle. Mark says, Jesus hears a voice that proclaims; "You are the One." We don't know from this account if anyone other than Jesus heard this acknowledgement from God. Mark does not say whether John the Baptist or anyone standing on the banks for the river heard the voice. Who would have believed it even if they had heard? This man from backwater Nazareth who worked as a peasant in a carpenter shop, how could he be the Messiah?

What follows seems even more strange. Mark tells us, "the Spirit immediately drove him into the wilderness. For forty wilderness days and nights Jesus was tested by Satan." Does that seem any way to begin a ministry convincing people Jesus is the One sent from God? This wilderness experience is one of the stories that has led to our forty day season of Lent. During these forty days, we are called to reflect on our own lives, our struggles, our need to repent, our need to be in a right relationship with God and our neighbor. As modern followers can we emerge from this time of testing to proclaim the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand; believe in the good news?

Believing good news got me to thinking. A woman who works two part time jobs to pay her bills takes a few dollars each week and plays the lottery. She knows her chances of winning are small but she hopes, so she plays. One week the news hits her. She has hit the jackpot and won the lottery. The first words she says are, "I just can't believe it."

A Dad works hard to provide for his family juggling schedules trying to keep up with the soccer schedule, band practice, homework and his own business obligations. He feels like he should find more time for his children but he can't seem to stretch any more hours into his day. One Sunday morning he is awakened by his son and daughter. They deliver the Sunday paper and breakfast to him in bed. Without thinking he says, "I just can't believe this."

Unfortunately it is not just good news that we find hard to believe. There is the knock on the door in the middle of the night. Half asleep you respond to the knock to be facing two police officers. "I'm sorry to have to tell you this. Your daughter has been in an automobile accident and has been taken to the hospital." All you can say is, "I just can't believe it."

In the language of psycho analysis, denial is a powerful defense mechanism that protects us in the face of trauma or overwhelming news. The human mind has the wonderful capacity to deny the existence of facts that are just too difficult to accept. We can simply defer the reality of a situation until we feel we are better able to handle it. At the moment we hear the news we honestly "can't believe it."

The Gospel proclaimed by both John the Baptist and Jesus calls us to repent and believe the good news of the kingdom of God. It all sounds so simple when in fact it is quite difficult. The good news is startling, it lays out new conditions for the world we live in. How do we know we are truly prepared to receive and accept these new terms of our existence? Are we honestly prepared to believe the words of Jesus to be true? Can we honestly deal with the fact that we are called to stake our very lives on what he said?

I think there is something perhaps not so obvious going on in Mark's telling of the Jesus story. The first words we hear from Jesus according to Mark are these, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." It interests me that the word "repent" comes before "believe." I think Jesus knows how our minds work. He knows that the news he comes to share is too good to just be believed. So, in proclaiming God's kingdom he tries to help us deal with the feeling the news is too good to be true.

Most of us have mixed feelings about the word "repent." Repentance carries a good deal of negative baggage characterized by sorrow, guilt, feelings of remorse, being unworthy, and so on. We have learned that to "repent" means we have to say we are sorry and change our ways. The word for "repent" used in Scripture carries a much

richer meaning. The word translated "repent" is "metanoia" a Greek word meaning literally "to gain a new way, a new understanding."

It is about seeing the world in a new light, making new connections, or in the language of Carl Jung "re-forming." It is about moving beyond our preconceived ideas to open ourselves to new possibilities.

Jesus said to his followers, "You will need to open your minds to a new way if you are going to understand what I am saying when I tell you about God's kingdom. It is good news for all the creation because it is founded on God's belief that all creation is good. God's love for you as a child of God has no conditions and is based on no preconceived ideals. God's call to you and me is to be special for the sake of all the world.

Indeed as God's children we struggle with this news. It is too good to be believed. After long years and much practice we still find it difficult to believe that God can love us as much as Jesus said.

The forty days of Lent is an invitation to believe that which is difficult to believe. We have been marked as God's own in our baptism. We have been called by God to be a special people, who "seek and serve Christ in all persons ....., who work for justice and peace....., who proclaim the good news of God in Christ and who respect the dignity of every human being."

There are days when this call and our identity is difficult to believe. That is okay. There are days when we find new reasons to hear again and believe the powerful story of Jesus that gives us cause for celebration and gives meaning to our lives. That is okay too. The assurance we have is that in Christ we are never alone. We travel together as Christ's body in this world and God has promised to be with us always. That's a promise you can believe.