

Lent 4B: Mark 1.9-15  
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In 1903, in a letter to a young soldier, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."

Rilke sounds like such the modern Episcopalian, doesn't he, embracing ambiguity and all that? I've come to suspect that we Episcopalians aren't really any more comfortable with ambiguity than the general public. We're just comfortable about a particular set of uncertainties. It's a little like claims to inclusivity. Have you not ever been at dinner with a group that prizes this virtue, only to find the conversation devolve into a version of "Thank God we're so inclusive. Don't you hate those exclusive meanies over there? Keep them away!"

Likewise, I really do want to be comfortable with all that is unsolved in my heart. But it's hard to live with ambiguity about whether a person you've hurt will ever forgive you, or whether a friend will be ok after a diagnosis, or to wonder whether we'll be accepted for who we truly are, especially in a moment when we know we need a friend.

I guess I don't think Rilke's wisdom is meant for times when I'm feeling fine about some uncertainty in my life. It's meant for moments when something dear to me is very much at stake, when nothing matters more than some uncertain outcome that's yet to come.

At first blush, there doesn't seem to be much uncertainty at all in our gospel for today. Mark was never one to waste words, but he's never more blunt and succinct than in what we just read. It takes only six short verses for Jesus to go from his home in Nazareth down to the Jordan for his baptism, out into the wilderness for forty days, and then to begin his preaching ministry. Over in Matthew, these events spread out over the better part of two chapters.

What Mark's stripped down account does, however, is lay three very different experiences side by side by side. First there's the baptism. And even Mark leaves in what we all wish we could get from time to time. It would be nice to have the universe just once tell us audibly and unambiguously the truth about things. But God doesn't speak like that to me. Or hasn't yet. And if I told you God did, it would probably make you more uncertain about the state of my mind, not less. But the voice from heaven makes

that severe editor's cut in Mark. "You are my son," says the sky, "the Beloved; in you I am well pleased."

And then, the text says, Jesus is driven immediately into the wilderness. "Immediately" is a word that rushes the reader along throughout Mark's gospel. We're not told the number of temptations or their particular natures. All we read is that Jesus lives for forty days among the wild beasts and that Satan tempts him there.

Let's note this contrast. Jesus gets the thing we never seem to get: perfect certainty about at least one thing in his life. The sky has opened and he hears he is loved. And the next thing we know he's being tempted. Immediately.

I take Mark at his word when he says Jesus was tempted, by the way. The lack of particulars may keep us from speculating on the symbolic nature of a series of traps the Devil never really had a chance of luring Jesus into. I take them to be meaningful, deeply felt temptations such as you and I would recognize in the pits of our own stomachs. Temptations that would spin around in our own anxious, uncertain minds in the middle of the night. It's as if Mark wants us to see that even Jesus could walk away from the most overt declaration of his belovedness imaginable and immediately be tempted to believe otherwise. Even Jesus's heart doesn't get to rest in a state of perfect certainty for long. Not in this world it doesn't.

After that, John — Jesus's wild beast of a cousin, who's just baptized him a few verses ago — gets arrested and is not long for this world. So everything seems to have gone very quickly to hell. Because that devil, not the Spirit from heaven, seems to be calling the shots. But here's the stunner. It's into this tempting, unjust, soon to be murderous world that Jesus walks, announcing that he's got good news for it. The reign of God has come near. Repent! Turn around! Enter in!

At least for me, and at least for today, having Mark bind these three scenes in Jesus's life so closely together suggests that confidence in our belovedness by God and all the ways we're tempted away from this fundamental truth will always be part of who we are. Like Jesus, you will walk into some days certain on some level that you're as worthy of love and dignity as any other human being, and, then, a moment later, become deeply unsure of this truth and look elsewhere for your identity. Maybe Jesus didn't walk entirely free of the temptations any more than he walked entirely free of the declaration that he is loved. But it was in this tension that the good news he was sent to proclaim first came forth.

Does this change the way you think about Jesus ... about his courage, his humanity, his mission and message ... if you imagine that there were things that remained unsolved in his heart that even he had to learn to be patient with? Questions even he had to live with, maybe to the end?

I'm sure there have been moments in all our lives we could point to that shaped the way we see ourselves and our world in fundamental ways. Here's one of mine that

I've told in other contexts, but never from this pulpit. And never as I reflected on this particular gospel text.

In the summer of 1990, I'd just graduated from college, and I guess my parents thought we should take a family vacation before I headed out into the wilderness of the world, almost certainly to be tempted there by the Devil. We took a trip to Chicago to watch the White Sox play, because Comiskey Park was slated for demolition the next year.

Mom's multiple sclerosis had progressed such that she needed a wheelchair to move about. And old baseball parks were hardly the most accommodating places for someone like her. Before we found our seats, Mom had to do what every living, breathing human being does every day of their life. She had to use the restroom. But, unsurprisingly, there were no gender neutral bathrooms to be found. As I remember it, Dad didn't deliberate for long before he yelled into the women's room that someone in a wheelchair was coming in and rolled her through the door.

As my brother and I waited outside, we saw the shocked and indignant faces of women as they exited, some expressing horror that they'd just seen a man in the women's room. And in that moment, at least two truths were alive in me at once. Part of me was more certain than ever that Mom was beloved and that she had as much right as any other human being to a safe and dignified place to tend to her body's most basic needs. Another part of me was embarrassed. Even embarrassed that I was embarrassed. Part of me just wanted to go my oblivious, able-bodied way through a world that had been built with folks just like me in mind. Part of me just wanted just to fit in in the very world for which my mother was an inconvenient intrusion.

I told that story at my father's funeral, because it remains one of the most loving and heroic acts I've ever seen. But all that really happened was that a small and very local accident was averted. Nobody's life was at stake and I doubt anyone else even remembered it past the fifth inning. As for me, I'm not sure I had any choice but to be patient with all that was unsolved in my heart in that moment, much of which remains unsolved, even now. All I could do is live with Mom in her ambiguous place in the world and with the terrible question of whether I would have had the courage to help her claim that place if it had been up to me to do so.

I know you've lived such moments as well. Moments that bear both the truth of human belovedness and the wish or the temptation to be ignorant of the ways we can deny that belovedness in people. I do believe that it was into and because of these unsolved places in our hearts that God became incarnate in this world. I'm still a follower of this Jesus, even if a too timid and unfaithful one at times, because I believe he knew the ambiguity and uncertainty that comes with life on this earth. Knew them intimately, and even from within that knowledge, showed us the way. Even said there is good news to be told. Good news to be heard. Good news that the kingdom of God has come near to even us. And he promised us that kingdom is a realm in which you and I

can begin to live right now, if only we'll turn from the temptation to accept lesser versions of the way things are and trust him when he says that every last one of us is beloved.