

Life or Death

When I was in graduate school and living in North Carolina, I took advantage of being only a few hours from the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Every once in a while I would go backpacking in the mountains, usually by myself. I enjoyed the solitude and the experience of carrying everything on my back – food, shelter, clothes.

Getting a backcountry permit was a required first step, both to limit the number of people on trails and also to tell them how to live in the wilderness. One of the requirements was to pack two long ropes. Each night before it got dark, the ropes would be thrown over two tall trees so that the backpack could be raised eight or ten feet off the ground and several feet away from any tree trunk. Without that precaution, one was likely to wake up in the morning and discover that a black bear had ripped the pack apart, looking for food. A friend of mine once didn't get his pack far enough away from a trunk and found his trip abruptly cut short.

I think about camping in the Smokies every time I hear Mark's description of Jesus in the wilderness. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark is very spare in his telling. Jesus is tempted, but there are no details on what the temptations are. So the mention of being with the "wild beasts" stands out. Some have interpreted this to mean that it was a new Eden, where the wild beasts became tame and sat around with Jesus. I always remember my days in the Smokies and think, no, this was dangerous. Satan was dangerous and so were the animals, which is why the angels were there ministering to Jesus.

Mark also uses very strong language. The Spirit "drove him out" into the wilderness. At the time of his baptism, the heavens were "torn apart" – literally split open, so that same Spirit could come down on Jesus. And, typically, Mark rushes his narrative along, using "immediately" twice in the course of a few verses.

The baptism of Jesus connects us all with our own baptism, of course; God calls each one of us beloved. The letter of Peter that we heard this morning connects baptism with resurrection. That symbolism is harder to see in the Episcopal tradition, where a few scoops of water are poured over one's head during baptism. It's easier to understand in traditions where full immersion is used, as was done in the time of Jesus. When one sinks completely under water and then is brought up again, the sense of death and new life (resurrection) becomes very real. Peter's letter also connects baptism with Noah and the ark, where eight persons are saved through water. (That's Noah, his wife, his three sons, and their wives – why is it that the women are never named?)

The first reading from Genesis comes *after* the flood, a wonderful passage where God establishes his covenant with Noah and all of his descendants. That's everyone, folks, including you and me! Remarkably, the covenant is made with all living creatures as well, and even the earth, if you look carefully. The sign of the covenant is God's bow in the clouds (the rainbow) pointing away from earth. It is God's everlasting promise to preserve life, not to destroy it.

That promise is an important one to remember, this week especially. Whenever someone asks me why God allows a tragedy to happen, whether human-caused or a natural disaster, I say that

whatever happened is not what God desired. God desires life, not death. That's why Jesus came to earth. I also say that God gave humans free will, and just like Jesus, we come under many temptations. Unlike Jesus, we often succumb to them. And when some people succumb to evil and have the means to destroy others, they will do so.

Human-caused tragedy is caused by human free will. But it is important to remember during Lent that we are to repent not only of individual sins, but of corporate ones. On Ash Wednesday I said that this year I was really struck by the passage in Isaiah that talks about injustice as societal sin. I asked why the Iowa legislature has reduced the funding of courts – and proposes to reduce funding even more – when those are the very places in our society that promote justice. Why is funding for mental health treatment also reduced? And why do we, as a society, have such a deadly inability to do anything about limiting gun violence? Satan continues to tempt us, just as he tempted Jesus, and we continue to succumb to those temptations.

That is why the good news of Jesus Christ is more important than ever. God calls us to *repent*, not only as individuals, but also corporately – as we did earlier in the Great Litany, that exhaustive list of every sin one could imagine. God calls us to *believe* in the good news, and act in ways that are *not* of our culture. If there was ever a time when Christians need to be countercultural, it is now, because we live in a culture of violence that is death-giving, not life-giving. So I challenge you this Lent to think not only of your own personal sins and how you might repent, but how we need to repent as a culture and work for justice, for the coming of God's kingdom on earth. That is what God calls us to. Will we listen and obey?

[Lent 1: Genesis 9:8-17; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15.]