

The Whole Story
A Sermon on Mark 14 and 15 by the Rev. Philip Major
Good Friday ~ March 29, 2024 ~ St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY

On Good Friday, the story of the arrest, trial, crucifixion and death of Jesus is most often read from the Gospel of John, but today I have chosen to read the story from the Gospel of Mark. This year we have been reading the story of the good news of God, revealed in the life and words of Christ Jesus, from the Gospel of Mark. I am especially concerned that we understand the story of the crucifixion and death of Jesus in context, which for us, this year, is the context of the Gospel of Mark.

Every story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Let's listen to some passages from the beginning, middle, and end of Mark. Let's pay attention to some of the themes and details found at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the story.

In chapter one, after the testimony of John the Baptist, we are introduced to the central character. *In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."* This is where the story begins.

About six weeks ago we heard a story from the middle of the Gospel. It was the story of the Transfiguration, from chapter nine. *Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud descended on the mountaintop, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.* The story of the Transfiguration is the turning point of the Gospel.

Today we heard most of the end of the Gospel of Mark. Near the very end we heard these verses from chapter 15: *When it was noon, darkness fell over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lama shabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's son!"*

What did you notice as you heard these familiar stories one more time? You and I are not the first people to notice some themes and details reappearing in the three stories from the beginning, the middle and end of the story. Ched Myers has observed the way the beginning, the middle, and the end of the Gospel of Mark are connected by strings of related events.

In the beginning of the Gospel we meet a great prophet, like Elijah, the one we call John the Baptist. Then, at the baptism of Jesus, the fabric of the heavens is torn open, the Spirit descends like a dove, and a loud voice from heaven proclaims, "You are my Son, the beloved."

In the middle of the Gospel, at the Transfiguration, Moses appears with Elijah, the fabric of Jesus' robes are not torn, but they are turned dazzling white. A cloud descends on the mountain top, and a loud voice from the clouds proclaims, "This is my Son, the beloved."

Here, near the end of the Gospel, Jesus was crucified. Then darkness descended over the whole land. Jesus called out to God, and the people standing nearby asked, "Is he calling Elijah?" Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. The fabric of the curtain of the temple was torn in two, and the centurion proclaimed, "Truly this man was God's son."

The repeated references to the historic, prophetic figure, Elijah, point towards something. The repeated motion of something descending from heaven to earth does not happen by mere coincidence. The loud voice calling out and the tearing open of the heavens or the curtain of the Temple point toward something. God's way and God's presence with us are being revealed.

This is what has been revealed. Jesus, the one who was just crucified, the one we call 'the Lord of love' and 'the Prince of peace', is the beloved child of God. God's love and power are breaking into the world. This is what has been revealed.

God is the one who is with us in every part of the story of life. God is present with us in our times of celebration and in our times of grief. God is with us in our birth and in our death. God is with us in our hopes and in our times of complete despair. God is the one who is with us. This is what has been revealed.

God is the one who is with us in the common, everyday, boring times of life. God is with us in our moments of transformation. God is with us when our lives are filled with pain. God is with us when we feel surrounded by love and when we feel completely forsaken. God is the one who is with us when life is empty and barren, like the altar is today. God is the one who is with us.

God is in the beginning, and all through the middle, and right through to the end of our lives. God is in every part of the story of our lives. God is the one who is with us. This is what has been revealed.

How will we respond to this Good News? What are the concerns and cares that are removed from our hearts by this revelation? On the most grievous, saddest day of the year, our lives will be changed by God, the one who is with us.