

## **Beautiful Beginnings, Challenges Ahead**

The Rev. Mark Sherwindt, Pastor  
Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church  
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“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. When he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, ‘Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.’ The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with wild beasts; and angels ministered to him.” **(Mark 1:9-13)**

It was last Saturday, and I received a phone call from George Gaiser, my friend and colleague living in Kent, and last Sunday’s Guest Preacher, who called around Noon, Ohio time, just to talk about the weather. It was around 9:00 a.m. in Palm Springs, which, while early, was still late enough to make it difficult for me to get my mind around what George was trying to convey. Palm Springs is in the Mojave Desert, where it is mostly sunny, because it’s a desert, with three-hundred-and-fifty sunny days a year! Not only was it sunny in Palm Springs, the Santa Ana winds had picked up about the time we arrived, making it five to ten degrees warmer than it usually is this time of the year. So, Marilyn and I were sitting on our balcony enjoying some morning coffee, with the sun shining and the temperatures rising from the mid 70s toward 80 degrees on a beautiful Saturday morning in Southern California, when George Gaiser called to tell me that it was snowing in northeast Ohio, and that the snow was supposed to continue through the afternoon into the evening and past midnight.

I’ve got to confess that it felt like I was in a dream, where one of the characters was trying to wake me up. It was warm and sunny, with Palm Springs beckoning, and George on the line telling me that I had to focus on reality and make some decisions about service times and our Sunday’s schedule. What an odd contrast: the dreamland of sunny California on the one hand, with the hard cold realities of northeast Ohio on the other. On the one hand, there was everything any of us could want for a weekend in January – warm, sunny weather, in a vacationer’s paradise, with snow in the mountains for skiing, dry heat in the canyons for hiking, great food, lots of golf courses, and an international film festival just for the fun of it – and on the other hand, there was the rugged cold, blizzard-like winds, and accumulating snow in northeast Ohio. That’s quite a contrast.

The Gospel of Mark is trying to create a similar set of contrasts with its introduction to Jesus’ ministry in the opening chapter. On the one hand, Mark opens with the glorious day of Jesus’ Baptism at the hands of John the Baptist in the Jordan River. Baptisms are days that are filled with hope for new beginnings and great anticipation for all that God will accomplish with the arrival of His promised reign. Then, Mark tells us that Jesus steps up out of that river only to be driven into the wilderness to be tried and tested by the

devil's trickery and temptations. Mark is telling us not to get too comfortable with the joyous hopes that abound among those who are celebrating God's presence and promises at Baptism. There certainly were plenty of reasons to be aglow with joy at Jesus' Baptism. God was there with His booming voice: "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased." Jesus could not have been more certain of God's blessing. God could not have been happier with Jesus' embrace of his call and mission. And yet, neither Jesus, nor anyone else, is allowed to linger in the joy of that moment, or the peace it inspired. Jesus is driven into the desert, and not just for an afternoon hike to enjoy the sights. He is driven into the reality of living God's love in a broken world, proclaiming God's will to a people who prefer their own darkness to God's light, offering God's life to a people who will respond by calling for his death. Mark is saying that we need to wake up because the reality to which God calls us will require sacrifice and service. The journey of following Jesus leads to the cross. The life we seek is not one long stretch of unending bliss. It wasn't that way for Jesus, and it won't be that way for us.

I've got to take some time to tell you more about the fun we had in Palm Springs. We discovered a great Jewish delicatessen right next to the hotel. That was fun. After George called on Saturday, we thought about lounging around the pool in the hot desert sun and warm Santa Ana breezes, but instead we rode the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway to the top at Mountain Station, which is 8,500 feet above the desert floor. We then snow-shoed over three or four feet of mountain snow. During the evenings we attended four different foreign films, an Italian docudrama about gang life and warfare in Naples entitled *Gomorrah*. It was all of that, and more. We saw a wedding farce about a busload of looney tunes going to a wedding in Iceland. We saw a rock 'n roll love story involving Chinese and Japanese lovebirds in Taipei, Taiwan. Our favorite was a Norwegian film about a locomotive engineer about to retire. Its title was *O Horton*. That's right! I thought Gary and Shirley Horton would get a kick out of that. "O", pronounced *Ot*, was short not for *Otto*, but just *Odd*. It was a delightful story, with scenes of Norway's winter forming the backdrop of the train run from Bergen to Oslo. We hope it wins whatever awards are given at the film festival. It was also a heartwarming reminder of our home in northeast Ohio, with the wintry weather there even more depressing than what we're enduring here, and the local connection with the newly retired *O Horton* putting smiles on our faces.

Oddly enough, the theme of engaging the challenges of transitions in life is a big part of our Gospel text with Jesus' baptism; and it is a big part of what's going on in America with the commemoration of *Martin Luther King Day* on Monday, and the celebration of his memorable dream with the Inauguration of President Barack Obama on Tuesday. Inaugurations and beginnings, whether we're talking about individual baptisms or institutional transitions, are moments that inspire hope for change, with a sense that history is open for moving in a new direction, that we can change the world and our lives with different decisions, renewed dedication, and God's blessing. But our Gospel text is trying to remind us that the future is not a *tabula rasa*, an open slate inviting all the changes we'd like to make. In many ways, it's a wilderness; it's a jungle out there, that

will test our resolve with all sorts of temptations, with trickery and treachery, dragging us back to a broken world filled with broken dreams and broken people who miss the mark more often than not.

In the 1980s Ronald Reagan told us that it was morning in America. Today Joe Biden and Barack Obama are telling us that springtime is coming. But nightfall returns and winter invariably arrives again. We've got tough challenges ahead – as individuals and families, as a congregation and a church, as a nation in a world filled with the violence of war and the ominous clouds of economic uncertainty. Mark's Gospel has hit the nail on the head with this opening text, which cements the connection between the mission we embrace and the challenges that we will encounter along the way. There is no time to bask in the glory of the moment. The call to change our world and ourselves begins now. Jesus says as much with his very first words when he returns from the wilderness, which are also his very first words in the Gospel of Mark. "Now is the time. The kingdom is here. Repent and believe." (Mark 1:15)

You know, for the longest time Mark's Gospel was regarded as a poor man's Matthew. It was shorter, less stylish, not the fuller, more complete narrative we get in Matthew. Both Matthew and Luke added a longer beginning, with all the quaint birth narratives and the historic genealogies. Both also added longer endings, which didn't just leave us at an empty tomb, but included accounts of Jesus' resurrection. Luke went even further, by continuing Jesus' story with the life of the early church. Even Matthew adds more in the way of talking about the church, the community of followers that began with the disciples Jesus gathered, and continued with the community that the Good News of his Resurrection inspired. This missing dimension in Mark is so crucial because the cause of the kingdom is not the work of one person acting alone. It takes place within the life of a community, which adds support, and so much more. It is through the growth of this community from a small huddle in the Upper Room to billions of followers scattered around the globe that we begin to understand how we get to the goal Jesus proclaimed to the arrival of God's reign.

This reference to community is a fundamental truth in all calls to change the world and ourselves. We need one another for the support that sustains us as our resolve gains and loses momentum. We need the strengths that come through numbers brought together around a convictional core of common beliefs, commitments, individual hopes and communal aims. Beautiful beginnings must prepare us for the battles ahead, the struggles that will come, and the disappointments that will test our resolve. The call God issues – whether we're talking about our own lives, the mission of the church, or the purpose of our nation – allows little time for basking in the glory of beautiful beginnings. As Jesus says with his first words as his ministry begins, "Now is the time. The work of the kingdom is at hand. Resolve to change your ways, to change the world, by believing the Gospel." Don't pause to glory in the moment, but pray to take in the Spirit, to move forward with our call, our mission of living the love God gives ... in Jesus' name. Amen