

## **February 21, 2021**

The first Sunday in Lent... Lent is a journey. Traditionally a time for self-examination, an opportunity to look at ourselves in the mirror. Perhaps a time of repentance, making changes...

Our short gospel reading is familiar to us, in fact we read a portion of this scripture just a month ago. It's interesting to me how the same scripture sounds different in Lent than it did in Epiphany.

Jesus is baptized and immediately the Holy Spirit drives him into the wilderness. A dangerous place... physically and also spiritually. Biblically, a lot happens in the wilderness. The Israelites wander in the wilderness for forty years, John the Baptist appears in the wilderness...

Sometimes the wilderness is a metaphor for wrestling and transformation, we've all had chapters in our lives when we've felt confused or conflicted, and yet somehow, we get through it. Perhaps a little wiser, perhaps a little stronger... And probably for all of us, this past year has been a wilderness experience.

So, perhaps it's appropriate that Lent begins in the wilderness, in the scary parts of life in a fallen, broken, and perhaps dangerous world.

The part of the gospel reading that gets my attention today is the arrest of John the Baptist. The writer of Mark, makes a point of noting that the arrest is the precipitating incident for Jesus to begin his ministry. Mark suggests that somehow these two occurrences are related or connected. John is stopped, and thus, Jesus begins...

What I'd like to do this morning, is do some reflecting with this link. We know that John the Baptist is the forerunner; John prepares the way for the coming of Jesus. And John is not only the forerunner in ministry, John is also the forerunner in death. And we'll hear that gruesome story in July...

The significance of this connection, is that it demonstrates the violence directed at Jesus is not unique, but rather structural. In other words, this same violence that killed John the Baptist, will also kill Jesus... And because it's structural, it's inherent in Humanity, is part and parcel of who we are...

My favorite scholar, Rene Girard believes that this violence begins with competing wants and desires, or covetousness. This makes us rivals with one another, we simply want things that other people have... You've all seen it... Two boys and one toy... Soon enough they'll be fighting over it. The big word for this is mimetic rivalry.

We like to think that as we get older, we get a little wiser... But truth is we're really not too much different, we just get more creative about it... In fact, we can even make it look like righteousness...

Which is exactly what the religious people did with Jesus. They became jealous of Him, they judged him, they bore false witness against him, they plotted against him, and finally they had him crucified on a cross. And as far as they were concerned, it was the righteous thing to do!

In our lesson today, Jesus proclaims “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” This Kingdom that Jesus talks about... Is this a way of living here and now, and transforming this structural violence? Wouldn't that be good news?

Quick story... I've been learning some new guitar techniques recently, specifically a technique called sweep picking. These days you go to YouTube and there are literally thousands of videos to teach you how to do virtually anything you want!

I choose one video and started watching it. The instructor seemed to know what he was talking about, but he kind of rubbed me the wrong way. I thought “he seems to think he's the only guy in the world that knows how to play guitar.” In hind sight, I was probably feeling a little rivalry...

He was haughty! I thought to myself, nope, this guy just wants to impress his girlfriend, he doesn't know what he's talking about...

I found a different video, and I thought, “This one is good!” So, I started watching...

After a looong introduction, I was suddenly struck by the fact that there was a big problem--while he sounded like he knew what he was talking about, he really didn't! Every time he played an example, he was blowing it! So, I started looking for another video to see if I could find a better teacher.

After wasting a good long time looking, I went back to the first video, to the guy I thought was a little full of himself, and guess what? I gave it a little more time, and as it turned out, he was a great teacher. Apparently, I was just a little too jealous, or a little too covetous of what he was doing... My jealousy clouded my judgment.

When I realized that, I couldn't help but feel a little foolish. Isn't it amazing how quickly and easily we come to judge others? It was as if I had another one of those little mirrors lifted up for me to see myself, and frankly I didn't like what I saw.

So, that's my little Lenten discipline this year, I'm going to try to observe my covetous and judgmental tendencies. We're always a work in progress...

The good news today is that, "the Kingdom of God has come near." This Kingdom is a new way of being in the world. This Kingdom is not about rivalry and violence, this is a Kingdom of loving God and loving the neighbor...

And I see this kind of Kingdom here at Cross of Christ and Cannon River, every time I see people loving and caring for each other. With every loving, kind, and gracious act... Every single one... Little by little... We are loving, kind, and gracious and generous people... And I believe it, because I've seen it... We've all seen it! Amen...