

Lent B-1

Mark 1:9-15

March 1, 2009

Title: The Reign of God Has Come Near

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Last Sunday afternoon three members of Boy Scout Troop 28 received their Eagle award. Two of those young men, Tommy Quinn and Chris Resovsky, belong here to Good Shepherd Church. During the Eagle Scout ceremony all scouts present, rise and recite the Scout Law. With lightning speed the assembled scouting community fired off these words:

A Scout is Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean and Reverent.

What a great list of 12 virtues. Such a list is transportable—said by the scouts of Raleigh as well as the scouts of Baghdad, by rich and poor alike, by the scout who achieves the Eagle and the one who doesn't.

Characteristic of Mark's Gospel in quick fire fashion, a manifesto of Jesus is provided, stripped of detail, brief and portable—Jesus is baptized; Jesus is tempted; Jesus proclaims Good News. These six verses read like a group of scouts reciting their law.

To know these things about Jesus is to know enough about him. You could write these few verses down on a business card and hand it out—

“Here, take this card, it will tell you about Jesus.”

Enough about him? Where are the teachings, the miracles?

Read that last verse, Jesus says: The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news.” Jesus' teaching and his miracles demonstrate that he filling the time with good news. Lepers cleansed; children welcomed; religious rituals

restored to giving life, people turned around. He is this statement. God is decisively acting through Jesus. What is said in verse 15 is lived all the way to Calvary

Baptized; Tested; Ministering — that's Jesus.

Wouldn't it be better to say it this way: BAPTIZED, tested, MINISTERING or even better just BAPTIZED; MINISTERING. Skip over the testing part. After all, in Mark it's only two verses. Set that part aside. Jesus is God, Jesus has the spirit of life in him. God is well pleased with him. Pass over the testing.

But it is God who sent Jesus there. The spirit drove Jesus ...this is not trip in a limo...this is being forced there, made to go there, compelled to go there, picked up and dropped there. You don't pass over the wilderness, you pass through the wilderness...even Jesus, yes, especially Jesus. He's been there; He goes there before us.

Satan, wild beasts, angels —code words for wilderness. Jesus isn't alone out there. These are the companions on this journey. Some have the potential to diminish, distract, destroy. Some bring life, sustenance.

That's wilderness. For Jesus; for those who bear his name. Here you rely on God, cause all that otherwise props you up is missing. Wilderness time puts before you the struggles that matter.

The 6th Scout Law is kind. It's just a word until at school your friends are engaged in bullying someone and want you to go along. What will you do? Risk losing your friends; risk living kind? It's a struggle that matters.

The economic turn down has driven us into the wilderness. Where are Satan and the wild beasts at prowl during this time and where are the angels? The buzz on every mind is the need to cut back, to pare down. Just last Sunday three people still employed identified salary cuts ranging from 10% to 20%.

Will we find ways as a faith community to live fully our service to others as we live with less? In such times the wild beasts lurk inviting us to turn inward, to care for self only. These are large matters, matters of the spirit.

Angels abound in the wilderness. The experience of financial stress calls us to get our priorities straight and remember what counts most in life. What counts most in life are things you cannot buy. Such things as FAITH, HOPE AND LOVE.

What counts is available in good and in bad times.

This week at Rex Hospital one of our members said the following:

“We don’t have any family here. I don’t know how anyone makes it without a loving, faith community.”

That was Kim Sweet whose husband Tim had successful emergency surgery on Wednesday. Kim came to Ash Wednesday worship and there she found her teenage sons, Marshall and Calvin, enveloped in this family of faith---you serving as angels for this family suddenly fighting the beast of uninvited sickness.

Angels abound in the wilderness

I pulled out an old sermon on this text. It was from the early 1990s. Guess what was going on back then on the First Sunday in Lent?

We were changing our Sunday Morning Schedule from two to three worship times. Here’s a portion of that sermon:

The wild beast of space has hold of us, leaving us unsettled. Will our educational life suffer now? May God grant us the courage to listen and love. It is in just such struggles the reign of God comes near.

And what will we do with the wild beast of anonymity? What happens when people don’t know each other? The community becomes less and less and before you know it you’ve accepted the kind of indifference so dominant in our world. The Reign of God has come near. Many of us are

saying “I don’t know anyone here.” These words can be turned around to say “Look at all those I can get to know here.”

Are we again in the wilderness, this time moving from three to two worship times. Where wild beasts, Satan and angels are found. Time given; some time to break down anonymity—time given to refresh our souls in education, side by side with one another; with those we may not know.

Time to struggle with the meaning of our mission to Believe, Belong and Serve.

This much we know for sure and it is enough to live on:

We have been baptized into Jesus, given His very spirit; sent to engage the hostile powers—Satan and the wild beasts— accompanied by angels, called to be bearers of Good News.

For the reign of God has come near in Jesus.

Near to us. Between his gift of life to us in Baptism and his work for us is the wilderness. Testing. True for Jesus, true for us.

In short, it reads like the Scout Law: For Jesus—Baptism, Spirit Sent Testing, Powerful life giving ministry. For us—no less a gift—the reign of God has come near.