

December 7, 2014

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Mark 1:1-8

Ripping & Roaring

“Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” Isaiah cried in the reading last week.

Mark heard. The gospel writer Mark tears right into the story of our Savior. In this gospel there’s no preliminary conversations with angels, no travel to a distant city, no baby in a manger. Mark 1:1 begins abruptly, with just an announcement, a sudden appearance that tears through all that once was and all that will be. The first line, not even a complete sentence: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Period.

They added that period later, punctuation not being a top priority with a story already in motion. Which is exactly how Mark tells it, the story of Jesus is already moving. It begins with an announcement that is like a rupture in the universe, like a lion’s thundering roar: “The beginning of the good news.” And this gospel moves like a lion pacing in a cage, a barely contained and powerful energy that is always impatient to move onto the next scene, immediately, a favorite word of Mark, the language itself rough and abrupt. You’ve perhaps seen the traditional symbols associated with each of the four evangelists. Mark’s, of course, is the lion. It tears onto the scene, wild and hairy. When it roars and you can see its teeth.

Maybe I have these active images on my mind because of the AED training I attended last week, right here, after church, which got me thinking in a sensory way. Warning: this is not a tame story. A small group sat around a table as David Hall demonstrated how to use our new defibrillating device, which delivers a shock of energy to a person whose heart has stopped beating. David showed us the different components of the device, and he warned us that offering life-saving care is messy and physical.

We trainees were a little confused about one of the components in the accessories to the kit, a razor. “You might need it,” David said, “When you are trying to affix this very sticky side of the shock administrator to a particularly hairy man—you might need to shave him, first. Or there’s another way.” We were a little befuddled by all of this. We asked, “If someone’s heart has stopped beating, we’ll have time to stop and shave them?” David said, “Well, as I mentioned there is another way, which is why there’s this back-up set of adhesives. You put the first set on, and if they’re just sticking to hair, you rip ‘em off, then affix the next set on the now smooth surface.”

We all cringed a bit at that. I cringe a bit, too, that I just told that story from the pulpit. I cringe at this idea of ripping, cringe at the roughness of this gospel message, this appearance of John the Baptist, this hairy messenger, not much tame about him either, nor about his call for repentance, and confession. John preaches a sermon with teeth. Here’s a preacher who is bold to say, “Sometimes you just have to rip the band aid off.” Ouch. And, yes.

Much as we might cringe, I think there’s a part of us that also nods. It’s a tough image, but a true one. Sometimes you need to rip the band aid off, uncover and take a look at what’s underneath, even if it’s painful. We know we need to hear it. There’s a part of us that wants to hear it, like all the people who come to hear John, we are listening for that voice in the wilderness, we are crowding to hear someone who will name this truth aloud, this announcement that there is something terribly off in the world. There are mountains and valleys of difference

between rich and poor. There are crooked politicians and judicial systems. There's a callous roughness towards those who are most vulnerable. We look around us and we see that.

We look inside us, and we see it, too. This may be harder to name. It's easy to rattle off the problems with the world, and all the other people in it. But if we are truthful, we know that we are part of the problem. When we look inside ourselves, we can see the mountains and valleys of our up and down inconstancy, a lack of trust which threatens communal life and well-being. If we let ourselves take the easy route of cynicism, if we shun the higher road of commitment, what hope is there for our institutions, sacred and secular? Church, government, family, education?

If we are truthful, if we look inside, we can see the crooked ways we use words; twisting phrases, dropping half-truths, saying one thing to one person, another to another.

If we are truthful, we can see the rough ways we treat people, even those closest to us, our callousness towards our neighbors or coworkers, our roughness with our mothers, our sisters, our sons.

The voice in the wilderness cries. "The valleys shall be exalted, and the mountains made low; the crooked straight; and the rough places plain." Prepare the way. Confess. Repent. Which sometimes means, "Rip the band aid off."

Will it hurt? Yes. But not as much as if you pull it off slowly. That hurts even more.

What's more, if you don't ever pull it off, it might not heal.

A friend of mine's fiancée had to have twelve stitches put into his chin on Thanksgiving. He took an unfortunate misstep while carrying a large pan of food, and did a face plant onto its metal edges. Ouch. He's got bandages all over the bottom of his face, and it's very tender. He's reluctant to move the bandages, but the doctor says he needs to, otherwise it might get infected. Sometimes you need to rip off the bandage, so that light can get in, so that air can get in.

That's the message of John the Baptist, too: Prepare the way. Prepare the way for healing. Rip off the band aid, so that the light of the World, Jesus, can get in. Rip off the band aid so that the fresh air of the Holy Spirit can get in. You risk things getting worse, you just might die, until you do.

If you know and love or are someone who has struggled with addiction and gone through rehab, you know that's what it is: a ripping off the band aid, a sudden exposure of all one's wounds, self-inflicted, other inflicted. People only go into rehab when their ways of coping with a terrible world are no longer tenable, when those terrible ways of coping can no longer be covered up. People go into rehab when they confess, "I need help." Their hearts have all but stopped, they need emergency measures to live. Sometimes, as with AED devices, you have to rip things up to save a life.

That's the message of John the Baptist, at the beginning of Mark, that's the truth we are crowding to hear: that we all need help. John the Baptist preached it with power, but he was nothing compared to the one who was coming after him. Someone whom John would baptize, and when he did, this gospel says, the heavens tore open. Someone at whose death the curtain of the Temple tore in two. Someone who took emergency measures to restore us to life.

In the theological allegory of C. S. Lewis, writer of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, that someone takes the shape of a lion, Aslan. Powerful, beautiful, affectionate—but in the words of Lewis, "he is not a tame lion."

It is not a tame world.

But God has torn open the heavens and come down—in the beginning of the good news of good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.