

“Gratitude and Courage”
Isaiah 43:1-7; Mark 1:1-13
Baptism of the LORD
1.9.22
West End Presbyterian Church
Sermon #5

Isaiah 43:1-7 NRSV

- 1 But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
- 2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
- 3 For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

I give Egypt as your ransom,
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.

4 Because you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you,

I give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life.

5 Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;

6 I will say to the north, “Give them up,”
and to the south, “Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away
and my daughters from the end of the earth—

7 everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.”

The Word of God for the People of God! **Thanks be to God!**

Mark 1:1-13 NRSV

1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,

who will prepare your way;

3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight,’”

4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **5** And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river

Jordan, confessing their sins. **6** Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. **7** He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. **8** I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. **10** And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. **11** And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. **13** He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

The Word of God for the People of God! **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I love Mark's Gospel. I think you already knew that, but I LOVE Mark's Gospel. There is no backstory of Jesus. There is no dramatic birth narrative. There is no story of Jesus as a boy. There is nothing about Mary and Joseph's journey. No wise men. Simply this:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The only background we get is Isaiah's prophetic words quoted in verse 2 and IMMEDIATELY, John the Baptizer is on the scene. John is a strange man who hangs out near the river and tells

people to turn around from their wicked ways and turn to God! He's strange not only because he hangs out baptizing people in the water, but he acts like a fool dressed up in camel's hair wearing a leather belt around his waist as well as eating honey and wild locusts!

Mark doesn't waste time. Mark gets right down to business. And this Gospel, the oldest of the four, doesn't give us a refined picture of anything. This gospel presents humanity in all its humanness: The good, the bad, the ugly, and the downright gross. And Jesus is very much not only the Son of God, but also the Son of Humanity. There is also a secret throughout the Gospel that Jesus is the Messiah and the disciples don't get it. Also, there are TONS of conjunctions in Mark: Suddenly, immediately, then, and, so, but, ect. I'm not sure the number of conjunctions, but if anyone wants to

read Mark in one sitting, you can count them up and get back to me. It won't take long to read.

But, more than talking about why you should read Mark and why it should be your favorite Gospel, there is something more happening here and you may miss it. And once you find it, Mark makes more sense. There is the moment in between verses 9 and 11 when Jesus is baptized and something in the heavens happens. The other Gospels either say “the heavens opened up” or merely “the Spirit rested on Jesus like a dove”, but Mark does something that is distinct to this Gospel. The heavens are torn apart.

Let me say that again: The heavens are torn apart! They don't merely open. Something doesn't just leisurely walk on through the

heavens down to earth. THE HEAVENS ARE TORN APART!

What does that mean? What would that possibly look like?

And after Jesus is baptized, the Holy Spirit immediately drives him into the wilderness where he must encounter wild beasts and have nothing but angels to tend to him.

Why does any of this matter? Why does Mark have an urgency?

Why can't we have more drama to the story? Why does it matter that the heavens are torn apart?

Well, it's what Rev. Dr. Brian Blount at Union Presbyterian Seminary says that sums up this Gospel nicely: God is on the loose.

God is on the loose! That is what permeates Mark's Gospel. "God is on the loose" is the foreground, background, within, without, inside, and outside of the text. It only takes ten verses to make that explicit statement in Mark, but, it goes back to the beginning:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God!

And God is on the loose in verse two when God sent the prophets ahead of Jesus to prepare the way! And God is on the loose within that strange man who hangs out baptizing folks in the river: John the Baptizer. And God is on the loose in the water and on Jesus as the heavens are torn apart at our Savior's baptism! And God is on the loose when the Spirit IMMEDIATELY drives Jesus out into the wilderness to confront the wild beasts and rely on angels to help him!

God is on the loose!

I think we've become accustomed to the way things are or keep hoping for some sort of resurgence of the romanticized past that never existed, yet we foolishly wait for it to come back. We lose sight of the truth that God is on the loose and God is always up to something! Instead of trusting in the One who tears the heavens apart just to be with us, we cling to the past. Instead of trusting in the Savior who was driven by the Spirit to face the wilderness and all the terror that comes with it, we stay in our own bubbles and want someone else to do the work for us. Instead of trusting the Spirit who leads people to doing things in new and exciting ways, we immediately say "We've never done it that way" and treat those people as a threat to our way of life! Instead of living our lives with intelligence, imagination, and love, we live with blissful ignorance,

complacency, and our own dangerous illusions that we are in control of everything.

Last March, I led a study over the *Confession of 1967*. I won't go into too much detail about its origins right now, but, as you can guess, it was created in 1967 and is a product of the United Presbyterian Church (USA), which is the northern branch that later reunified with the southern branch to become what we know today as the Presbyterian Church (USA). And if you remember your history, 1967 was not a peaceful time in the United States, much like today. Vietnam and the Civil Rights Movement are but a sampling of what was going on during that time.

During last year's study, someone in the group pointed out the very paragraph we will state together in a moment as our Affirmation of Faith. More importantly, though, this person lifted up one sentence:

Life is a gift to be received with gratitude and a task to be pursued with courage.

Once the person pointed this out, I was stunned. Those words hit me in the gut. We had just come out of a horrible year and 2021 was in the midst of making 2020 look like a Sunday School picnic.

Life is a gift to be received with gratitude. Life is a task to be pursued with courage. Life is a gift. Life is a task. Gratitude. Courage.

There is gratitude in today's verses from Mark. With gratitude, Jesus came to the Jordan to be baptized by John. With courage,

Jesus was driven out into the wilderness to experience unimaginable things. With gratitude, the authors of the *Confession of 1967* responded to the Spirit's call on their lives to create this beautiful document the Presbyterian Church (USA) has incorporated into the *Book of Confessions*. With courage, the authors of this confession called out humanity, particularly Christians, for living out their lives that did not reflect the love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

How do we live our lives with gratitude and pursue our lives with courage when God is on the loose? It's certainly not becoming a deacon or elder just to keep a chair warm. And if that's anyone's plans today, I suggest you find something else to do with your time so the rest of us can discern the Spirit's will for West End Presbyterian Church. How do we live our lives with gratitude and pursue our lives with courage when God is on the loose? It's

certainly not sitting in the pew complaining to others that you can do it better by not offering anything except loud, angry noises and distracting everyone else from listening to the Spirit's leading. How do we live our lives with gratitude and pursue our lives with courage when God is on the loose? It's certainly not building our own comfortable places so we can avoid the wilderness the Spirit is driving us into and pretend there aren't any wild beasts out there or claim that the angels cannot minister to us like they did for Jesus! Living our lives with gratitude and pursuing our lives with courage is supporting each other even when we may not agree on the solution. With gratitude and courage, we take a look at ourselves in the mirror and say: Thank you, God, for another day! What do you have in store for me now?!?

Gratitude and courage. It takes a lot of guts to say thank you, especially when times are uncertain. It also takes a lot of guts to go

out into the wilderness that is 2022 and face it with courage knowing that there are some wild beasts out there.

With gratitude, we say “Thank you, God!” With courage, we say “God, protect us in this wilderness as we face these wild beasts!”

If you’re looking for an easy, feel good answer about how to live your best lives now, you won’t find it here. However, if you, Deacons, Elders, and all of you who call West End Presbyterian Church your home, are ready to venture out into a place that only God knows about, then you’re about to undertake a wild, unexpected, yet Holy Spirit-driven journey.

God is on the loose, friends. Together may we say with gratitude:
“Thank you God!” May we also courageously ask: “Where to,
God?”

Beloved in Christ, trust this Good News!

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the
Sustainer. Amen.