

Chris Currie  
Text: Mark 1:9-15  
Sermon: Child of the Covenant  
February 18, 2024

Mark 1:9-15

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

<sup>12</sup> And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. <sup>13</sup> He was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him.

<sup>14</sup> Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God <sup>15</sup> and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Let's face it...we have had a lot to keep up with in the past weeks so if you missed the 'Jesus, he gets us,' commercials that aired during the Super Bowl, one can be forgiven. According to David French's op-ed in the New York Times this week, 'the ad came from a group called He Gets Us, which is running a multimillion-dollar ad campaign with the aim of essentially reintroducing America to Jesus.' I have seen some of the ads and have my own mixed feelings and not surprisingly so do a lot of people. And guess what, it's gotten political. Surprise. French writes that for starters, 'there's the entirely fair question of whether it's appropriate for Christians to spend large sums of money on an ad campaign when it could be spent instead on, for instance, providing food or shelter to those in need.' Plus, the ads have been criticized by those on the left because some of the funders, which include a founder of Hobby Lobby, note that this same group have funded conservative Christian legal causes.' But the religious right are also furious about the ads, calling the ads 'heretical, adding an expletive, and saying, 'putting out an ad that invites narcissistic, prideful, unrepentant sinners to come and get their feet washed is bad actually.'

Whatever we may think about the ads and their motivations, French points us to the point made by a writer and podcaster named Kaitlyn Schiess who calls attention to the provocative nature of the ads because they prod us by asking 'are you willing to risk shame and isolation for loving those on

the other side of the political and religious aisle? Are you, like Jesus, willing to love others even if it causes people (sometimes your own fellow travelers), to hate and question you? Are you willing to love others even if they haven't repented of what you believe to be grievous sins?"<sup>1</sup> I think many of us probably have an allergic reaction to the 'Jesus is my boyfriend,' type religious music. Some of us for obvious aesthetical reasons, others of us for more theological taste and maybe a little bit of ecclesiastical snobbery, I admit, but then there is also because I think that there should be a healthy unsureness about the close presence of Christ that at times makes us uncomfortable and uneasy and not completely sure what it will mean for us to be swept up in the mystery, called to follow as disciples, asked to take risks and live with courage, and to work for truth and justice in ways that often swim upstream in the priorities of our world. Singing about a Jesus who affirms all our good feelings, never calls in to question any of our emotions or opinions, and affirms all our crackpot thoughts seems to resemble more of a god of our own making than the Jesus who shows up off the pages of scripture. There is something haunting, dangerous, risky, ominous about the presence of Jesus in our lives. Look at what happens to him in this passage. The Spirit drives, propels, prods him out into the wilderness; and he goes there for forty days where he was tempted by Satan, where he was surrounded by wild beasts; where angels waited on him. Now to me, that sounds like a dark night of the soul, to me that sounds adventurous but also a bit discomfiting and challenging and scary, to me there is struggle and wrestling and facing down demons, things that 'Jesus is my boyfriend' lyrics don't always get at it or reflect very well. In a weird way, scripture and especially the gospel of Mark in particular, puts before us a Jesus who makes us feel less familiar, less predictable, and less comfortable in his presence than we might wish for.

WH Auden the ruffled British poet puts it this way in these stanzas from the *For the Time Being*:

A Christmas Oratorio:

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<sup>1</sup> David French, 'The Meaning of the Super Bowl 'He Gets Us' Ad, in the New York Times, February 15, 2024.

“He is the Way.

Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;

You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.

Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;

You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.

Love Him in the World of the Flesh;

And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.”

In spite of our efforts to turn Lent into a season of fasting and giving things up, in many ways it serves as a reminder that the Christian life and the life of discipleship is about pilgrimage, setting out, having unexpected things happen along the way, finding our lives enriched by our traveling companions, and believing life is about a larger holy pilgrimage than a life bracketed by our birth and our death.

The floats and theme of Tuesday’s Rex Parade was inspired by the writer Lafcadio Hearn, a 19th century writer who lived in Cincinnati, New Orleans, and later in Japan, and who died in the West Indies. The two main places in the world that remembered Hearn fondly and read his literature were Japan and New Orleans, partly because those two places were where he lived and worked for the longest seasons of his life. One of the quotations from the Times Picayune that made Hearn a hero here goes like this: ‘Writing from New Orleans, Hearn acknowledged the city’s many shortcomings, but, he said, “It is better to live here in sackcloth and ashes than to own the whole state of Ohio.” Sackcloth and ashes. Wearing a hair shirt and giving up meat or equating our faith with austerity is often how we think of Lent. But I wonder if the themes taken from Auden’s poem about Jesus work better. Reminding us that faith is not about staying still or at least staying static, but following after Jesus in a world often

in crisis but also being able to see the unique opportunities and adventures that present themselves to those in the presence of Christ.

Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety. Technological advancement, Artificial Intelligence, and our own cultural affluence have helped us progress and reach levels of autonomy and self-sufficiency unparalleled and yet at the very same time we are experiencing elevated anxiety to more than 40% of our population, increasing suicide rates that have continued to elevate no matter our progress and prosperity. We seem to thrive best, in spite of all our progress, when we are dependent creatures who need to ask for help, who rely on the gifts of others, who share each other's burdens and each other's resources. I have always been struck by the fact that the highest percentage of per capita charitable giving among Americans was recorded during the Great Depression, not during times of abundance and financial prosperity. We were our most generous in a time of scarcity and challenge and uncertainty about the future. Seek him in the Kingdom of Anxiety.

The final Auden admonition to us is to follow Jesus in the world of flesh and to find joy and dance for joy in the finitude of our lives. Following Jesus should not be about trying to look serious or turn faith into something self-important and overly serious, but should be marked by occasions for joy, especially during these days of Lent. In the gospel of John, Jesus first miracle is not a healing or a restoration or even a casting out of a demon like Mark. He does not feed five thousand or cleanse an unclean person or raise a dead person, he turns water into wine. He does something frivolous and unnecessary. The party is winding down; and he takes the water set aside for ritual purity and gives them a deeper use. Rather than wasting the water trying to create the image of cleanliness and untainted wholeness, Jesus takes the water and blesses it and distributes it so that the occasion for joy is enriched and can continue on indefinitely. That is what happens when the kingdom of God comes near. People find an opportunity to rejoice in the life together they share in Christ and offer the world an invitation to join in the joy of the banquet.

When my siblings and I were young children and probably even adolescents, when we did something to get in trouble, which happened from time to time, one of my parents, probably to keep from landing on a curse word would exclaim and groan, 'child of the covenant,' the same thing we say to a child at their baptism. To be a child of the covenant is not necessary to create or own future or to be a prisoner of our past, it is to follow Jesus, to trust that in the life of Jesus we see the truth of our own, and to receive in the presence of Jesus the community of people that Jesus refuses to be Jesus without. To be a child of the covenant is to give up thinking that life is all about preserving our jars of our self-righteous ritual purity over in the corner, and instead watching Jesus empty them before our eyes and turn them into something better that enriches the whole community and brings everyone joy.

So this Lent child of the covenant and children of the covenant, follow Jesus there.