

The Time is Fulfilled

Mark 1:9-15

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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The gospel of Mark is thought by most biblical scholars to be earliest of the four gospels written, perhaps three to four decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Mark has a lot of similarities with Matthew and Luke (not so much John), but it has a few important differences, as well.

The beginning, for example. Matthew begins with a long genealogy. Luke begins with the birth prophecies and narratives of John the Baptist and Jesus. The gospel of John begins with dense theology — “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Mark begins in the wilderness.

The wilderness is an interesting place to start a story. As one commentator put it, it’s a location that “implies a vote of non-confidence in the current arrangement of the world.”¹

(Does that resonate with anyone these days?)

Then (and probably, to a certain extent now) people went to the wilderness to escape the degradation and corruption of the world. To get away from the noise. To focus on what mattered. To embrace hardship. To obtain clarity and resolve on one’s vocation. To encounter God. To hear God speak.

This is why many people to this day try to embrace some form of spiritual discipline or self-denial during the season of Lent. It’s a “wilderness” kind of pursuit, an attempt to strip the clutter in order to see God and God’s purposes more clearly.

¹ Stanley P. Saunders, “Exegetical Perspective on Mark 1:9-15” in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 45.

This is where we first encounter Jesus in Mark's gospel. Not in idyllic manger scenes (which probably never matched our Christmas ideals), not running off with his family to Egypt, not even as a precocious young scholar frustrating his parents by wandering off to the temple in Jerusalem.

In Mark, we meet Jesus as an adult, in the wilderness.

Another unique feature of Mark is that of all the gospel writers, Mark seems the most in a hurry. He can't be bothered with Jesus' birth or childhood. He wants to go right where the action is. He gets right to Jesus' three-year ministry. He can't wait to get to the good news part of the story.

A lot happens in the seven short verses of our reading today. I want to focus very briefly on the three "scenes" in our gospel text this morning.

First, Jesus is baptized. On the surface, this is a head-scratcher. If baptism is linked to repentance for one's sins, what does this have to do with Jesus? Is Jesus not the spotless Lamb of God? The sinless one? Why would he need to be baptized?

The answer seems to be that this baptism scene is for our sake, not Jesus'.

In this baptism, Jesus is identifying fully with sinful humanity. He is modelling obedience to the will of God, showing us the way, leading by example.

He is embracing his unique role as the chosen one of God, the One sent to reclaim and redeem fallen human beings.

This is reflected in the descent of the Holy Spirit and the divine voice: *You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased.*

He is, in a sense, taking on our condition, and beginning the process of redeeming it.

Second, he is tempted.

In the verses immediately following Jesus' baptism, Jesus is thrust further out into the wilderness. The divine voice from heaven has barely finished speaking, when we read these words :

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him (Mark 1:12-13).

Mark is skimpy on the details (Matthew and Luke fill out the story of the specific nature of the temptations). But at the very least, we see that divine favour evidently does not entail the absence of struggle, even suffering.

We should pay attention to this.

There is a symbolic aspect to Jesus' sojourn in the desert. His forty days in the wilderness is a re-enactment of Israel's forty years between the exodus from Egypt and their entrance into the land of promise. Jesus is faithful where Israel was not. This is part of the point of this passage.

But it's not *just* about symbolism. It also reveals an important truth about the spiritual life more generally. It does not come without hardship.

Indeed, sometimes being faithful to God's call in our lives takes us straight into struggle.

It is the wilderness places where we come to the end of ourselves, where we realize that our resources are insufficient for the task of becoming all we were created to be, where we sometimes even feel abandoned and alone and our souls pant for the living water of God.

These are the places where God is at work, refining us, restoring us, repurposing us, ministering to us, and delivering us.

Which brings us to the third thing that happens in these seven verses.

He begins to proclaim the good news of God. He says three things:

- the time is fulfilled.
- the kingdom of God has come near
- repent and believe in the good news.

"The time is fulfilled," Jesus says. I spent some time dwelling on that word this week. "Fulfilled."

The Greek word, as usual, has a range of meanings.

- to fill to the top: so that nothing shall be wanting
- to consummate
- to make complete in every particular,
- to render perfect
- to carry through to the end

What does it mean to apply these meanings to the word “time,” whether Jesus’ time or our own?

Jesus is clearly not saying, “Well, that’s it, show’s over, everything’s done that needs to be done.” He’s only just beginning his public ministry, after all.

His time will be filled with many things — healing, teaching, delivering, challenging, provoking, forgiving, causing divisions, confusing, liberating. And ultimately, of course, dying and rising to new life.

Equally obviously the kingdom of God has not yet come in fullness in our time. God’s will is not yet done on earth as in heaven.

Jesus clearly has something else in mind when he says, “the time is fulfilled.”

As you may know, there are two Greek words for “time,” *kairos* and *chronos*.

While *chronos* refers to chronological or sequential time, *kairos* signifies a time in between, a moment of indeterminate time in which something special happens—it means something like “the right moment” or “a critical moment” or “an opportune moment.”

I doubt it will surprise you that the word Mark uses in this text is *kairos* not *chronos*.

It is a very specific, opportune, critical moment that has been “fulfilled.” God’s story has made a decisive turn, and the world will never be the same.

God will forever now be known as the God most fully revealed in Jesus Christ.

There is a sense in which all *chronos* is now subsumed under God's *kairos*. Our chronological days are lived underneath and within the reality that God's decisive time has come.

And so repent. And believe. These are the only two instructions Jesus gives to those gathered in the wilderness. And these are the instructions he gives to us who are gathered on this First Sunday of Lent, 2024.

Repent: turn around, rearrange, and reorient your perspective and your lives according to God's good news. Let the time you are given be fulfilled by God's decisive intervention into all time.

Believe. Trust fully that God's kingdom has come and will come again in fullness, that Jesus is the Saviour of the world.

One final word. All three of the events that happen in these seven short verses of Mark operate on at least two levels.

First, they serve as kind of template for us. Jesus gives us an example to follow.

We must be baptized,
We must resist temptation.
We must embrace the good news of the kingdom.

But second, and more importantly, they reveal Jesus doing for humanity what we can never fully do for ourselves.

He is baptized on our behalf, taking on our sin.
He resists the devil where we and all of humanity fail.
He is the good news of God's salvation that we cannot achieve on our own.

As we take our first steps into the season of Lent and our journey toward the cross, let us never forget that our seeking to follow of Jesus' example always takes place in the broader context of Christ's finished work on our behalf.

Amen.



