

## **Come Up**

Mark 1:9-15

February 18, 2024 First Sunday of Lent *Series What are you UP to?*

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*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.*

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

*Mark 1:9-15*

The season of Lent. Certainly not a focus for most of our culture. I have not seen any Lent greeting cards from Hallmark. What are your associations with Lent?

We talked about this at our session meeting on Monday night and I have asked a few others during the week around the Ash Wed. service. For some people, they had friends and neighbors who were Catholic. The tradition has been to give up something you love for Lent as a spiritual discipline and eat fish on Fridays. For early followers of Jesus, the 6 weeks or 40 days before Lent was a time of preparation to be baptized on Easter Sunday. Lent was a season of prayer, of repentance, of fasting, of study. To deepen heart and head knowledge about committing to Christ and living in community of faith.

This year I talked with our Worship Committee and Liturgical Arts Committee about some ideas and resources for Lent. And as you have seen and heard, we chose "What are you UP to? What is God is up to?" It grew out of Marcia McFee's resource from Worship Design Studio. She looked at the scripture passages from the gospel lessons for Lent. As she began to study the lectionary readings, I kept seeing the word "up" show up. And the phrase "what are you up to?" popped into my head several times.

It felt like a juxtaposition to what we usually do in Lent — give something up! So I began to read the scriptures from this viewpoint. What is Jesus encouraging us to be up to? So the series was born out of her love of word-play, the desire to see Lent in a different way, and also acknowledge that spiritual practice is also about active participation in the world, for the sake of the world.

But being “up to something” can also be construed as “you aren’t doing enough.” Instead, my hope is we as a congregation can see the small things we are up to and can do. Small practices, or micro-practices, are actually the only way that most big things happen.

Finding “practices” that elevate our spirit can sometimes simply be a more intentional minute of reflection about something that shows up already in our lives. To be “up to something” may be simply raising up our awareness of what is important, what is precious, what is necessary for a life that feels gratifying. It can also mean raising our awareness of those things that don’t feel life-giving and giving them up “for good.”

We ask our friends, “what are you up to these days?” It is a playful question when we ask it this way. Lent is a little like that. It is a time when we go inward to assess “what’s up” in there so that the outward-facing life we lead is fueled and supported by a deep inner spiritual well. When we get up to something, it is because we ourselves have deemed that this “something” is worth our heightened attention — not that we are trying to reach some height that someone else set for us.

“Are you up to it?” There are times when we just don’t feel up to much. Life’s circumstances can take a toll. Maybe what we are up to is preparing and pruning. What would you prune in your life to spend more quality and quantity of time with the most important people and activities? Small steps. A season of reflecting, seeking healing, remembering who we are, beloved.

And I am grateful for the ways people in our congregation are up to good in the community. The Spirit is at work in the world through us – kindness, education, food, spiritual resources.

So let’s look at our first biblical story of exploring what Jesus is up to.

The first Sunday of this series brings us to the moment at which Jesus comes up out of the waters of baptism to hear, “You are my beloved.” We are called to come up out of the depths of whatever seeks to keep us under and know that we are beloved of God. Come up, for now is the time to be fully who you are created to be for the sake of the world.

In the early church, the journey toward new life, toward transformation, began with baptism, and they often built baptismal fonts in the shape of tombs. So, with the baptism of Jesus, we get into this archetypal pattern - life, death, and resurrection, right at the beginning of Lent. From an evolutionary perspective, when we consciously participate in this process, we evolve toward a fuller and deeper expression of what it means to be human.

In the passage, Jesus’ journey in the wilderness is right after his Baptism. After Jesus “comes up” out of the waters, he is sent out to be tested. The thing about Baptism is that we have to “go down” in order to “come up.” For us to come up as people of faith, where do you think

God is calling us to "go down?" What places do we need to be witnesses to pain and suffering? What situations in our neighborhood is God calling us to live out compassion and service?

As I was reading and studying this passage, I read a great piece in *The Christian Century* by Elizabeth Felicetti. She writes - (2)

Sometimes I wish I could engage in a writing workshop with Mark so I could critique his biblical accounts. Your readers need more detail, I would tell him. We need scenes. I'd especially like to offer him feedback on his report of Christ's temptation in the desert, which in Mark's short gospel comes in the early verses of the first chapter, whereas Matthew and Luke each wait to share this story until chapter 4. Mark describes the entire incident in one verse, while the other two synoptic gospels take 11 to 13.

Slow down, I could tell Mark. I understand that he was in a hurry because of the siege of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple in 70 AD, but for me as a writer, the magic happens in the revision, and Mark seems to have skipped that part in his haste to get his account into the world.

On the other hand, in his brevity Mark packs a punch with powerful verbs. During Jesus' baptism, Mark writes that the heavens are torn open. He deliberately evokes Isaiah 64:1, "Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down." The verb "tear" suggests a violent in-breaking, not a peaceful scene with a bird. With just one word, Mark accomplishes much with his listeners, showing that Christ is part of the thread of the unfolding story starting in the Hebrew scriptures.

After the brief baptism scene, Mark states that the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, while Luke says Jesus was "filled by" the Spirit and Matthew writes that the Spirit "led" him. While Mark may be short on scenes, the words he picks offer intrigue. Does being driven by the Spirit mean that Jesus does not enthusiastically embrace his time of testing? Would he have preferred to prepare for his public ministry in a different way? Does he resist going to the wilderness, necessitating a driving force?

And of course, the part about the Spirit driving Jesus into the wilderness is preceded by Mark's favorite word, *immediately*, an adverb he uses as much as the other three gospel writers combined. This marks the first appearance of immediately in Mark. After Jesus is baptized and hears he is Beloved, *the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. (v. 12)*

Mark's next verse encapsulates the entire 40-day period of testing, which both Matthew and Luke spend several verses depicting, including dialogue with the devil. Mark uses the word Satan, while the other two say "the devil." While I miss the scenes with the devil in Matthew and Luke, I'm intrigued by Mark's use of Satan.

Since I can't offer Mark feedback, and because of his few, carefully chosen words, his gospel lends itself to imaginative rumination.

Does John the Baptist notice the tearing open of the heavens? How could he miss something so violent? And if the Spirit immediately drives Jesus into the wilderness, does that mean right after he comes up from the waters, while his robe is still wet? Does John stand in the water under torn-apart heavens staring at Jesus being driven away, or does he just move right on to the next person in line? Is there anyone else waiting to be baptized? Mark doesn't say.

And why Satan, which means "adversary," instead of the devil? Satan certainly evokes Job, and maybe that's what Mark was going for. If so, I want to know more. Is the testing like the scenes in Matthew and Luke, or is it more Job-like? Job never interacts with Satan directly.

And what is it with the wild beasts? Are they friendly to Jesus? Wild beasts in the wilderness don't sound friendly to me, even if Jesus is some kind of beast charmer. I imagine them in Satan's employ, menacing Jesus over the 40 days. Is Jesus scared of the wild beasts? Does he hide from them? Hurl rocks at them? Does he slay any of them?

Finally, the angels waiting on Jesus: this detail is in Matthew as well. What strikes me most is that the verb *wait on* comes from is the same root word for *deacons*. I think of the deacons in our church. Gifts of caring, compassion, attending to needs. I see this waiting on Jesus as gentle, as serving. And offering care to leave the wilderness when he was able so that he could begin his ministry in Galilee.

I wonder how Mark would respond to me in a writing workshop. Maybe he would tell me that leaving so much to my imagination was his goal.

Today as we begin this journey through Lent, may we let this story of Jesus baptism and time in the wilderness find a place in our imagination. And may it be an invitation. Where in our lives are we feeling we have gone down, are feeling the weight of worry or fear? What small steps are we taking to come up, to hear & know we are beloved by God, to do acts of kindness, to give time or money to lift someone else come up? And if we feel like we are in the wilderness, may we be open to angels and the presence of Holy Mystery to be with us and then invite us back to hope, to grace, to serving our neighbors near and far. Amen.

1) Dr. Marcia McFee, Lent 2024 What Are You UP to?, Worship Design Studio, overview materials  
[https://0w66mekd.pages.infusionsoft.net/?inf\\_contact\\_key=da1bfa6e16ebf53498ff1c55a20ea4f8680f8914173f9191b1c0223e68310bb1](https://0w66mekd.pages.infusionsoft.net/?inf_contact_key=da1bfa6e16ebf53498ff1c55a20ea4f8680f8914173f9191b1c0223e68310bb1)

2) Elizabeth Felicetti, February 18, Lent 1B (Mark 1:9–15), Christian Century  
<https://www.christiancentury.org/lectionary/february-18-lent-1b-mark-1-9-15>