

SERMON for Sunday, March 5, 2006
 Genesis 9:8-17, Mark 1:9-15
 First Sunday in Lent

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 Madison, Wisconsin

You Can Count on Me

Tonight, the night of the Academy Awards, with all its glitz and glam, all the hype of Hollywood. Will you watch? Will you get caught up in the drama about the dramas? Or will you watch it for a bit just to see what's so great, and doze off before the final Best Picture award? Don't worry, you will find out tomorrow. Meanwhile, most of us don't need to live our lives on someone else's drama. We have our own. Name the subjects of movies, and you will name real-life situations: an auto accident, homosexual love, mental illness, estranged sisters, torn-apart marriage, war, violence erupting over drugs, birth of unwanted babies and unwanted death. Scenes of our lives, scenes of life the world around enlarged and played on the big screen, replayed in our homes and communities. Who needs movies?

Many movies have been made of the life of Jesus, the most recent and high-profile being the one of death and resurrection two years ago by Mel Gibson, *The Passion of the Christ*. That one alone engendered much criticism, critical acclaim, and a huge box-office. It was, of course, an interpretation, a take-off on Biblical material. Who could have known exactly what the details of those three days more than two thousand years ago were like? But film has the power to draw us in, to make words come to life, to catch us up into swirling emotions and action.

The gospel writer Mark writes the story of Jesus' life and ministry, his death and resurrection, as if he were planning to shoot a movie. Remember, Mark is the shortest and believed to be the earliest gospel, the whole story of the life of Jesus told in an abridged version. In the seven verses we read today, there are seven scenes: first, Jesus emerged from Nazareth, out of nowhere; second, Jesus was baptized in the river; third, the heaven was torn open and a dove descended; fourth, God's voice sounded from heaven; fifth, Jesus was pushed into the wilderness; sixth, Jesus was with the wild animals and attended by angels; and the seventh and last scene, Jesus begins his ministry and preaches his first sermon. In these seven short verses, in these seven scenes of action, the gospel writer packs a lot of meaning about the Messiah, the Savior of the world. It is a great drama of immense proportion. Certainly, there are many details of the story that are left out, details we know from some of the other accounts in other gospels. But there is also a single theme that strings these verses together, a theme in addition to the biographical one. Although there are seven verses, and seven bits of action, there are really only three major acts: the baptism, the wilderness sojourn, the beginning of ministry. And the constant thread that is over and within each is the constant presence of God. "You are my Son, the beloved" and "the angels waited on him" and "the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near".

I was reading a collection of illustrations on this text and came across a rather humorous take on the baptism of Jesus. The small Baptist church way down in the low country of North Carolina was conducting its quarterly baptism, and since it was summertime, it was doing the baptism in St. Claire's Creek, which flows into the Tar River and has beautiful, clear, slightly tea-colored clean water. One of the Cartwright boys, the mischievous, bad Cartwright boys, was being baptized, and when the preacher pushed him under, he held him down about twenty or thirty seconds because he needed a good baptism. When the preacher brought him up, he said,

'Have you seeeeeen Jesus?' The Cartwright boy sputtered, and the preacher pushed him under again and held him down about twenty seconds, and when he brought him up he said, 'Have you seeeeeen Jesus?' The Cartwright boy sputtered again, and the preacher dunked him under again, hoping the youngster would finally get the message that he needed to be come clean of all his sinful ways. And when he brought him up, for the third time, the preacher said, 'Have you seeeeeen Jesus?' And the Cartwright boy, breathless and sputtering, said, 'Are you sure this is where he went in?' What happens in the baptism of Jesus? What happens in ours? Is it that we are trying to find Jesus, or that God is finding us? When that voice from heaven came to say 'You are my Son, the beloved', with those words Jesus was claimed and named as God's chosen and anointed one. With these words Jesus was appointed and called as Messiah, and his ministry was empowered. As depicted by the dove, the Spirit of God hovered over him as it would throughout his life, and we see a dramatic vision of heaven touching earth.

Act two of today's gospel is Jesus' time in the wilderness, which we usually read in more detail from the gospels of Matthew and Luke, in which it is described that Jesus faced great temptation, to turn stones into loaves to bread, to claim political authority, to be somehow rescued from a mid-air plunge from a high mountain. In Mark there is no such detail, only that Jesus faced temptation, perhaps faced his own deepest fears, his own insecurities, his own trepidation of what was to come. In this wilderness Jesus had time to think about the towns and cities where he would soon be preaching, and the needs of those places to hear about God's justice and peace. And he had time to think about the people he would meet, and the needs of those people for healing, for wholeness, for love and reconciliation. And he had time to think of the challenges he would face in a world that he knew was not ready to hear the good news, was not ready for the kingdom. For forty days, Jesus wrestled with the beasts within and without, and prayed.

We all know about wilderness, although we may not identify it as such. Pastor Michael Lindvall, in his book *The Christian Life: A Geography of God*, writes, "Among the patently true things about this [Christian] journey is that it will lead through deserts – fearsome places where wild beasts live. For all its sweetness, life also brings sorrow and disappointment, confusion and illness. Alone among God's creatures, we live knowing that we shall die. Set against the faith's dogged declaration of the goodness of God, these bitter passages ask ageless questions: if God is good, why do bad things happen? And more pragmatically: when they come, how can I find my way through?" We are always asking the question: What wilderness lies ahead for us? How will we find our way?

We might be tempted to say that whatever happens to us we can rather stoically chalk up as God's will, that somehow all of the human mess we have made of things is really not our responsibility, or that God's plan is for us to suffer to be more strong and sturdy, to confirm our faith. Some years ago, a young man named Alex Coffin died in a car accident in Boston. His father was William Sloane Coffin, then pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City. Thirteen days after he lost his son, he climbed into the pulpit and preached a sermon that began, "As almost all of you know, a week ago last Monday night, driving in a terrible storm, my son Alexander...who enjoyed beating his old man at every game and in every race, beat his father to the grave...When a person dies, there are many things that can be said, and there is at least one thing that should never be said. The night after Alex died, I was sitting in the living room of my sister's house outside Boston, when the front door opened and in came a nice-looking lady with about eighteen quiches. When she

saw me she shook her head, then headed for the kitchen, saying sadly over her shoulder, 'I just don't understand the will of God...' The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is, 'It is the will of God.' Never do we know enough to say that. My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over his sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break."

"And the angels waited on him..." No matter where we find ourselves, no matter what kind of places we find ourselves tempted to destructive behavior, no matter how lonely we are in a hospice bed or a hospital corridor, no matter how loaded up we are with worries about our aging parents or our partner's declining health, no matter how heavy the burden of job loss and an uncertain future, no matter how fearful we become over the tension and violence we see in the news and fearful for our own safety, God waits on us. Grace abounds, and angels will come and minister to us.

Let's not forget Act Three. After the high drama of baptism and wilderness, Jesus emerges and begins his ministry. He preaches of repentance, of forgiveness, of peace, of how God can make broken people whole and communities places of mutual respect and honesty, of justice and a reaching out to one another across barriers of social class, gender bias, and race. This, Jesus proclaims, is the kingdom of God. God has come to us, has touched humankind, in body and in Spirit, in flesh and in blood. And that is perhaps the greatest drama of all.

Popular author Anne Lamott writes in her book *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, about her struggles with her Christian journey. She writes, in a chapter about her angst over the world at war, "The best thing I've heard lately is the Christian writer Barbara Johnson's saying that we're Easter people, living in a Good Friday world. I don't have the right personality for Good Friday, for the crucifixion: I'd like to skip ahead to the resurrection. In fact, I'd like to skip ahead to the resurrection vision of one of the kids in our Sunday school, who drew a picture of the Easter Bunny outside the tomb: everlasting life, and a basket full of chocolates. Now you're talking. In Jesus' real life, the resurrection came two days later, but in our real lives, it can be weeks, years, and you never know for sure that it will come. I don't have the right personality for the human condition, either. But I believe in the resurrection, in Jesus', and in ours...What is there to do in such difficult, violent times? I am going to pray..."

As we enter this time of Lent, we are especially reminded that at the center of our life's drama, in every act, in every scene, is the cross. On the cross, God descends to the depth of human suffering and brokenness. On the cross, God declares that nothing, even death itself, will ever separate us from God's love. On the cross, the empty cross, we see the promise of God's presence. And that we can count on.

Thanks be to God. Amen.