

Proper 7B/Pentecost 4
Sunday, June 20, 2021
The Church of Saint Mary the Virgin
By the Reverend James Ross Smith
Job 38:1–11, 16–18; Psalm 107:23–32;
2 Corinthians 5:14–21; Mark 4:35–41

Jesus, newly baptized, is cast into the wilderness by the Spirit. He is not alone there: Like Adam and Eve in the Garden, he is “with the wild animals.” Like Adam and Eve, he is tested by Satan, who cannot defeat this new Adam, who is cared for by ministering angels, and who emerges from the wilderness to proclaim a kingdom, that Adam could never achieve: “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God and saying, ‘The time has been fulfilled, and the dominion of God has come near! Turn around, return, change your minds and believe in the good news!’” (Mark 1:14–15).¹

What is this kingdom, this dominion? Is it that mansion up there, in the heavenly places, that has been prepared for us?²

No, apparently not. Not for Mark and not for Jesus, as we see in the gospel readings these past two weeks.

¹ See Marcus, Joel, *Mark 1–8*, The Anchor Yale Library, vol. 27 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 167–171.

² John 14:2–4

Those readings are asking us to think of the kingdom, not as a place, a thing, a noun, but as something else, something that is more like a verb. One modern theologian puts it this way, “It is not the kingdom that is or will be in heaven, but the rule and the kingdom of the One who is in heaven. The kingdom of God is no territory . . . no region [with borders], but a condition, a situation, a mode of existence: that existence in which God, the lordship and divinity of God, is recognized as the all-decisive reality...and comes to completion in the life of human beings, individually and in community.”³

As some of us have been learning recently, 156 years ago, on June 19, 1865, Major General Gordon Granger of the Union Army, led a force of soldiers to Galveston, Texas, a center of Confederate resistance, and issued General Order No. 3. The order was clear: the Civil War was over; slavery had truly and finally come to an end, at least officially. Those were facts, though those facts were very late in coming to this Western outpost of the Confederacy. The Emancipation Proclamation had been issued two and a half years earlier. The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which abolished slavery, had been ratified on January 31; and General Gordon and his men had come to Texas, whether they understood this fully or

³ Fries, Heinrich, *Fundamental Theology*, trans. Robert J. Daly, S.J. (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 1996), p. 419.

not, to do their part to fulfill the promise of July 4, 1776: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

The events of June 19, 1865, have long been remembered by the members of the African-American community as Juneteenth. It was and is a day for celebration. But it is also just one more step on what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has called the “stony road” to freedom, a road that wends its way through Reconstruction, the violently enforced caste system of Jim Crow, segregation in North and South, the civil rights movement, and on to the events of the present moment.⁴ But, still, the joy of Juneteenth reminds us that along with the stumbling blocks on that stony road there have also been Spirit-filled moments of ingenuity, creativity, and triumph, achieved in the face every kind of resistance. The fabric of American culture would be something else entirely without the threads woven into it by African-American men and women. And, to my mind, one of the most important of those threads is a spiritual, a theological, thread. It is the clear understanding and deep belief that the kingdom is not a noun, but a verb, that redemption has come, is

⁴ Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019).

coming, and is still to come. We see this in the spirituals. For instance, both “Go Down, Moses” and “Wade in the Water” appropriate and interpret the events of the biblical Exodus to speak of past, present, and future all at once: “Wade in the water/Wade in the water, children/Wade in the water/God’s gonna trouble the water.” Here is the Exodus and Enslavement and the Red Sea Crossing, and Emancipation and Freedom and Holy Baptism and Freedom from Sin, and the faith that God is “gonna” continue to “trouble” those waters, not just in the past, but now, and also in the future. There is an instinctive understanding here that redemption is not just a past event and the kingdom is not just a place. God’s dominion is an action, a movement, an advent, an arrival, and a presence; and sometimes that presence is a judging, troubling, transforming presence. To believe in the kingdom is to believe that, despite the setbacks of the present moment, someday the Promised Land will be something more than just a promise.

In today’s gospel, we hear the next portion of Saint Mark’s testimony concerning the kingdom. In last week’s gospel⁵, we heard that God’s dominion is like a tiny mustard seed—apparently weak and insignificant, easy to miss—especially if you don’t have eyes to see—but, in the end, it is filled with an explosive power,

⁵ Mark 4:1–2a, 9–12, 26–34

capable of amazing growth, and able to achieve, despite its minuscule beginnings, a great and redeeming embrace.

This week we hear Mark's account of Jesus' Stilling of the Storm. There is no parable here. God's dominion is not *like* the sea. Here, the raging sea is an opponent. Mark probably intends us to be reminded of texts like Isaiah 51, "Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the LORD; awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago. Was it not thou that didst cut Rahab in pieces? . . . Was it not thou that didst dry up the sea, the waters of the great deep; that didst make the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over?" (51:9–10). The sea here is not the sea of our beach vacations or ocean cruises. It is a great and sometimes terrible force, created and controlled by God, but with a will of its own, capable of chaos and destruction: it is the great sea monster; it is Pharaoh and Egypt's threatening and terrible waters, defeated in the Exodus. It is the waters of baptism that both drown and save. It perhaps also represents all those who were persecuting Mark's small and fragile community. In today's gospel, on the most literal level, the sea is pure threat. The disciples are terrified. Their boat is filling up with water, and yet Jesus isn't afraid. He sleeps calmly, tucked away in the stern of the boat. Like the Lord in the Isaiah passage, Jesus is awakened. He rises and, not politely, silences

the raging sea. And then there is calm: and in that calm, Jesus asks a question that is meant not to soothe, but to challenge: “Why are you cowardly? Don’t you have faith yet?” (4:40, following Marcus’s translation). The passage ends with the disciples frightened, awestruck response, “*Who is this?*”⁶

So, in the end, Mark *is* telling us something about God’s dominion, just as last week’s parable did. He is answering the disciples’ question. He is telling us that Jesus is not just *like* the kingdom. He is something more than that. Jesus announces the kingdom, but he also *embodies* it. This story asks us to look at Jesus rising, rebuking, calming, and challenging and to see in him God’s saving power in action.

But the passage is meant to do something more. It means to wake us up, too. It invites us to ask ourselves: is it possible for me to be more courageous? Is it possible for me to have a faith strong enough to endure the terrible storm? Is it possible for me to see God alive and present and working in every moment of my life—on my own hard and stony road to freedom; in my regrets; in my returning, and repenting; in my joys and my triumphs? Am I brave enough to look at Jesus and see him rising, *rising*, confronting the enemy, and

⁶ Marcus, Joel, *Ibid.*, 335–40.

calming my fears? Do I dare to believe that, even now,
I live in the very presence of God?

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