

## **Mark 1:9-15 and 1 Peter 3:18-22**

### **Watch Where You Step!**

A good conscience. Those of you old enough to remember the Mickey Mouse Club might associate a good conscience with Jiminy Cricket who echoed Pinocchio when he said, "Always let your conscience be your guide."

We begin the season of Lent today with a complicated sentence from 1 Peter: All of God's saving work in history "prefigures" baptism—"not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

You might think of Lent—each annual Lent—as a sort of Mini Baptism. *We begin our life of discipleship at Baptism* when either we or our parents renounce evil.

*We begin Lent* by renouncing evil and repenting of our sin, just as in Baptism, and then trying to go through life-- from then onward-- in a way that is pleasing to God. Doing that is what the author of 1 Peter described "as appealing to God for a good conscience" which we know is possible because Jesus died so that his spirit might always be in us.

So for Christians, having a good conscience is preferable to having to appeal to God's word before making every decision. More and more, I think, as life speeds up, we need to be able to make split second decisions that are *right and just* and in accord with God's will.

We have to be able to rely on a good conscience. A good conscience is a God-conscience.

A good conscience is made up of a lifetime's worth of decisions that have been *right and just* in the eyes of the Lord. Not always easy decisions, but right and just ones. All of this adds up to God's saving work in the world.

For instance, God said to Noah, build an ark! Noah could have looked around at his neighborhood and middle-class friends and said, "You've got to be kidding!" And maybe he did. But he decided to build an ark, and it saved a remnant of the people for a new world.

Moses could have said to God, "Plant my staff in the ground and command the waters to open? What kind of hocus pocus is that, just when we have no time to spare?" But he did what God said, and the Israelites were delivered from slavery to freedom.

Jesus could have said to God, "You told me I'm sinless. Then why would I go to the river to be baptized by John?" But Jesus did. He entered the Jordan River, and the Spirit descended upon him, and today we are blessed with that same Spirit at our baptisms.

God pulls us closer and closer into his embrace every time we vote with our actions for what is God-ordained: what is good and beautiful and true. But remember that God, who loved us even before expecting anything of us, knows we'll get it wrong sometimes.

I used to think everyone was born with a good conscience, that everyone had an innate sense of right and wrong and a conscience that guided them, whether they defied it or not. I remember arguing that point with my mother as we sat sipping coffee at the kitchen table.

As an adult, having seen so much, my conviction has changed. A good conscience is developed. We have to pay attention to what we are doing, to where our steps are taking us. Sure, a good conscience can be developed apart from Jesus, but in Jesus we have a perfect life to observe and follow.

Both actions were consistent with God's saving ways.

But sin, especially the sin of pride, remains a problem, no matter how righteous we think we are. And sin can be sneaky.

So we see / in our Mark reading . . . although sin's delusional power is seen more obviously in the way the story is told in the other gospels . . . we still see that sin looks for all the world *like something we really want and need*.

And then we see that God sends Jesus right from the high of baptism to a one-on-one battle with sin personified. And that his battle doesn't stop there.

And we know / that is what life looks like for you and me, too. We too often find ourselves back in our ordinary, frustrating circumstances just after experiencing a mountaintop high, as Natalie spoke about last week.

Some would read the gospel of Mark and blame Satan for all the bad things that happen to Jesus in his short life, starting here at the beginning of his ministry. Later will come the contentious religious officials who will try to humiliate Jesus, defame him, even kill him . . . at every turn.

Does Jesus look on any of those as the one who makes him into The Man of Sorrows? Does he blame them as the source of all his struggles—for making his life so hard? Are these oppTosers in any way scapegoats for Jesus?

No! there's no room in Jesus' life and ministry for scapegoats.

But us? We need them too often. They let us off the hook for sin. Scapegoats are people we can blame for all the things we do not want to blame ourselves for, someone who will carry our dark sides for us, so that we do not have to carry them ourselves.

"That is why it's so helpful to keep an enemy or two on hand," says biblical scholar Barbara Brown Taylor. No, Jesus had no time to look around for scapegoats.

But us? It's often the easy way out of hell. It's a way of saving ourselves . . . or better yet, convincing ourselves that we are already saved.

No, when John said to start off our Christian walk by repenting, he got it right. We are to keep our eyes wide open and repent of our sins—those things we have done and those we have left undone. And if we're honest, that can take all day.

I'm reminded of that Superbowl commercial when a young man hands the priest a package of M & Ms while leaving the confessional booth, and says, "I wish you didn't have to hear all that."

The antidote to spending all our time repenting of sin is to focus on growing our relationship with Jesus and to seek God already at work in the world.

C.S. Lewis once famously said an essay called "The Weight of Glory", "Our Lord finds our desires *not too strong* but too *weak*." In other words, it's not so much that we desire sin, but we don't desire righteousness and justice enough.

He went on, "We are half-hearted creatures, fooling with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

Maybe what we should be hearing here is, "Be alert! Raise your eyes from the mundane things that keep you content, and focus on the manner in which Jesus brings about God's kingdom, our promise. Jesus does it by considering first / God's desires and not his own—even as he nears the cross.

If we were to adopt that kind of thinking, it would keep us from stumbling—keep us from absentmindedly falling into sin.

Today then, let us commit to being, not half-hearted creatures with weak desires for things that are within our grasp. No, let us commit to

being whole-hearted creatures, seeking the better world God is creating.

And let us consciously build up habits—let us shape good consciences—that will help us stay the course / as we participate in God's saving work this day and every day.