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Where is the Kingdom? (Mark 1:9-15)

Leaving Home

The day I left home my mom and dad and I piled my belongings into a pickup truck we had borrowed from my brother in law and pulled away from the house in which I grew up.

Now, I get my best characteristic, my stoicism, from my mother, so I remember vividly the fact that when I looked over I saw tears welling up in Mom's eyes and it occurred to me that moving away might be a bigger deal than I originally thought. My dad was pretty down too, I could tell by the way he was driving really fast, taking shortcuts, talking to stoplights, you know the classic signs of grief.

You can leave home but there is always a place there for you, isn't there? Children's rooms become shrines, forever paying tribute to young ones now on their own. Unless of course, like my parents, you tear down the wall between the bedrooms to make one large master bedroom.

But it isn't about a particular space reserved especially for you, is it? After all, the importance is in the home itself, having a place at the table... When my parents ultimately sold my childhood home, I remember thinking "Hmm. I wonder where they moved?"

Now, while I have you imagining me forlornly looking thru the windows of an abandoned house, let me tell you this: Growing up, moving away from my family taught me this: though you may not see them everyday, you carry your family with you wherever you go. You can even imagine how they would react to this or that situation you find yourself in, even though they may never actually be aware it is occurring. It is one of the ways we carry even people who have passed away with us everywhere we go. We are never truly alone.

Tempted

After he was baptized, Jesus entered the desert, an apt metaphor at Lent for those times of

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desolation and wandering and what happens when we feel as though we have to somehow “cover” for a God who has abandoned us. When Jesus left for the desert, he appeared to leave behind him not just an awestruck baptist, but also God, whose voice had just boomed its approval from the heavens.

Mark’s gospel glosses over the details, but the other gospels fill us in. It goes like this: Once in the desert, once on his own, Jesus was tormented by Satan who used temptations we can certainly relate to if only we put them in contemporary terms, both on a personal level and on a larger scale.

First, Jesus was tempted with bread: a material thing. It’s easy, almost a cheap shot, to ask people from western cultures how this might be like the way we sedate ourselves with material things. The problem being not the things themselves, but what we are doing with them, how much of our heart they are taking away.

Maybe you’ve heard the study about people who are asked how much more money they would need to feel happy and secure. Invariably, everybody states an amount that is about 10% more than they are currently making. But I’ve never heard anyone challenge the premise of the question. Happiness and security by any definition have a spiritual component to them. How could they possibly be addressed with materials things?

What is bread on a larger scale? Oil, perhaps?

Next, Jesus was tempted with an easy escape. “Call on God; God will get you out. Who put you here in the first place? It is one thing to question and to doubt but quite another to give way to the despondency that causes us to test, curse, or give up on God.

On a larger scale true devotion gives way to beautiful faith traditions being twisted by political parties, regions, and countries into tools of oppression.

Finally, Jesus was tempted with power, but with an upfront cost: “bow down to me and I will give you all of the kingdoms of the world.”

In many ways this is the most dangerous of temptations...with just a bit of compromise we can really achieve some kind of significance for ourselves.

Maybe it would be so bad if just one person acquiesced, right?

Where is the Kingdom?

In his book "The Kingdom of God is Within You," Tolstoy writes about an incident in a small town in Russia in which peasants protested a wealthy landowner who had taken their only source of crop irrigation. He simply needed to provide for himself. The courts ruled that the action was within the law and to quell the protest, as well as send a message that would be remembered, the peasants were tortured.

The problem with the situation was not that everyone involved in the torture were godless thugs, but that, according to Tolstoy, they were all, most likely, Christians. All of them, the lawmakers, the judge who issued the order to enforce, the governors who ordered the torture, the soldiers and officers who executed the order, the other peasants who sided with the authorities, and even the clergy who blessed it.

In fact, all of them were likely good people, who on their own would never do harm to another person, yet each of them, says Tolstoy, acted out of a concern for how they could survive one more day in their respective political, societal, or material desert. By appealing to a seeming greater good they numbed the voice of conscience that screamed to them "this is wrong!"

Is it possible that 100 years later, we are still in the same deserts? Poverty, prejudice, and war in all of their shades and hues, from Darfur to Saint Paul, don't just happen, they are manufactured and maintained by good but frightened and wandering people who think they are alone and have to do God's work by themselves.

Near, Amongst, Within

When Jesus emerged from the desert, he was unscathed by the temptations that befell him. Time and again he had fought back Satan saying "It is written!" It is written Satan that we shall not live by bread alone. It is written that we shall not test God. It is written that shall not bow down before any other gods. It is written, it is written, and it is written.

But this is more than the story of how reciting Bible passages can get you out of sticky situations. What Jesus demonstrates is the strength we are afforded by the form of God as the indwelling Holy Spirit.

That is the good news of the message he was preaching when he emerged from the desert, when first he cried out "Repent! The Kingdom of God is near!" This was no

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political takeover he was announcing or a promise of a world in the sweet by and by.

Indeed, the command to repent suggests that the establishment of the Kingdom was a matter of internal change, of change within the person. We repent, we let go of the claim of ownership and stand before God empty. The only acceptable form of poverty.

In Luke's gospel the language used is "the Kingdom of God is amongst you." It is both present and pervasive. Look further still and you find, in Luke 17, Jesus stating the greatest news: "The Kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For in fact, the kingdom of God is within you."

Modern scholars recommend using the word "domain" in place of "kingdom" in order to convey the totality of God's claim on our lives. This is the presence we are to regard and the voice Tolstoy says we are to listen to. But if we listen, if we are transformed, it can only follow that the world around us will be transformed as well.

The Kingdom of God is within you. May you experience the incredible sense of holiness this implies and carry it with you in the deserts of your life and of this world.

Amen.