

Lent 1 B 2018

Genesis 9:8-17

Psalm 25:1-9

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

On this first Sunday of Lent,
I invite you to wonder
And reflect with me on this all-important question:
How is Mark's gospel
Like Big Little Lies?
And how is Mark's gospel
Unlike Big Little Lies?

Those of you who have seen the black comedy
Big Little Lies
Can ponder this question for a few moments.
Not how it's unlike;
That's too easy.
How are they alike?

For those of you who have not seen it,
Let me offer a non-spoiler summary:
Big Little Lies
Is a melodrama with a murder at its center,
But in this lovely, lurid tale,
not only are we guessing until the end
Who the killer is,
We we're wondering until the very end
Who gets killed.
At first, when we loathe most of the five women
Who are the central characters,
We believe any of them could be the killer
Or the killed.
Once we begin to understand them,
And feel affection for them,
We hope against hope
That none of them is killed or killer.

How is this like Mark's gospel?
Glamorous housewives and house porn
In Monterrey?

It's all about the storytelling
Within the story.

It's about simplicity.
A spare, short,
Bare bones story.
On which everything depends.

These are similar stories,
Hiding under different events.

We know from the beginning
how Mark's gospel is going to end,
And how it begins again beyond the end.
Towards the end of Big Little Lies
You begin to wonder if you will ever know
Who killed and was killed.
But still,
They are similar.

Once we finally know who was killed,
But before we know who did it,
One police officer says to another,
They're lying.
The story is too simple,
And they all tell it the same way.
They're all lying.

The story at the heart of Big Little Lies
Is too simple,
And that means it's a lie.

But the story at the heart of Mark's gospel
Is very simple,
And it's true.
It's short – but a big truth.

We forget, sometimes,
How utterly simple, spare, short,
Mark's gospel is.

But then we come, as we do today
On the first Sunday of Lent, all prepared
To hear the elaborate story
Of the temptations in the wilderness
At the beginning of Jesus's public ministry.

And instead, we get less than a sentence.
Does that mean it's unimportant?

Untrue?

Listen again to this morning's gospel,
In all its spareness,
The brevity and simplicity that is so characteristic of Mark's gospel:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 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. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

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

A lot happens here in just a few words.

And unlike the police investigation
At the end of a deliciously appalling melodrama,
The truth of this simple story
Does not depend on the facts.

This is the story told through generations,
Told this way, and many other ways.
With every retelling, the story gets bigger.

But they all contain the kernel of truth
As it's told here,
In the earliest, simplest version:
Jesus shows us the way to truth,
To freedom, to life,
To God.

Jesus knows the truth that belongs to all of us:
We are loved by God,
And God is pleased with us.

Jesus faces the adversary, as do we all.
Angels ministered to him.
And after that,
He preached the good news:

God is here,
God's commonwealth of love and justice
Is within reach,
Even at hand.
There is good news,
In the midst of all the bad news,
The false news about fake news,
The unbearable news
That happens over and over and over.
Wars that go on and on,
Famines that persist,
And mass shootings,
One after another after another.

It's tempting to feel helpless.
And we are helpless,
Unless we repent and believe this good news,
The bad news is not the only news.

As I hear the story in these words, this year,
I wonder what the perspective of this short, spare gospel
might offer in a time that tries our souls.

What is the temptation this year?
Could there be a gift in this simple story,
Which puts the temptations in their place,
At the center of the story,
But a small part of the story?

Here's the gift I see:
I believe,
When the story is told this way,
That we're being invited
To put the temptations in their place.

We think of them taking a long time,
Taking place in a vast wilderness.

But here they are just a small part of a big story.
Whatever the tempter says,
Is said with words of love still echoing,
And words of strength and inspiration already sounding.

There is no temptation
From which the love is absent,
No temptation from which the good news

Will withhold itself.

So what's the call to us, this year,
As we enter the season of Lent?

Remember there is a louder voice
Than the voice of the tempter.
It's the voice of love.

Remember there's a wider world
Than the wilderness.
It's the kingdom of heaven.

Remember there is another way
Than the way of yielding,
Of knuckling under,
Of lying, or hiding,
Or giving in to despair.

It's the way of repentance,
Of turning around,
And believing this good news:

The story of God with us is true.