

February 26, 2012

Lent 1, Year B

Genesis 9:8-17

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark, 1:19-25

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In 1949 William Faulkner won the Nobel Prize in Literature, and the Nobel folks threw a big banquet for him. Faulkner gave a rare speech lasting almost three minutes, and he spoke about “the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself” and how exploring those conflicts alone makes good writing. I read his speech some 25 years ago, and a sentence from it has rung repeatedly in my mind. Humanity, he said, would not merely endure, but prevail.

When I think about what makes a good life, I think of prevailing, not merely enduring. Much of human experience can seem as simply existing, not living; as getting by, not growing, as surviving, not being purposeful. Think of the routine, the ruts, we can find ourselves in: sleep, work, eat, TV, sleep, work, eat, TV... again and again. We call it a grind, and we say, “There’s gotta be more than this.”

Enduring or prevailing, existing or living. At the core of a good life is a positive sense of identity and a purpose, clarity about who you are and why you’re here. Today’s gospel shows us the foundation of our identity and of our purpose. In these six verses, Mark sets forth the fundamentals about following Jesus.

Identity. Think of how we’re often valued – how part of us is always wondering about each other’s professional success, where we stand, and how no matter how many successes we’ve had, they’re never enough. We often treat each other according to career status, fitting people into a dog pack hierarchy, sniffing each other, seeing who belongs. Success is a common way people try to have a sense of importance and of belonging.

We know that success influences how others treat us. “What do you do?” Who hasn’t answered that question and at times received a warm smile and at other times a cold shoulder? What we do can determine whether we’re embraced or abandoned. Everyone has experienced rejection and loneliness, and we fear it. Our drive for achievement is often a way we try to escape loneliness, try to inoculate ourselves from it.

A spiritually healthy church helps us to address loneliness. It creates a community that operates on different, gospel values, that encourages different behaviors. It starts with the truth that every one of us matters to God, that every one of us is important and precious, that every one of us makes difference to God. This isn’t achieved. It simply is.

We can be extremely successful, extremely smart, extremely attractive, but inside wondering, "Why don't I feel more fulfilled? Why don't I feel really connected to other people? Why do I find myself trying to be different than as I really am?"

God tells us that we can find true life and our true selves in Jesus Christ. Prevailing not merely enduring comes from seeing ourselves not as defined by success, but by our relationship with God.

Paul writes to his fellow Christians in Rome, "You have received the spirit of sonship... we are children of God." (Romans 8:15,16) Today's gospel shows us the truth about our relationship with God: "You are my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." In our baptism, at communion, in our prayer, in loving other people, we become one with Jesus Christ, and so each of us is God's beloved child in whom he delights. There's nothing more important to trust than that you are a beloved child of God. Nothing.

In today's gospel, Jesus responded to John's call to repent and be baptized, and in the moment of baptism Jesus had an experience of the heavens opening, the Spirit coming upon him, and God calling him his beloved son.

Jesus had this experience revealing his identity as God's beloved Son, and the Holy Spirit descended gently as a dove and then drove Jesus into the wilderness. There's complexity here: gentleness, a dove of peace, but compelling Jesus to face danger, to battle Satan. The Holy Spirit is disruptive. The Spirit led Jesus in a new direction, along a difficult path, full of challenges and difficulties. For us, too, when the Holy Spirit comes upon us, God changes our lives, takes us in a different direction.

If you are a Christian, the primary story that defines you is not the story of your career or your family or your social group or anything else – important as they are, but the primary story is the story of Jesus. Repentance takes us back to the story of Jesus. It's switching the story we see for ourselves to his story. It's seeing him living in us. It's re-imagining, re-inventing ourselves. It changes our lives. New things are possible. Things can be different.

Imagine yourself as Jesus in the wilderness. It's not that hard. We all know about being in the wilderness – sometimes it's a metaphor for life. The wilderness is a place of struggle and learning and loneliness. We know what it's like to be tempted by Satan to turn from God and to find purpose and success in the wrong places. We know that there are wild beasts out there. We've encountered them. And we also know the relief and strength received from angels who have popped up and helped us and cared for us.

When Jesus returned from the wilderness, renewed and inspired from his difficult experience, he began to preach, "The time is now. The Kingdom of God has come here and now. Accept this Good News and change your life." It is the heart of Jesus' message.

The Kingdom of God is not a place. It's not heaven where souls go after death. It means the world being put right. It means God is ruling. So if we're open to it, the

Kingdom of God comes and shapes our hearts. When God rules in our hearts, love characterizes all relationships, all acts, all attitudes. It's rule distinguished not by status, dominance, aggression, and power, but by freedom, peace, cooperation, and trust. It's rule expressed in meekness, humility, generosity, charity, and patience.

Jesus says, "The Kingdom is breaking in," and we pray, "Thy Kingdom come." It's not entirely here, but it's starting to appear. The Kingdom of God breaks in as we move from focusing on "What do you do?," "Where do you vacation?," "Where did you go to school?," "Who do you know?" to "What makes you feel loved?," "What do you regret?," "How do you communicate with God?," "What do you give thanks for?" In the Kingdom, we move beyond superficiality to what really matters. It's about going deeper, to what's universal, and not exclusive.

For Christians, instead of "What do you do?," the deeper question is, "What do you do with what you've been given?" What do we do with our time, our talents, our treasure? What do we do with our opportunities, our enthusiasms, our friendships, our creativity, our talents? These are questions of purpose.

Lent is a time to renew our sense of purpose, and reflecting on the Kingdom of God, praying for it to come, we can ask ourselves, "How am I involved in making God's rule present here and now?" We can pray, "God help me make your Kingdom known and present. I want to be part of that." We find our purpose in God's rule, in our relationship to his Kingdom. "The Kingdom of God is at hand."

The other theme – identity, how we think of ourselves, the most important part is not our profession or our roles as spouse, partner, parent, child, boss, subordinate, neighbor, friend – all important and potentially life-giving, but none of those is the most important part of our identity. It's our relationship with God.

Our relationship with God. Imagine how you feel about someone you love, someone who brightens your day. Parents take pleasure in watching their child play on a playground or simply watching their child sleep. A spouse or friend takes delight in watching their beloved read, or sing, or pray, or smile, or walk down the street. Think of a moment when your love for someone has taken your breath away. Recall the feeling of brightness, of a heart leaping, when we are re-united with a loved one. God takes that same pleasure in you, in each one of us. The core of our identity is God telling each of us: "You are my beloved child in whom I delight." From that comes a life not merely of enduring, but of prevailing.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.