

## ***Empowered by Spirit***

by Rev. Durrell Watkins

Mark 1.9-11

Sunshine Cathedral, January 11, 2009

My family can be a bit macabre. One day, I heard my mother, my grandmother, and my great-aunt Gladys all discussing their funerals.

My mother said, "If I could hear what people say at my funeral, I'd like them to say I was a good mother and a good person." She then asked my grandmother what she'd like to hear at her own funeral.

Grandma said, "That she was a faithful churchgoer and a model citizen." Mother then asked Aunt Gladys what she'd like to hear people say at her funeral.

Aunt Gladys said, "I'd like to hear someone say, 'Look, she's moving.'"

Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River. As he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens being torn open and the spirit descending on him like a dove. And he heard a voice affirming his sacred value.

That's our gospel story today. Now, of course, it isn't written in a vacuum. There is a context. Mark is writing during a time of great conflict. Rebels have risen up against the Roman Empire, and the Empire responds with brutal force.

Jesus was executed a generation earlier, and the Jesus Movement feels marginalized and oppressed. They aren't in the mainstream of Judaism. They aren't part of the Greek or Roman pagan cults (though a few hundred years later they will borrow significantly from them).

They don't feel like they really fit in anywhere. They are struggling to find their center. They are struggling to have their place in the world. And they are hurting from some significant set backs and crushing blows. In this environment, Mark puts pen to paper and writes his one person performance piece...and he calls it a gospel!

Now in Mark's world, the gospel, the good news is the gospel of Caesar. Good news about Caesar's victories, Caesar's leadership. And Caesar's government has killed Jesus, and some 4 decades later decimated Jerusalem and the holy Temple. Mark probably doesn't think news about Caesar is very good for his community.

But he does believe that following the way of Jesus offers something hopeful and healing in response to the brutality of Empire. And so, in quite a seditious manner, Mark offers Good News about the Jesus Way...over against the Good News of Caesar.

Now that's all fine and good for Mark. He writes something that is politically cutting edge, but how does that help those who first hear Mark's good news? How does it help us who are hearing it today?

Well, Mark is a very talented playwright, and he tells his story like a Greek Tragedy. I'll spare you all that Aristotle had to say about the value of tragic drama but I do believe that is the style that Mark chooses to use; and so as the story unfolds as it is performed in market places, house parties, and amphitheatres, an audience member would literally see Jesus combating overwhelming odds, and somehow gaining victory even when things are difficult, or dire, or deadly.

The message to a hurting community is:

We are not alone.

We have the example of Jesus before.

We have the strength of community.

We have the spirit of indomitable life within us.

And if we are never alone, we can face the difficulties, and we can dare to hope no matter what.

And so, here in this first chapter of Mark, Jesus is beginning his ministry...his effort to bring hope and healing to hurting people in a difficult time.

And he begins his ministry with a cleansing ritual (one wants to release as much old baggage as possible before starting a new venture), and as he is coming up out of the water...he sees the heavens torn open and he imagines the spirit anointing him the Voice of God affirming him.

Caesar ruled the world.

Caesar claimed to be divine.

He claimed that the gods favored him.

His influence reached throughout the earth and into the heavens...or so he wanted his subjects and his enemies to believe.

He was king of all kings and prince of the air...so when the heavens are torn apart...that may be a message that powers of oppression cannot defeat ultimate Good. They may win for a while, but as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

And Jesus imagines, or at least Mark imagines Jesus imagining, the powers of oppression being ripped apart, and right through them comes the wind of God to enfold and affirm Jesus.

He could see with his mind's eye the spirit being with him and affirming him. And once he could see that, feel that, believe that...he was ready to take on the world.

Believing himself to be empowered by spirit...Jesus could touch the untouchables.

Jesus could love the unlovable.

Jesus could stand up to power and privilege.

Jesus could risk his life in an attempt to enrich and empower others.

Jesus could help people feel more complete.

Jesus could help people experience the presence of God, that is, the reality of unconditional love.

Jesus could even stand up to disease, confusion, oppression, and the most diabolical elements of his time, all represented literally as demons, and he could live so authentically that even death couldn't keep people from experiencing his goodness, feeling his love, and following his example.

Those are the world changing miracles that can occur when one is empowered by spirit.

Some in Mark's community would suffer.

Some would die.

But Mark tells them a story about someone so empowered by spirit that he could lift up others even while religion and government tried to put him down. He could face death with dignity, and somehow even have his influence experienced beyond death...as it turns out, for millennia so far.

The message of hope is – look what we can do if we will see ourselves empowered by spirit.

That doesn't mean the chemo will do the trick. We hope it will, but whether it does or not we are empowered by spirit!

It doesn't mean that no one will be mean to us; but being unpopular doesn't mean we don't have sacred value.

Courts and legislatures might ignore or even target us, but we can choose to see ourselves immersed in spirit hearing the voice of God from within saying, "I love you. You are made in MY image. You have sacred value just as you are."

Families, schools, churches...we can't make anyone behave, but we don't have to accept their judgments.

And if we will believe in ourselves, if we will dare to imagine the very Spirit of God enfolding us, filling us, embracing us, affirming us...we will be miracle workers in our community and in our world.

Spirit filled, spirit anointed, spirit empowered people can support ministry regardless of the economy.

Spirit empowered people can stand up for justice and inclusion in any political climate.

Spirit empowered people will use their gifts and skills and talents to let every person know that there is a divine spark in every human heart.

Spirit empowered people will comfort the bereaved, and show hospitality to the seekers, and visit the sick, and sing loud praises to an all inclusive God.

Spirit empowered people will share time, talent and treasure with such joy and consistency that miracles occur in our midst!

Jesus was in the margins. A country boy, poor, living in an occupied land. We have no proof that he could even read; and if he could, he would have been one of only 5% of the peasant class who could.

But Jesus, of all people, so threatened an empire that they had to kill him, and yet he lived so generously and so authentically that really killing him was never even an option. They could bruise and break his body, but his love would rise again and again, throughout eternity, until every person could believe that they too are God's child in whom God is well pleased.

Someone like us had something to share; and because he shared it, the world changed. We can share our gifts, ourselves, our indefatigable hope and our unlimited joy, and as we give time, praise, service, resources, hope, joy, encouragement, and goodwill...we, like Jesus, will find that we are agents of positive change. WE are ministers of hope and healing.

Mark is reminding us that Jesus allowed himself to see the divine light within him, and he let it shine, and that's what makes him our friend and hero.

Mark is encouraging us to see the spirit, the light of God within us, and to let it shine. And we can.

As we pray for our church, attend our church, invite others to our church, keep a positive attitude about our church, and contribute to our church, we are letting the light of spirit within us shine.

And those healing rays go forth from us to touch, encourage, and uplift others who need the hope, the peace, and the joy that we have found together.

As we let our light shine, we will be agents of change in our world. This is the good news. Amen.

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I am empowered by spirit!  
I am immersed in spirit.  
I am filled with spirit.  
The spirit of God blesses my life.  
And the spirit is expressed in my faithful service.  
Alleluia!  
Amen.

Norman Vincent Peale taught us how to live in the power of Spirit when he said, "A positive thinker doesn't refuse to recognize the negative; s/he refuses to dwell on it. Positive thinking...habitually looks for the best results from the worst conditions."