



### Mark 1:9-15

*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."*

So, going back for a minute to last Sunday... who watched the Super Bowl? I guess on one level it was a great game, right? Tied at the end of the 4th quarter, overtime for only the second time in history, and finally a second overtime quarter touchdown for the Chiefs to take the game. Overall, a pretty good game by Super Bowl standards, even though, by the Souper Bowl collection taken last Sunday, I'm guessing that most here, by a small margin, were disappointed at the outcome. Sunday's game was number 58 in a series that began in 1967. In that first game the Green Bay Packers beat the Kansas City Chiefs. The Packers took the second Superbowl, also. I bring this up, maybe a little bit, because my brother Craig is here today from Colorado with his wife Susie and he is a lifelong Packer fan. But I bring it up for another reason, as the NFL goes to sleep until Fall. I was reminded again this past week of a story of their Coach, Vince Lombardi, after whom the Superbowl trophy is named.

The story that I remember is about something he said. It was not, like you might expect, about the games and championships he won. They were words he said at the beginning of every season on the first day of training camp. He would gather and welcome all his players. Long time veterans, brand new rookies, high priced players, accomplished all-stars, wide eyed hopefuls, cocky upstarts. He would take them all together to the fifty-yard line at Lambeau Field, and then he would grab a football, hold it up, look them straight in the eye, and say, "This is a football."

And he would then teach them, again, the basics of their sport, rookies and veterans alike. He would start them again on their journey, brand new, each year, as if they were all hearing about it for the first time. He didn't start with high and mighty words about winning the Super Bowl. He just re-introduced them, as if they had just stepped foot on a football field for the first time, to the path, to the promise, to the journey, to what was ahead for them and what would take in order to be victorious in the end.

Brothers and sisters...lifelong church goers...first time visitors...those who are the first to volunteer and those who have yet to step forward...faithful pledgers, tithers, and those who have not yet found the blessing and joy of giving to the mission...Chapter members and those who get to church once a month or less, or race out the door before the candles on the altar have been

extinguished...disciples, members, consumers...believers, seekers, and even scoffers. I would like to welcome you all to Lent. (Hold up cross). This is a cross.

You know, I think Coach Lombardi was on to something. Maybe the reality is that the church, God's church, is on to something, also. Each year we come to this point of our annual journey in order to re-embrace our journey of salvation. We re-engage the fundamentals, the basics, that will bring us to where we say we want to go.

Things like:

Repentance. It is important for us to hear clearly what we are called to in Lent. It is important to understand that the journey ahead takes preparation. Jesus was clear about this from the very beginning of his ministry.

Here is how Matthew remembered it: "And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 'The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles — the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.' And from that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'"

Listen again to what we heard in our Gospel passage this morning. 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."

Repentance is the key to Lent, and, whether we are church pros or hope filled rookies, we are to recognize our need, our continual need, of that repentance. In Lent, we recognize our separation from God, we mourn that separation, and we commit to turn back. It's basic to the journey. It's a necessary part of the game plan. Without it, so long as we continue to hold on to our self-initiated plan, we will never be able to find God at the end of it. We will just find ourselves. We will never be able, through our own play book, to receive what God wants for us and what we have been made for.

And Lent is a time for humility. We think that being humble means thinking less of ourselves when in reality it is simply thinking of ourselves less. It's a time within Lent that we admit to ourselves that there is a better way than our way. Lent is a journey we embrace that shows us that there is a higher goal than the meager goals we hold so dear.

That's why we take on Lenten disciplines. Some fast from food, or other things, in order to teach ourselves to put worldly comforts and abundance into their proper perspective. Others take on disciplines like engaging God's word more deeply and intentionally, or praying more regularly, or serving more faithfully.

These disciplines help us to get passed the greatest stumbling block on our road back to God... us. And Lent is also a time for decision and for sacrifice. It is a time that brings us to, and strengthens us for, the decision that needs to be made. Will we choose to follow a different path from the world? Will we allow ourselves to accept the challenging, and often difficult, path of transformation? Will we choose to take up our cross and follow Christ? It's a choice, and it is a choice that needs to be made by each person. It's a covenant that needs to be re-embraced on an individual basis.

(hold up cross) Lent teaches us about this and what this means for us and for you. Lent helps us to prepare for this. Humbly, sacrificially, in order to be transformed and made whole, for the sake of the mission that God desires us to be part of.

But Lent and the cross teaches us one more thing. It teaches us that through these things, by going through Lent and by encountering and embracing the cross, we can ultimately find the prize. We can embrace the trophy. We can be brought to the Kingdom. And so can everyone else who would just get out of their own way in order to embrace Christ.

Lent helps us to understand that it is only by intentionally drawing close again to God that we are able to find true happiness, and real joy, and lasting peace, and complete healing. It's basic. And it's then only through that same cross, and drawing close again to our loving God, that our hurting and confused world can find that same peace, joy, happiness, and healing that has come to live within us.

As Jesus often said, "Those who have ears, let them hear." So, let US hear on this first Sunday of Lent. And let us see our true, ongoing, need. I mean, how much more clear can the message of Lent and need that we have be for us as we, again and again, watch our brokenness on display each day within the world? Giving us a view of what a world looks like when it moves further and further from God and the One sent to help the world return to how it is meant to be?

The problem we face is that we think, our leaders think, the voices screaming all over social media think, that we can eliminate our brokenness and our division and our lostness through human means and measures. We believe, the world believes, that our struggles can be eliminated by establishing laws and penalties and by separating others from us and us from others. We think that we have the solution when it is the reality that is held within the message of Lent that holds the true path to the healing we seek. It is the solution that is only possible through our drawing closer to the source of all true life. Do we get that?

And then, through that personal healing and renewed relationship with God found through this (hold up cross), we can draw closer to each other within an authentic relationship that can come only through the depth of that truth, of God's truth, that, if embraced, would make many of the divisions and heartaches, imagined and real, that are plaguing the world in our day, unimaginable. The message of Lent is this: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation for the world; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, and God is making his appeal through us to the world. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God..." It's basic.

Welcome to Lent...(Holding up Cross) This is a cross. And it is only through this that we are reunited to God and it is only through that reconciliation that the world can become again what it is supposed to be.

Amen



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