

The Hand-Off

The First Sunday in Lent—February 21, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

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."

Crucial to the game of football is the hand-off. This basic football move happens so frequently and looks so simple that we take it for granted, but it is not as simple or as easy as it looks! Getting the football from one player to another may look easy when the pros do it, but these skilled players will tell you that perfecting the hand-off requires real study and practice. Our Gospel lesson tells of an important hand-off, not of a football, but of a ministry, from John the Baptist to our Savior, Jesus Christ. *Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.* John's work of preparing the nation to meet the Messiah came to an abrupt but successful conclusion, and Jesus continued that ministry of proclamation without missing a beat. This transition from John to Jesus appeared to go very smoothly and God's desired plan went forth, but this hand-off was not as simple or as easy as it looked! These pros make it look easy, but we are wise to pause and study this important move, for we all have hand-offs to master in our own walks with God.

As we take a second look at Mark's report we are struck by the sudden and unpleasant conclusion of John's ministry. This hand-off was a painful one and it is all reported in a very terse, matter-of-fact kind of way with no comment. *Now after John was arrested,* writes Mark. Nothing more is said about John until sometime later when a report is given of his grisly death by beheading. One is left to wonder what impact this arrest must have had on the common people of Israel. I find it curious that so little has been said or even speculated about this great injustice. This must have had a great impact upon the common people. John was deeply loved and respected by people from all

across the country and tens of thousands had received his baptism. One might have expected rioting or rage to be expressed over his arrest, but we hear of no such reaction. In our present age any such injustice would be met with loud protests, but we must remember that this was a different day. We deal with elected government. They were dealing with Herod and Caesar. At last year's World Day of Prayer service here in Lititz we heard the testimony of a woman who spent her childhood in Hitler's Germany. She told of a world where the common person dared not even question, let alone protest. They had been taught first to fear, and once that lesson had been learned (and there was much to fear in Hitler's Germany) it became easy and natural to stop questioning or even thinking for oneself. It was probably little different for those peasants of Jesus' day. Surely, they were heartbroken and crushed in spirit over John's arrest, and a spirit of sadness and discouragement must have prevailed. Jesus would soon come, preaching Good News and performing miracles, and this joyful and energetic ministry lifted spirits, but John's sad fate was not forgotten.

John's arrest and subsequent execution definitely had an impact upon Jesus. These were deeply sobering events for our Savior, not only because he loved and respected John, but because he saw it as a foreshadowing of his own fate. The Gospel of John offers a little more detail as to the end of John's ministry and the beginning of Jesus' three-year mission. John was baptizing in the northern regions of Judea near the Jordan, and Jesus and his disciples were also baptizing at a site a few miles away. We are told that the Pharisees took note of Jesus' rising star and how he was gaining more followers than John. This caused deep concern for them. John's ministry they could tolerate, but just barely. Jesus, whom John praised as one much greater, was now gaining strength and popularity which would have caused a very deep concern for them. The tension must have been great between Jesus and the Pharisees, for we are told that Jesus retreated to Galilee. His moment of great confrontation with the religious leaders was not to be had just then. The powerful Pharisees of Judea were posing a real threat to Jesus and his ministry, so he moved back toward his home in Galilee, and there he began his ministry of teaching and healing. It was also at this time that John would have been arrested. Jesus was beginning his ministry already having incurred the wrath of the dominant religious faction in Israel, and with his forerunner carted off to prison by an offended secular authority. The lead had been handed off to Jesus and immediately he faced tremendous opposition.

One could say that Jesus received an apparently dubious promotion. I think of the worker in a shop or on a production line who is promoted to foreman. While this is an honor and usually means a real raise in salary, it is also a very unstable position in the world of industry. One's former fellow workers may now look upon them with suspicion as they have become a part of management, while the people in management look at the foreman as one low in rank and easily fired. The newly appointed foreman suddenly finds himself in a precarious position. Our Lord suddenly found himself under tremendous pressure as he began his mission. Perhaps an even better

illustration of such a promotion is that of one appointed sergeant or second lieutenant in war time. Promotion is an honor, but in time of conflict it is also known that sergeants and second lieutenants do not last very long in their new and vulnerable position. So it was for our Lord, yet he freely stepped up and stepped into this new role, for this was God's plan.

It is fascinating to watch Jesus begin his ministry, and I have long been amazed by the continuity of John and Jesus' ministries. Jesus begins by continuing John's ministry of baptism, although Jesus left the baptizing to his disciples. It would appear that he was affirming John's mission and ministry. And then, leaving the work of baptism behind he began preaching, and his message was clearly meant to be a continuation of John's. Some like to think of Jesus and John as playing the roles of "Good Cop—Bad Cop" with John being the harsh and strict officer and Jesus being the kinder one. John may have been heavy on the harsh message of repentance, but Jesus was not shy about proclaiming the same words. Consider the first words of Jesus' ministry which Mark records for us. *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.* These words are nearly identical to those of John! Jesus would soon add much more to this message about this Kingdom of God and of the Good News, but it all began with a strong affirmation of the message which John had been preaching. Jesus would soon be preaching a message of Kingdom. This Kingdom was near and one could enter it by repenting, turning away from this world, and receiving this new citizenship as a gift. Jesus was presenting himself as the King, and for those who could see with the eyes of faith, the Kingdom had already arrived!

From the very beginning Jesus preached a bold message, but one might ask as they considered all that was going on all around Jesus, "is the Kingdom of God really here and among us?" Look around. John came preaching a bold message of repentance and a great Savior to come. He created quite a stir but where did he land? Caesar and Herod were still seated quite securely upon their thrones, but this messenger of God was now in jail awaiting death. And here is Jesus, speaking boldly, yet what is this amounting to? Evil men still ran the Temple, and the religious leaders despised him and sought to destroy him. It took faith to see that God's plan was actually going forth in power. This time of transfer from John's ministry to Jesus' mission was a difficult one and Jesus found himself beginning his ministry under all kinds of threats and opposition. John was in a very bad place and from the very beginning Jesus had powerful enemies working against him.

But Jesus stepped up, took the hand-off and began three dynamic years of preaching and healing such as the world has never seen. Jesus was about to change everything, and though his enemies would win ever so briefly by having him crucified, this would only serve to advance God's plan. The sins of the world would be nailed to the cross and by the Resurrection Jesus would leave no doubt that He truly was the King. At a glance the world seemed unchanged, but Jesus had ushered in a new Kingdom and lives were being changed for eternity.

Today the St. Luke's congregation gathers in their annual meeting, and at each of these meetings there is a feeling of hand-off. Certain officers retire from their posts and other step up and are ordained to service. This is also a time when we are reminded of the saints of St. Luke's who have served us in years past. We remember those no longer with us who blessed us as leaders, teachers, givers, willing workers, encouragers and joyful servants of Christ. We miss them. It is good to remember and miss such folks, but this fondness for the saints before us can blind us to what God is doing among us now. I have visited a number of Churches and Christian groups that spoke so glowingly of their departed saints that I began to feel that I got there too late! Truth be told there were many wonderful servants of God present who had stepped up and were serving in an exemplary manner. It was a little too much rejoicing in the past that kept folks from also recognizing the saints now among them. On a day like today we may find ourselves saying, "Back in the day, Fred would have stepped up and handled that. Fred knew what he was doing, and he knew how to lead!" Perhaps Fred did, and God rest his soul, but I can guarantee that God doesn't let a Fred pass from the scene without raising up new and able servants. The question is, are these servants ready to step up?

What a blessing to see Jesus beginning his ministry in such a frightening and threatening time. It certainly appeared that the world and the powers that be were winning, but Jesus paid no mind to such appearances. We now find ourselves in a day when Church seems to have gone out of style and this can be profoundly discouraging. I am glad that Jesus did not get discouraged and quit. May we find the faith to see the world as a place desperately in need of Good News, and may we trust that though our neighborhood and nation seem unchanged, God is still changing lives and bringing more citizens into the Kingdom.

Today is a day to step up, take the hand-off and advance the ball. God works mightily through those who step forward in faith. What might God be calling you to do? Perhaps you have just stepped forward to serve as an officer in the congregation, or you have already been appointed to a post. There is work to be done. May God guide you to find the task and the grace to do it. Do you find yourself lamenting an unmet need in the congregation and telling yourself that "*someone* ought to do something"? You may be that someone!

The season of Lent has begun. This is what we commonly think of as a time of retreat, and while this is true, it is not to retreat only for the sake of withdrawing from life. This is a time to pause and consider our service to God. It is a time to resolve to step up and take the hand-off. It may not be as easy a task as it first appears, but God gives us grace to do great things and to keep advancing the message of life, for *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.*