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DRIVEN BY THE SPIRIT

A lot is going on in this Sunday's Gospel reading from Mark.

- Though we've spent much time on various parts of Mark's first chapter during Advent and Lent, we may still miss how much is here.
- It's worth noting that Matthew and Luke give separate and descriptive narratives for all of these events,
  - contrasted with Mark's compressed history of these important proceedings in a brief passage.
  - Baptism and blessing, temptation, John's imprisonment, and the beginning of JESUS' ministry in just a few short verses.
  - Mark's Gospel is not unlike episodes of Dragnet where Joe Friday asks for, "Just the facts, Ma'am. Just the facts."

While it is tempting to jump into all of these episodes, there is one in particular that stood out to me as I reviewed these verses this week.

- Consider that in Mark's reading, the Spirit did not lead JESUS into the wilderness.
  - Both Matthew and Luke say it that way: *JESUS was led by the SPIRIT into the wilderness.*
  - They both characterize the SPIRIT's guidance in directing JESUS toward the next stage of HIS life.
- But Mark says, "*At once the SPIRIT sent HIM out into the wilderness.*"
- An even better translation would say that the SPIRIT "drove" HIM out to the desert.
  - It is more direct and forceful.
  - The SPIRIT, for whatever reason, needs JESUS and wants JESUS out there.
    - So, the SPIRIT, the same SPIRIT that tears heaven apart so that it can descend upon JESUS and the voice of the FATHER can be heard,
      - this same SPIRIT kicks JESUS out into the wilderness.

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I think that's a helpful and sobering reminder that the Christian faith is not an invitation to the easy life.

- It is a comfortable country club to come and see our friends and then return home until our next visit.
- Baptism into the SPIRIT of CHRIST is to be called to, indeed driven into an adventure that will include testing, challenge, and temptation.
  - And one of the greatest temptations is to do nothing when the testing and challenging come.

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One day I was driving past the local middle school shortly after school had finished for the day on my way to make hospital visits.

- Across from the middle school was a 7-11 and a vacant field.
- On this particular day when I drove by there was a group of about 30-40 kids yelling and cheering in a circle in that field.
  - It seemed clear to me that there was a fight going on and many had gathered to watch and cheer for their favorite.

I continued on, shaking my head at these young people who had chosen to settle a difference or express their biases in this way.

- But then, into my head flashed the saying I had taught the previous Lenten Wednesday from the Parable of the Good Samaritan:
  - My neighbor is anyone who is in need.
- And next came a voice that told me that there was at least one young person in the middle of the cheering and jeering crowd who was in need.

When you get a message like that, you can't ignore it.

- Suddenly, I found the HOLY SPIRIT was kicking me back to that 7-11 and the wilderness of what might happen when I went there.
- I did turn around and go back.
- I pushed through the crowd and broke up the fight.
- The crowd quickly broke up, including the two boys who had been fighting.

That wilderness wasn't so bad.

- I didn't know why the SPIRIT had driven me there.
  - There wasn't any suffering or hardship other than the mumbling that a number of the watchers made about me under their breath.
  - I had been tempted to continue on my journey without stopping and it seemed it would not have mattered, except perhaps for the boy on the bottom of those two amateur pugilists.
    - How often do we give into the temptation to ignore the SPIRIT's leading when IT calls to us?
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My friend, Jan Enslin, was going to have a wonderful future as a concert pianist.

- He was truly gifted.
  - Then, one evening, while playing a concert on the stage of a high school, he looked out the window at the church across the street and heard a voice say, "Jan, I want you here."
    - Jan understood that as a call to ordained ministry.
    - Jan said to me, "Isn't it wonderful that some people know what the LORD wants them to do without having to get hit over the head with a 2x4?"
  - Jan later became bishop of the South-Central Synod of Wisconsin.
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It's important to listen to the SPIRIT when IT is taking you somewhere.

- It's important, not necessarily because it's where you want to go,
    - but because it's where GOD needs you.
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I think I've told the story before, but a few days after breaking up the fight by 7-11, I was teaching confirmation and one of the students asked, "Why did you break up that fight?"

- I explained about the voice telling me to go back, and then I said, "If you saw me, it means you were there. Why didn't you break it up?"
  - He replied, "If somebody picks a fight you let them go at it, even if they pick the fight with you."
- I was shocked, but I asked, "If someone picks a fight with you, why not just walk away?"
  - "If you do," he answered, "everyone will call you a chicken."
- "What if you said you wouldn't fight because you're a Christian."
  - Another boy spoke up and said, "I think I'd rather be called a chicken than a Christian."

About a week later, the mother of Janelle, one of the confirmation girls called me to tell me about her daughter.

- Janelle had been cornered the previous day by a girl who had a gang and went around picking fights with other girls.
  - She had confronted Janelle, the girl from my class, to fight her.
- Janelle told her, "I'm not going to fight you. It's not because I'm afraid of you, because I'm not."
  - "It's not because I think you might beat me up because I don't think you can."
    - "I'm just not going to fight you."
  - Janelle told her mother, the whole time I kept hearing Pastor Jeffrey saying, "Tell her you're a Christian, tell her you're a Christian."
    - "Today, I didn't, but next time I think I can."
- The next day, the day Janelle's mother called me, Janelle had come from school and said that the girl that had picked the fight with her had come up to her and told her that she had gotten into so many fights, that if she is in another one, she would be sent to reform school.
  - The fight with Janelle would have been that next fight.
  - She told Janelle she didn't want to go to reform school and asked Janelle if she would help her stop fighting.
    - Janelle told her mother, "I don't think we're going to be friends, but I think I can help her."

It's important to listen to the SPIRIT when it's taking you somewhere.

- What would have happened if I had not listened?

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So, what does the SPIRIT sound like, just so you'll know the next time you hear it?

- For Jan Enslin, it was a voice calling from a nearby church.
  - For me, it was a quiet reflection on a scripture passage.
  - For Janelle, it was a conversation with her pastor and classmates.
  - For a troubled girl, it was a courageous young woman who stood up for herself.
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The LORD once promised to pass by Elijah, a great honor, indeed.

- A great wind came by, tearing the mountains apart, but the LORD was not in the wind.
- Then there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake.
- Then there was a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire.
- And after the fire came a gentle whisper, and the LORD was in the gentle whisper.

GOD doesn't always speak in a loud booming voice.

- Sometimes it's a still quiet voice.
- Sometimes it's a sense of needed action or word.
- Sometimes it's a clear call for help or interaction or presence.
- Sometimes it's just something you know.

But when it comes it is important to listen,

- even when it's taking you somewhere,
- even if it's leading toward something you're not sure you want to do.
- It's important to listen because it is something GOD needs you to do.

And rather than fear when the SPIRIT drives you, making you feel challenged, or tested, or overwhelmed, you should also seek a sense of hopefulness.

- While it's worthwhile to listen to the SPIRIT, it's also of value to remember the rest of Mark's narrative.
- When the SPIRIT propelled JESUS into the wilderness, IT did not leave HIM unprepared or alone.
- It equipped JESUS with the words to turn Satan and his temptations away.
- And it sent the angels to minister to HIM and bolster HIM up.

It's important to listen when the SPIRIT drives us somewhere.

- GOD needs us there.
- But it's also important to remember that the SPIRIT never leaves us alone.
- It's important to pay attention when you're driven by the SPIRIT.