

ARCS AND CIRCLES
Homily for Lent 1B—Mk 1:9-15
LPC, 2/22/15

I am a lover of fiction. I really like books where things happen. In the course of a work of fiction, changes take place. The classic story arc, if I remember correctly is exposition, development, climax and denouement. This is a fancy way of saying that a good story has a beginning, a middle and an end. The characters and situation are introduced in the beginning. The middle usually includes some kind of conflict, which eventually reaches some kind of dramatic turning-point, and then things are resolved.

The characters don't usually end up in the same place they started. As a matter of fact, to end up in the same place where you started is sort of a metaphor for hell, or at least limbo or purgatory. Remember the old movie *Groundhog Day* where the Bill Murray character was forced to relive the same day over and over until he learned something and changed his life?

In short, the best stories are arcs, not circles. They end up someplace else. That's the kind of story Mark's Gospel is. Today's excerpt, taken from the Gospel of Mark, is the end of the beginning. The characters and situation have been introduced. The conflict is prefigured but is not yet developed.

The conflict is prefigured here by the heavens being torn apart. The root of the Greek verb used here for "torn apart" is literally σχιζω (schizo), which you may recognize from English words like schizoid or schizophrenic. Here it can be translated split, torn, separated, divided, disunited. And this violent action has taken place in the heavens above Jesus' baptism.

What we are meant to understand is that this is a cataclysmic event. Once this has happened there is no chance that things will ever again be the same – not the eternal heavens, and certainly not the volatile earth. By the time this story ends we will be in a vastly different place.

Let's bring this discussion into the present day. Today is the first Sunday in Lent. Lent, as you know, is a time of spiritual discipline, often associated with giving things up. This past Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, in my sermons I suggested a more theological way of approaching Lent that isn't so much about the exercise of human moral excellence.

I suggested instead a reflection on the meaning of the word "fast," which comes from the same root as the word "fasten." In this context a Lenten fast is less the absence of something from your life than the enhanced presence of something that is already there – the most important something in the world: your relationship with God. I suggested on Ash Wednesday that Lent is a time to make fast this relationship, to stand fast upon it, and to become fast friends with God.

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With this strategy, the Holy Spirit being what it is, you Lent will be an arc, not a circle. You will end up in a different place. You know the old saying, “God accepts you where you are, but he doesn’t necessarily want you to stay there”?

In other words, if you just give up chocolate or something like that, for Lent, and at the end of Lent you just start eating chocolate again, you’re just back where you started, which frankly, won’t end up making a whole lot of difference to you or to God. On the other hand, if your Lent is a time of holding fast to God, you will almost certainly end up in a different place. I daresay this different place may be a bit closer to that kingdom of God Jesus is always on about.

Let’s make our Lent an arc, not a circle. By the grace of God, we may never be the same again.