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The Dance

Mark 1: 1 - 4

** The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

*"I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way"—*

*"a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.'"*

And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

** We're beginning a series this weekend that will take us through the end of summer (Labor Day.) It's based on Part One of Timothy Keller's book, Kings Cross. Many of you have already read part *two* of the book, or, by coming to Church here over Lent 2013 you at least heard a series of messages based on Part Two. The response to that study was very positive, and I said back then that we would take a closer look at Part One this summer, so here we go.

The entire book, *Kings Cross*, is a study of Jesus based on the Gospel of Mark. And as the Gospel of Mark has a definite and obvious division between chapters 1-8 & 9 - 15, so does this book. Part one, then, focuses on The Identity of Jesus (who he was); Part Two, you may recall, centers on The Purpose of Jesus (what he did), which just seemed much more appropriate for Lent, which is why we're doing it backwards!

If you have a copy of this book or are able to get ahold of one, I think that you will get more out of this series by reading along with me; but it is not necessary to do that. So either way, please continue to come to church, over the summer! And feel free to invite a friend, or call someone from the Church that you haven't seen in while, and check up on each other.

Mark gets right to the point in telling us who Jesus is. In the very first sentence of his

** gospel he states that Jesus is "the Christ" and the "Son of God". You are likely aware that the word "Christ" is not Jesus' last name (!) but it is actually a title, a more literal

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translation of the name would be "Jesus *the* Christ". 'Christ' is a Greek word which means 'the anointed one'. This is exactly the same meaning as a Hebrew word that sounds very much like its English translation: *Messiah*. "Jesus the Christ" is the same, then, as "Jesus the Messiah".

The Jewish people were looking for a Messiah in Jesus' day, as an anointed one (meaning, someone God has set apart for a special work, like a King) a human ruler like King David - i.e., someone who would come and administer God's work on earth, and set the nation of Israel free from all her oppressors and troubles.

So, it is important to notice the words that Mark chooses in his opening paragraph - he doesn't just call Jesus 'the Christ', he's not *just* the Messiah, but he is also the "Son of God". As Keller points out, this claim goes far beyond the popular understanding of Messiah at the time. This is a claim that not only does this 'messiah' have God's anointing - i.e., God's power, and God's 'backing', etc. - but he is, in fact, *divine*.

Mark goes on and quotes Isaiah's prophecy of the voice calling in the wilderness:

** *'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'*"

Then he makes it clear that this 'voice' was none other than John the Baptist, who came to prepare the way for ... whom? Yes, for Jesus. So, again, the clear inference is that Jesus is The Lord himself, he is God almighty, the long-awaited King who would rescue his people from all their troubles. God has come to earth in Jesus Christ.

Again, Keller points out that in making this claim - which doesn't seem so radical to many of us due to familiarity, but remember, it was shocking, and scandalous to the first hearers - that Mark is telling his readers that "Christianity...is not a completely new thing. Jesus is the fulfillment of all the biblical prophets' longings and visions, and he is the one who will come to rule and renew the entire universe¹."

¹ Kings Cross, Timothy Keller, p. 16

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God was doing something wonderful and amazing through this Jesus - the Messiah. Now, having announced him in this way, Mark then introduces Jesus to us in another familiar scene that not only tells us something more about *his* identity, but about the identity of God himself.

** Let's read Mark 1: 9 - 11

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

We see here, right from the beginning of Jesus' public ministry that all three members of 'the Trinity' are present. Jesus comes to be baptized, the Spirit descends on him like a dove, and the voice of the Father from heaven announces his love and blessing.

** Keller observes that there was only one place in all the sacred writings of Judaism where the Spirit of God is pictured as a Dove. It's pretty familiar to *us*, post-pentecost, but it was very unusual then. That one place is in the Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (which is the Bible that the Jew's of Mark's day would have been reading.) In the book of Genesis - the Creation story - in chapter 1, verse 2 we read in our Bibles that the Spirit *hovered* over the face of the waters.

The Hebrew verb means *fluttered*: the Spirit *fluttered* over the face of the waters. To capture this vivid image, the Rabbis translated this passage in that Aramaic translation like this:

** *"And the earth was without form and empty, and darkness was on the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God fluttered above the face of the waters like a dove, and God spoke: 'Let there be light'."*

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So we are reminded that there were three 'parties' involved in the creation of the world: "God, God's Spirit, and God's Word (through which he creates). And here we are at the onset of God's plan to restore and redeem the world, and once again we see the same three parties present:

The Father (who was the voice), Jesus who was the Word, and the Spirit once again fluttering like a dove, descending on Jesus.

Timothy Keller is not the first one to point out that this is not a coincidence. Mark is deliberately pointing us back to the creation account so that we can see that, just as the original creation was a project of a triune God, in the same way the redemption of the world, the renewal of all things in Jesus the Messiah is a project of the triune God.

Ok, are you with me? This might seem like an unimportant detail. We've heard this before - we know about the Trinity, and all that. Why is it important to know that the Creation and Redemption of the world are both projects of a Trinity, one God in three persons? Well, answering that question is kind of the point of Keller's book, and its the reason that I wanted us to study this together this summer!

The Doctrine of the Trinity is a difficult teaching to wrap our heads around. Keller truly understates in saying that it is "cognitively challenging." In fact, it is kind of *impossible* to understand completely - and when we think we have it, we probably don't. How can something be truly *three*, and yet in essence *one*?

** We resort to pictures and images to try and help us here, but they all fall short. And because of that Christians over the years have proclaimed our belief in the Trinity - we believe that God is "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit", three and yet One God. We sing great hymns that describe the Trinity ("Holy, Holy, Holy" and others). We can grasp the significance of the doctrine insofar that as Christians we readily acknowledge the Divinity

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of Jesus, and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and the existence of a Holy Creator... but, frankly, I don't think for the most part we grasp what that 'kind of God' has to do with our lives and our world today.

So the result is that I often hear people (and I don't mean to be condescending or insulting and I hope I don't come across that way to you here) kind of 'specialize' in one member of the God-head. "I worship Jesus"... "I pray to Jesus, how about you?"..."I'm all about the Holy Spirit (usually meaning a focus on gifts, leading, and spiritual power)... someone else might say, "I see God as a Holy, Unapproachable, awesome being who I worship in silence. God is grand and fearful!" So, you know, we 'choose' the best we can, because we can't grasp how 'three-in-one' relates to me, here in New Jersey in 2013.

And that is why I've been looking forward to this summer's study of King's Cross with you - because I think we're going to learn something about that. About how the essence of God (being three-in-one) is a key to the meaning of life. It is a key to understanding our purpose here, and a key to understanding how we can move our Christian faith into a much deeper, fulfilling, life-giving... dance... with God.

For those of you who are newer to the faith, I should probably share this: the doctrine of the Trinity is the belief that God is one God, eternally existing in three persons. It's not three different gods working together in perfect harmony, and it is not something that the Church Fathers called 'modalism' - the idea that God takes on different forms depending on what is needed. That was rejected long, long ago as heresy.

Keller puts it like this: "Trinitarianism holds that there is one God in three persons who know and love one another..."

When Jesus comes out of the Water of Baptism, the Father covers him with words of love: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." At the same time the Spirit

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covers him with power. Now, let me quote Keller:

"This is what has been happening in the interior life of the Trinity from all eternity. Mark is giving us a glimpse into the very heart of reality, the meaning of life, the essence of the universe. According to the bible, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit glorify one another... each person of the Trinity glorifies the other."

** So, that's saying that our Christian God is not a 'static thing' but, as C.S. Lewis writes, is *"a dynamic, pulsating activity, a life, almost a kind of drama. Almost, if you will not think me irreverent, a kind of dance."*

Another writer puts it like this:

"The persons within God exalt each other, commune with each other and defer to one another...Each divine person harbors the others at the center of his being. In constant movement of overture and acceptance, each person envelops and encircles the others..²

** One of the ways to picture this that Keller uses throughout the book is C. S. Lewis' suggestion of a dance. And Keller describes that dance in a way that we'll become more familiar with over the course of this summer - he talks about 'orbiting' and 'circling' around others and God.

He puts it like this: "You're glorifying something when you find it beautiful for what it is in itself. Its beauty compels you to adore it, to have your imagination captured by it."³ He talks about listening to Mozart in order to get an 'A' in music appreciation in college. And having to get good grades to get a good job, you could say he listened to Mozart to make money. But today, he's quite willing to spend money just to listen to Mozart, not because it's useful to him anymore but because it's beautiful in itself, no longer a means to an end.

² add reference

³ Keller, p. 18

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When find a person beautiful in that way, the natural response is to want to serve them unconditionally. If we say, "I'll serve, as long as I'm getting something out of this" that's not really serving people; it's serving ourselves through them. So that's not "circling them, orbiting around them; its using them, getting them to orbit around you."

So there are lots of people who *look* unselfish simply because we can't say 'no'. So, we say 'yes' to everything and people are constantly using us. Everybody points out how selfless and self-giving we are, always putting everybody else's needs before ours. But people who don't have boundaries and who let people walk all over them are not doing this out of love, we're doing it out of *need*. We can't say no, so we say yes, with inward grumbling and resentment.

To glorify others means to serve them unconditionally, not because we're getting anything out of it, but because of our love and appreciation for who they really are.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are doing just that - each centering on the others, adoring and serving them. And because the Father, Son, and Spirit are giving this glorifying love to each other, Keller writes, "...God is infinitely, profoundly happy."⁴

Think about this: if you find somebody you adore, someone for whom you would do anything, and you discover that this person feels the same way about you, how does that feel? It's incredible! And that's what God has been enjoying for all eternity. The Father, Son, and Spirit are pouring love and joy and adoration into the other, each one serving the other. They are infinitely seeking one another's glory, so God is infinitely happy.

And if it is true that this world has been created by *this* triune God, then ultimate reality is a dance. And this is where we get to the heart of all this...

⁴ Keller, p. 19

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** If our lives are self-centered, if everything is focused on *me*, if its all about *me*, *my* needs, *my* desires, *my* dreams... we are static, stationary. We are the center, everything else moves around us.

Keller writes, "I might help people; I might have friends; I might fall in love as long as there's no compromise of my individual interests or whatever meets my needs. I might even give to the poor - as long as it makes me feel good about myself and doesn't hinder my lifestyle too much. Self-centeredness makes everything else a means to an end. And that end, that non-negotiable, is whatever I want and whatever I like, my interests over theirs. I'll have fun with people, I'll talk with people but in the end everything orbits around *me*."⁵

What happens in a community where *everybody* is saying, "No, you orbit around *me!*" Picture ten people, a hundred, five hundred people on a stage and every one of them wants to be the center. So they all just stand there and say, "You move around me!" Nobody gets anywhere, and the dance becomes impossible.

The Trinity is very different than that! Instead of this self-centeredness, each person, (Father, Son, and Spirit) is characterized by mutually self-giving love. Each person in the Trinity voluntarily circles and orbits around the others.

And you see, if this is ultimate reality - if this is what the God who made the universe is like - this is the key to life, meaning, and hope. "If this world was made by a Triune God, relationships of love - just like that - are what life is really all about."⁶

How we picture God has a tremendous impact on how we understand what life is about. If there is no God - and we're here by blind chance, then love is just a chemical reaction to

⁵ Keller, p. 19

⁶ Keller, p. 20

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ensure the continuation of the species.

But if from all eternity, without an end, and without a beginning, the ultimate reality of the world is a community of persons knowing and loving one another... life is about love relationships.

Look how this understanding shapes our world...

** Why would a triune God create a world? He didn't create it so that he could have beings who worship him and even love him so that he could have joy. The Triune God already had this, and he received love in a far more powerful, pure form than we mere humans could ever give him. So why create us?

Here's what Keller writes: "There's only one answer - God did not create to *get joy*, but to *give it*. God created us to invite us into *the dance* - to say: if you glorify me, if you center your entire life on me, if you find me beautiful for who I am in myself, then you will step into the dance, which is what you are made for. You are made not just to believe in me or to be spiritual in some general way, not just to pray and get a bit of inspiration when things are tough. You are made to center everything in your life on me, to think of everything in terms of your relationship to me. To serve me unconditionally. That's where you'll find your joy. That's what the dance it about."

So he asks...

"Are you in the dance or do you just believe God is out there somewhere? Are you in the dance or do you just pray to God every so often when you're in trouble? Are you in the dance or are you looking around for someone to orbit around you? If life is a divine dance, then you need more than anything else to be in it. That's what you're built for. You are made to enter into a divine dance with the Trinity."⁷

What God has
has come to offer to you.

⁷ Keller, p. 21

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That's part one... we look forward to sharing more of this wonderful story with you throughout this summer.