

Year B - 1 Lent

Mark 1:9-15

Feb. 18, 2018

“Did Anyone Hear from the Lord this Week?”

This has been a dark, stormy week – and I am not talking about the weather. It brought to mind an old column of Terry Mattingly which began, “ Did anyone hear from the Lord this week? “ he wrote that about the time of the Sandy Hook school shooting.

Today I ask you, Did anyone hear from the Lord this week?

There have been 30 mass shootings so far in 2018. On Ash Wednesday – also Valentine’s Day – there was a gun-crazed slaughter of 17 people at the highschool in Parkland, Florida. The nineteen year old shooter carried a legally purchased assault weapon. The details of the shooting were emerging as Deacon Brian and I stood – in the rain– on the sidewalk in front of the post office and offered Ashes to Go as a reminder of our mortality and God’s blessing.

Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.

These shootings are not ‘God’s Plan.’ The irony of the juxtaposition with Ash Weds. and Valentine’s is hard to miss. I hear a wake-up call to change our conduct and our thinking, to become aware that it is *our* burden to effect gun control legislation and invest in mental health services. It is *our* burden to protect our neighbor and to proclaim the Gospel of God’s love, the plurality of God’s love for all, until no one kills their neighbor to act out their own pain.

In his message for Lent, Bishop Rickel said “Lent is to bring us in closer connection with mortal life, and not sit back in quiet resignation as if death were our only call.”

Only twenty or so people stopped for ashes this year – they showed us photos of family and shared bits of their faith stories. One fellow, though, said he was headed for the pool, and the ashes would be washed right off, so no point. I said, *God’s blessing won’t wash off...*he smiled, shook his head, and walked on.

I thought, really? A blessing that washes off? A baptism that washes off? A commitment to follow Jesus that washes off? A commitment to love our neighbor? Water. Standing in the God-given rain, we offered blessing – and ashes.

Rain on Ash Wednesday, putting us in touch with our mortality.

Our Scripture readings turn from Epiphany images of God as light to Lenten images of water, God’s power manifest in water.

Noah’s story recalls God’s Creation out of the waters of chaos, and God’s destruction by the

waters of the Flood. After the Flood, God covenanted that the waters would never again destroy all flesh. God's life-giving and life-taking power: water that creates, water that destroys, water that marks an ending, water that heralds a new beginning and a new covenant.

There is ambivalence about water in Noah's story and in the baptism of Jesus. John's baptism of repentance washed and purified. For Jesus, who does not need to repent, baptism marks the beginning of his ministry. So, not the waters of purification but waters recalling the Flood – waters that herald death, new beginning, and new covenant. The unavoidable cross and the resurrection.

Jesus' baptism is a public act of commitment to God's will, to the way of God that John has been preparing. It is the end of Jesus' former life as a citizen of Galilee, an end to the assumptions, world views, and obligations. Jesus' baptism is a religious act, and also a political and economic assertion of God's lordship. Jesus emerges freed of obligation to anyone or anything except God. Jesus emerges from the waters of the River Jordan empowered to do his ministry.

He saw the heavens torn apart. The violent and hope-filled image marks the end of the old. The image is repeated at the moment of Jesus' death on the cross, when the curtains of the temple are torn apart. Mark 15:38.

The waters of Christian baptism symbolize freedom, the suffering and death of Jesus, and the promise of new life in the resurrection. The waters re-shape us through our commitment to follow Jesus.

A voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved". What a beautiful name - the Beloved. Much better than the names bandied about on twitter or in public speeches these days. Names that are intended to diminish, denigrate, and fan the flames of discord.

What we call each other is important – God called God's only Son, *Beloved*. Beloved, an affirmation of unique being and significance to God, an identity and worth that is eternal. God calls *us* His beloved children.

I can well imagine that whatever Jesus may have known about his future, those words from God caught him up short. *'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'*

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. A real wilderness, a literal wilderness, sacred and scary. The hills around Jerusalem are mostly desert hills – steep terrain, with rock out-croppings, sparse vegetation. Harsh, painfully bright, unshaded, seemingly uninhabited land. Wilderness. The kind of place where you can see for miles, and know whether an enemy is approaching, and also know that you are totally and utterly defenseless.

Psalm 121: 'I lift up my eyes to the hills; from where is my help to come?' is a literal cry from the wilderness. Physical place, and spiritual place.

Jesus seeks a place where none would want to go alone.

Jesus's ministry becomes a ministry of rebellion against the powers of the state and the Jewish leadership, one that was likely to lead to his death. I do not know if he understood exactly what was going to happen, but surely he knew that something big would happen, that his will, his resolve, his faithfulness would be tested in the days to come.

And he had God's affirmation, he was God's Beloved.

The Spirit... drove him. Jesus was driven by a deep spiritual awakening, that sense of "something big just happened" that marks moments of significant change in our lives. Moments when we need space to embrace, time to process, before going on.

Jesus needed those forty days in the wilderness to reflect, to resist the voice of Satan, and to strengthen his spirit for the journey.

There are moments in our lives that herald the junction of old identity dissolving and new identity emerging. We are beset with the tension between holding on and letting go. Not the 'letting go' of disciplined scarcity or living a life of less, but the *making room* to embrace the something new, to allow ourselves to be reshaped.

Sometimes these moments are good news, sometimes not so good. Graduation from college. Newly divorced, or newly retired. Diagnosis of serious illness. Death of a parent, spouse or child. Birth or adoption of a child, or new marriage. We know that something big is happening, and that we will be tested.

'Something big' moments. We tend to speed past them, to leap into the new life with (or life without). We miss the possibility for peace and strength that time for reflection will give us. After all, who wants to go out into the wilderness? Forty days. It's a long time.

That's not about camping or hiking. It is about preparing for the different path, even a different direction. About being alone with our demons, about gaining strength through the confrontation. About realizing that we are not alone, not really. Jesus was with the wild beasts and the angels waited on him.

Whether expected or not, there will be new circumstances; new demands on our time or energy; our world rearranged. Jesus knows what it is like to wrestle with temptation in big moments, to reach the hard places, to come to a junction where getting lost seems easier (and less risky!) than going on.

We can wrestle for God's meaning, without losing sight of divine favor. Beloved. We can summon the courage to follow Jesus, even though (mostly) he does not lead us down the easy path. We can commit these forty days of Lent to take time in the wilderness, time to be awakened

and reshaped.

I have been thinking about the wilderness as needing to travel lightly, unencumbered. A journey where all I take is a backpack. To take more than that would be a burden and make the journey an impossible task. So I need to let go of material things, and also of fears, and old expectations. Let go of past hurts and past achievements: these do not define me. These are not my identity, nor my eternal worth.

What pain or change do you need to confront? What do you need to let go of to make space for something new, a different path to live life more fully, to embrace the joy of Easter?

The wilderness experience will not make life easier, in fact it may make life harder, this facing up to the changes and letting go. If we are honest with ourselves, we will wrestle with our relationship with God. The whys and wherefores, and our communal responsibility for tragedies like the Parkland shooting. That is not who we are supposed to be, and we must confront and change.

In our reflection, our wrestling with God, we will find renewal and new commitment.

What we carry into the forty days of Lent is not food, or clothing, or shelter. We carry our identity – Beloved child of God. Beloved of God. And the knowledge that we are not alone.

Amen

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