

Mark 1: 9-15

Trust the process?

First Sunday of Lent, Year B

February 21, 2021

Greeting

Welcome to the first Sunday of Lent. On this Sunday, we journey with Jesus into the wilderness. The first hearers of Mark's gospel, which we'll hear later in the service, would have known immediately what the wilderness meant. Wilderness wandering was a part of their story from the very beginning, when Moses and the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 days. It occurred to me that we understand wilderness today perhaps more than we ever have before. The isolation, the uncertainty, the loneliness. I don't want to make a blanket assumption, but I am going to say that all of us have experienced those things on a new level this year.

Jesus does go into the wilderness, but he does not go alone. God remains with him in the wilderness. Lent is not usually a time to celebrate, but with so little to celebrate these days, we can celebrate on these Sundays of Lent that we are not alone, that God remains with us. That is a gift of worshipping together as a community, we are not alone.

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."

Mark's gospel is fast-paced. Everything seems to happen in quick succession, the entire story is crammed into 16 short chapters. The pace is evident more here in these six verses than perhaps anywhere else. In just six verses we have Jesus' baptism, his temptation and the beginning of his proclamation of the good news.

What does it mean that Mark squishes all these stories so closely together? Well it could have a lot to do with the historical nature of this gospel, how it was passed down orally so it needed to be shorter so people would remember. It may be because Mark was the first Gospel story written down, so it doesn't

have the additional commentary that John, Luke and Matthew have... but what does it mean for us?

At the start of last year, the first Sunday of Lent, we never could have imagined what we are doing right now. I thought Lent last year was intense, most of it taking place in a pandemic, but now... Ha. I was wrong.

We are staring down the Lentiest Lent of all time: still in a lockdown we could never have imagined lasting this long, the light of vaccinations at the end of the tunnel, but also feeling so far away. We're hitting a collective wall, and we have been for a while. I don't know about you, but I'm starting to berate myself and tell myself, "you should be used to this, you should be doing better, you should be doing more." (By the way, my therapist always tells me "should is poison.") And then I know that I have so much to be grateful for, so I start to shame myself for feeling low when I am so unbelievably privileged. So what good news do I have to share today?

The best I could come up with is that beloveds don't have it easy, but we are not left alone.

God marks Jesus as God's beloved, and then sends him out into the wilderness. Just because we are called "beloved" doesn't mean life will be perfect. It does mean that we are not alone. That we are a part of something bigger than ourselves. That we realize the kingdom of God HAS come near. It's not about to come near, it's not coming in some future time, it's already here and now.

I'm sure you've heard the phrase, "trust the process." People say that all the time. Counselors, social workers, maybe even friends and family. What does it mean to trust the process?

Trusting the process is to fully embrace and live into each step of the journey, no matter how confusing, hard, or messy. In these brief passages from Mark, Jesus participates in quite a process. Each step along the way has its own significance in the process that brings him to the cross and ultimately to resurrection.

I think we can safely say that Jesus knew what God was doing, or at least had some idea, about the process he was undergoing. But trusting the process is not what we want to do. It doesn't always seem to work because we don't get better, we don't find what we're looking for, the process doesn't work.

We see that played out every day. Gridlock in the halls of Congress continues and the needs of our nation are ignored. There is no relief for weary healthcare workers, who continue to bear the brunt of the grief and pain of this past year. There is no economic relief for those who struggle to pay bills and provide basic needs for their families. Remote school is just plain awful.

What if instead of saying “trust the process,” I told you, “God is in the process.”

When in the midst of the wilderness of pain, fear, depression, anxiety, addiction, unemployment or uncertainty, Jesus’ process reminds us of this: God does not proclaim Christ’s beloved-ness **after** he resists temptation, but before he even encounters it. We don’t have to achieve anything in order to be called beloved, that mark is on us right from the beginning, just as it was for Jesus.

Many of you have heard me talk about Kate Bowler, a writer and professor at Duke Divinity school. My favorite book of hers is called “Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved.” Several years ago she was diagnosed with incurable colon cancer and is facing her mortality in a way that, thankfully, many of us have never had to do, but it’s a way that some of you likely strongly relate to.

Before she was diagnosed, Bowler had written a book about the prosperity gospel, which is a complex theology that I’ll try boil down to a single sentence: if you pray hard enough, if you have enough faith, God will give you exactly what you want. A new car, a clear scan, the perfect spouse, etc.

The problem with this sort of gospel is that our struggles and challenges have absolutely nothing to do with how much or how little faith we have, how “good” or how “bad” we have been in our life.

That’s a thought that may have occurred to you this past year, as you see family or friends suffer from Covid, loved ones who have lost their jobs or homes, long lines at food distribution centers or even this past week as we see death tolls climb in Texas in the wake of the devastating winter storms.

I had an explanation for why bad things happen to good people, but I don’t.

The only thing I can say is that before the struggle, during the wilderness, and after we come out the other side of the 40 days, three years or even a lifetime of pain; before, during and after, we are marked as God’s beloved.

God is there in the hospital rooms, where exhausted healthcare professionals act as nurses, family and friends to the dying who cannot receive visitors. God is there with the shivering person unable to find shelter in a weeklong Texas ice storm. God is there with our high school seniors, missing all the traditions and excitement of 18 years of hard work, stuck in their bedrooms when they should be walking the halls of a community they’ve worked so hard to be a part of.

God is there. In the pain and the grief and the heartbreak. God is there.

We will all face trials and challenges, no matter how faithful or unfaithful we are.

As people of faith, Bowler says, the only certainty we have is that in the worst moments, God comes to us, unbidden, uninvited. We don't have to earn God's presence, or worry that we won't have it; the only certainty is that when we come to the end, we are not alone.

I noticed that Mark stays silent about what Jesus' temptation actually is. Luke and Matthew both describe the conversation between Jesus and Satan in the wilderness, but Mark leaves it up to us to imagine the ways that Jesus might have been tempted. It allows us to put ourselves into the story as we notice all the different ways we are challenged, tempted or confronted by powers outside of our own control and outside of our own desire for our lives and the world¹.

The process of today's scripture passage is: baptism & beloved-ness- challenge & connection - gospel proclamation.

This is the process to which God invites us. It starts with our mark as beloved and leads to us proclaiming the gospel with our lives. There will be wilderness and there will be challenges but throughout this process God will not leave us alone. We will have companions along the way, as Jesus did.

On Wednesday we were physically marked with ashes on our foreheads, a sign of our mortality but also of our beloved-ness. As we marked our own foreheads, we said "From dust you have come, to dust you shall return. Remember your baptism and rejoice."

Those two things sound strange together, dust and rejoicing, but when we remember our baptism, our mark as God's own forever, we can rejoice that there is more to life than dust, than what we are facing right now, that there is more to life than even death.

"Why should I have to do Lent when the pandemic is Lent forever?" Kate Bowler asked on her Instagram account this week. She's doing a daily series of videos and I would highly recommend checking them out on her Instagram or facebook page.

Why should I have to do Lent when the pandemic is Lent forever?

When the smallest problems feel like catastrophes and the larger, systemic ones feel utterly unsurmountable? We are here at the place where things are genuinely terrible. And we cannot be convinced otherwise. But on the other hand, things are wonderful. We are alive. We are together. God is here. Dust and rejoicing. Holding both of those things is what I want to practice this Lent.

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx?podcast_id=979

Remember that from dust you have come, and to dust you shall return.
Remember your baptism and rejoice.

Believe in this good news. Amen.