

Again & Again: God Meets Us

First Sunday in Lent

Mark 1:9-15
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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Our brief Gospel reading is a perfect entry point into our season of Lent. With remarkable brevity, Mark provides us with a wealth of helpful information. But before we get to that, the word "Lent" comes from an Old English word for "lengthen", referring to the gradually lengthening days of late winter and early spring. Over the centuries, Lent evolved into a 40-day period of reflection, repentance, and preparing for Easter. It's more than that, however. **I invite you to embrace Lent as a pilgrimage, a spiritual journey where you and I search for deeper meaning and connection with God.**

The gospel writer, Mark, the first of the four gospels in our New Testament to have been written, and used later by both Matthew and Luke, begins by framing John the Baptist's message as a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4). He then **frames Jesus' baptism in a message that reveals God stands with sinners, with us**, and is thus a communal event, not just personal one. Mark states that when Jesus comes up from the water, the heavens were torn apart. Not just opened up, but ripped open! Biblical commentator MaryAnn McKibben Dana asks, "Does the rip in the heavens get put back together? Is it all sewn up and fixed, pristine as before? Does it heal like a wound, perhaps leaving a scar?" She reflects, "I like to think that the gash in the heavens remained. From where I sit in 2021, it feels more honest, after what we've all been through, to have it not neatly repaired but still in ragged pieces." She concludes, **"The covenant of God stands in the midst of a world that is still not as it should be."**

Next, Mark states that after the heavens were torn apart a dove descends on Jesus and a voice from heaven declares, "You are my Son – my Child – the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." As I have stated on so many occasions over the years, we too are also claimed by God as beloved. Know that is true, deep within your own being. Yes, God indeed claims you and me. And just as God meets Jesus at the water before he is tempted in the wilderness, **God meets us as well, at the water's edge, so to speak, at the threshold of something new, and names us Beloved.**

The Rev. T. Denise Anderson, former Co-moderator of the 222nd General Assembly of the PCUSA, where I had the fortune to get to know her when I served as a moderator of one of the GA's committees in 2016, is currently the Coordinator for Racial and Intercultural Justice with the Presbyterian Mission Agency at our national headquarters in Louisville, Kentucky. She is the biblical commenter for the *A Sanctified Art* resource that I'm using for this year's focus during Lent. Concerning that focus she states, **"God's covenant with all of creation reminds us that God meets us where we are – in the midst of our reluctance, doubt, eagerness, or weariness – and proclaims we are good.** In reference to today's Gospel reading, she then comments, "In just seven verses, we learn of three significant events in the life of Jesus as he began his ministry. The first is

his baptism, where God claims him as God's own beloved son. The second is his experience in the wilderness, where God sends angels to attend to him as he faces the Accuser. Lastly, after John the Baptist's arrest, Jesus begins proclaiming God's proximity and reign while calling for repentance.

"The common thread in each account is God's closeness. In pivotal moments, God is extraordinarily present with Jesus and those around him, and for good reason." She relates that to each of us in the here and now when she proclaims, "**God's proximity informs our trajectory.** God approaches us to claim, equip, and send us to do God's will. Again and again [which, by the way, is the name and overall theme of this Lenten resource], God meets us where we are, but doesn't necessarily leave us there. We shift from sinking sand to solid ground, navel-gazing to community, personal pietism to justice for all, and away from behaviors, both personal and systemic, that frustrate God's vision for the world."

That's the entire point of repentance of which Jesus preached. Repentance, in the original Greek, simply means a change of mind or heart. And while it is right and good to repent of our individual failings, it is also fitting to take responsibility for those things our community has done or left undone that need change. And yet, many people find it very hard to have a change of heart and mind, or have the courage to be held accountable. This is obviously something our nation has deep problems in facing. And yes, some form of reparations are part of this discussion.

So, the season of Lent is to be an intentional time when we focus on the fact that there are indeed things in our own lives where we need a change of heart and mind. **Lent is a good time to undertake a kind of physical, emotional, and spiritual spring cleaning.**

As mentioned, in so few words Mark records Jesus as stating in his very first sermon after returning from the wilderness, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). There's four parts to that statement. First, "The time is fulfilled": a reference to the dawn of a new era, a promised new day of which the prophets speak. Many have reflected that we, as a country, are indeed entering into a new era, including a racial reckoning. May it be one of greater accountability and justice.

Second, "The kingdom of God has come near": despite how things might seem, God's active kin-dom of love, justice, and peace is breaking into the world here and now. I encourage you to spend part of your time of reflection during Lent in how you are seeing that kin-dom manifested and embodied in our midst. Next, "repent": because of this nearness, we're called to repentance, that change of mind and heart of which I spoke. Perhaps this is at the very core of being persons of faith, actively seeking to transform our hearts and minds and actions to become the people God is calling us to be, especially in loving one another. Finally, "believe in the good news": trust that all of this is true, and rejoice! Because if we aren't filled with genuine joy, we didn't really hear the news!

You may have noticed I have basically skipped over the part of the story where Jesus spent 40 days of temptation in the wilderness. Since there is so much that needs to be said about that it will have to wait for another sermon. I'll close, instead, with the words of artist and poet Jan Richardson from her poem "Beloved Is Where We Begin", a wonderful blessing as we enter into this season of Lent.

Beloved Is Where We Begin

—Jan Richardson

from Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons

If you would enter
into the wilderness,
do not begin
without a blessing.

Do not leave
without hearing
who you are:
Beloved,
named by the One
who has traveled this path
before you.

Do not go
without letting it echo
in your ears,
and if you find
it is hard
to let it into your heart,
do not despair.
That is what
this journey is for.

I cannot promise
this blessing will free you
from danger,
from fear,
from hunger
or thirst,
from the scorching
of sun
or the fall
of the night.

But I can tell you
that on this path
there will be help.

I can tell you
that on this way
there will be rest.

I can tell you
that you will know
the strange graces
that come to our aid
only on a road
such as this,
that fly to meet us
bearing comfort
and strength,
that come alongside us
for no other cause
than to lean themselves
toward our ear
and with their
curious insistence
whisper our name:

Beloved.
Beloved.
Beloved.

Remember, again and again, God meets us, meets you, on that journey.

Amen.