

February 22, 2015

“Risking Forgiveness: The Inner Struggle”

Sermon by Rev. Robert English



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 for 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.'

Have you ever just felt the need to get away? Maybe you've just felt a little lost, or you're not quite really where you want to be, or who you want to be, or you feel like a shell, like you're just going through the motions? Those moments where you just feel this inner desire to just go out and drive for a bit with the radio turned down, just you, your thoughts, and the road. Or maybe you have a place, that solitary place, in your home or your neighborhood, that if you get there at just the right time you can spend at least 5 minutes alone...

If so, then we can at least start to empathize with Jesus in the gospel passage this morning on this the first Sunday of Lent. Each year we read this story of Jesus' time in the wilderness as we begin our 40 day journey together.

This year we hear the story from the gospel according to Mark, which is a gospel marked by its brevity and pace. In fact, if you weren't paying close attention to the reading this morning, you might have missed Jesus' 40 day journey all together, because the writer captures it in just 2 verses;

'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.'¹

Jesus, after being baptized, is immediately sent out into the wilderness by the same Spirit which just ripped apart the heavens and descended upon him. This same Spirit which is now driving Jesus out into the wilderness, because, well, how often do you volunteer to go into the wilderness?

It is here in this place where Jesus exposes himself in holy vulnerability, it is here where he is tempted and confronts the entirety of who he is, his true self.

It's not an accident that Jesus is driven out into the wilderness because the wilderness is a dangerous place but also a place where God had acted in the past. The wilderness is a space outside the bounds of normal society, normal everyday life, where you go to get away from it all, to know your true self and to meet God.

Theologian Karl Rahner wrote: 'Therefore Jesus goes into the desert, therefore he fasts, therefore he leaves behind everything else that a human needs even for bare existence, so that for this once not just in the depths of his heart but in the whole range of his being he can do and say what is the first and last duty of humankind- to find God, to see God, to belong to God to the exclusion of everything else that makes up human life.'

To belong to God, to the exclusion of everything else.

Jesus in the wilderness engages with the whole range of the human experience to find God and see God. He exposes himself, the fullness of who he is, the fullness of who we all are, by shedding everything else and just being Jesus. See in the wilderness you don't have a title, you don't have a role to play, you're not responsible for anyone else, you don't have the respect admiration of others, in the wilderness you are just you; Jesus was just Jesus.

He reveals to us the power and risk it requires to be vulnerable enough to go inward and engage in that inner struggle. To be tempted, to break down all of our false identities, to wrestle with the shadow side of being a human being, and to find God even in the midst of that, to see God, to belong to God, to find forgiveness and grace.

This is what this season of Lent is intended to do: To pluck us out of our day to day and place us with Jesus in the wilderness. It asks us to shed all of those human things that we put on each and every day and to take just a moment to peer within and see our true selves.

I ran across a blog post by Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber that reminded me that I like the season of Lent, a lot, probably too much. I like the fasting, the prayer, the intentionality of it all. I like that it is a season that so many of us **try** to take seriously. I like that our mainstream culture and society doesn't quite know what to do with it and so they take a break from trying to market to us until the season of the chocolate bunnies comes around. I like how comfortable we become over time with uncomfortable truths

revealed to us. But most of all, I find great hope when we as a church, as the body of Christ around the world, take 40 days to consider and to confess our own limitedness, brokenness and sin. It's no wonder I never get party invitations during Lent...¹

But, in some significant way, the wisdom of this church season invites all who choose to enter into it, a time, a dedicated spiritual space, to consider this huge part of what it means to be a human being, that we are in fact flawed, imperfect beings, that we have a shadow side within us, that we are bound by sin.

That part of us that can empathize completely with Jesus in the wilderness, surrounded by wild beasts and being tempted by Satan. That deep part within us that says, yeah I know what that is like, I've been there, I've seen that wild beast within me. I've felt lost and alone, and acted from that place of spiritual insecurity and separateness. That side of ourselves that it would be easier just to ignore and sweep underneath the rug, to go about our human day to day life and pretend as if it didn't exist.

But **sin** is not about having a poor self-image and beating ourselves up, it's not about being immoral and trying to manage our immorality, it's not about a list of rules and commandments that we are trying to keep, it's not about being utterly worthless or totally deprave.

It means that we are turned in on ourselves, the self-turned in...

That we give into the temptation to believe that we are separate from God and isolated from one another. It means that we believe that there is a part of us that is un-loveable, even for God.

This is why we need the wilderness places. This is why we are driven out, alone, vulnerable and exposed, so that we can, 'not just in the depths of our heart but in the whole range of our being.... belong to God.'

This is why we need Lent, to remember that we are dust, that we are turned in on ourselves, that within each of us is an inner struggle and that we stand in need of God's unconditional love, unmerited mercy, God's amazing forgiving grace. And in that act of confession we allow ourselves to just be our true self and we allow to God to be God.

And thank God that God is God, right? Thank God that the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness to confront, that which is within each of us and all of us that shadow side of our humanity. Because there is no part of our life, no part of our being that isn't graced with God's forgiving love. That even the part of us that turns inward and away from God is known by God in Christ in the wilderness. God has entered into every inner struggle, that we have known or could ever know and has redeemed it all, **and said there is nothing but love, nothing but love, nothing but love.**

As we follow in the way of Jesus, we are called not to hide ourselves away, but engage in our inner struggle, because God can use that to help us grow in our love of God and our love of neighbor. We can see our need every day for divine grace and recognize in others the same struggles that we share, offering forgiveness and compassion instead of judgment or resentment.

We are called to find our own wilderness places and spend time shedding all of our false identities and placing our true self, our whole self before God.

We are called to this risky life of forgiveness and hope, and it is a risky life because sometimes the world is not a very forgiving place. It seems like we prefer to tell stories of people who fall from grace for, well, being human, rather than the good news of Jesus Christ, where we never fall from grace but always into grace. Sometimes it can feel like there is a shortage of forgiveness and compassion out there, so much so that when we experience it, it catches us by surprise.

The person who extends compassion by not honking at you when you cut them off because you're running late....

The man who extends compassion by letting you in line before him at the check-out stand even though you both know he was there first and you have way more than 12 items in your basket

The woman who gives you that loving, forgiving, 'oh I've been there look' as you are gathering all of your gear while apologizing to everyone because your overtired infant is having an epic meltdown in the middle of the restaurant ruining everyone's lunch...It can catch us by surprise, these acts of grace, and wake us up to the truth that God's love is at work in the world, it gives us hope and encouragement, to engage in our own inner struggle and to grow in our love for others, to share in the struggle of another person, to say hey I've been there too, I know what that is like, and to risk forgiveness knowing you have been forgiven.

Be you, let God be God for you, and know that you are forgiven because Christ has been there. Amen.

Notes: ¹ Part of this section was inspired by a blog post by Nadia Bolz-Weber on Why I love Ash Wednesday

© Rev. Robert English, 2015. Permission is given for brief quotation with attribution. All other rights reserved.

First United Methodist Church • 1008 Eleventh Street • Santa Monica, CA 90403
www.santamonicaumc.org • 310-393-8258