

Sermon February 21 2021

SCRIPTURE: 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.'

SERMON: "Begin Where You Are" The Rev. Brent Damrow

I want to start by introducing you to Penelope. Penelope lives in a really small but a really beautiful apartment. And over the last year it has come to feel a bit smaller and perhaps a little bit too familiar. You can't possibly relate! Anyway, it started innocently enough on a Zoom conversation with a friend one evening about six months ago, when her friend asked, "If you could go anywhere, where would you go?" Penelope remembers that the answer that came first to her was, "Well, anywhere." But over time, it went from a hypothetical to a bit of a preoccupation, maybe even an obsession. So Penelope dreamed of and formulated a great adventure, a chance to get out and explore, to travel and discover, and have her world expanded, dreaming, because forces both internal and external had conspired for a whole year to deny her the chance to go anywhere. Could you possibly imagine??

So, the day was finally here, her two bags were packed, the car that was going to take her to the airport was on its way. She was finally going. So she picked up her cell phone to call the bellman. There was a tinge of undeniable excitement mixed with a healthy dose of nervousness. Adventure, risk, discovery, vulnerability – can you remember what that felt like? The bellman noticed two bags, one small but dense, black, bulging at the seams, the other huge, decorated with so many stickers from so many places that Penelope had been, that it almost took on the hue of a rainbow if you looked at it just right.

Well, the bellman hadn't been helping anybody with luggage for a long time, and he was a little nervous about whether he was out of practice, so he was going to start with the little one. He bent over to pick it up and he tried to stifle the grunt, because the heft of that first bag knocked him off balance. How could something so small weigh so much? And so he got a little bit nervous because he saw that huge bag sitting over there. And so he thought back to what his doctor said. He planted his legs firmly side by side, and made sure his back was straight. He knew he was going to lift with his legs, and he got down, and he heaved with all of his might. And that time he fell right over, as that huge, many-traveled and hued, behemoth of a bag literally flew off the floor, because it was light as a feather. Stunned, he turned to Penelope, who smiled, and remarked, gazing apologetically at the small bag, "Oh, I do need to bring a little something with me." But then wide-eyed at the bigger one, "But I need a lot more room for everything that I hope to bring home."

In Mark's gospel -- the gospel of journey, of motion, of movement -- there is an act of accumulation in full view, this need to have something with us on this journey to carry it all with us. Because Mark brings every scene into the next scene. The pace of Mark's gospel doesn't just move the story along. It allows each story to come along with the last, one barely out of mention with the other beginning, nothing ever fully wrapped up or explained. Instead, each encounter blossoms into the next moment of the journey. Both preparation and explanation, all of it a mosaic, just like those stickers on Penelope's bag, evoking an ever more full picture of what Mark proclaims in the very first verse of his very first chapter, that what he's trying to tell you about is the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And friends, that news comes in all sorts of different pictures and hues and sizes and shapes. So you better have something big enough to attach it to.

Consider this passage that Frank read this morning. From baptism to temptation to proclamation in seven verses. Did you know that Matthew takes two full chapters, six times the verses, just to spell everything out and wrap it all up for you? Luke -- you don't even want to know how long it takes him! But Mark, on the beginning of this Lenten journey, doesn't want to spell everything out. Instead, he wants us to learn how to do the spelling. He doesn't wrap anything up, for all that wrapping gets in the way of walking. Instead, Mark wants us to set out too and experience it, and then bring it home. Not just our bags, but our lives, ever more adorned with colorful testaments to our journey and to the one we follow, space always left for a little bit more to fit in.

Desmond Tutu was once asked how to set out on such a big journey like this one, especially in these daunting times. To which he smiled that trademark smile, and remarked, "Start where you are." The gift of Mark in this opening passage is to give us an unencumbered place to start with, empty feather-light bags, rather than being weighed down by too much.

I love Lent. I love all of the meaning that's been slowly wrapped into and onto it. I love the ritual, the meaning, the liturgy, the expectation. And I will also confess that sometimes it can end up being a time of more. More to give up, more to confess, more to address. The beauty of all of it, unfortunately, morphing into heavy-laden suitcases of what we think we need for the journey, rather than the journey bringing us what we need. Don't let Lent get heavy, for heavy baggage get in the way of fluid movement, and routines can get in the way of seeing new paths that we never knew were there. And Mark will not have any of it. Instead, he gives us everything we need to know for this journey to simply start moving, and he points us here in this passage to the path we too need to follow.

He starts with a high and holy day in the church life, the baptism of Christ. But in these two verses, notice Mark is not obsessed with any of the trappings, not focused on great crowds. He doesn't name them. He's not focused on the Baptizer or even on Jesus himself so much. Instead, the focus comes in that dove that alights down from the torn open heavens, the one that comes to you and me in the form of the Spirit, and the one that Jesus heard proclaiming his belovedness. Do you have eyes to see and ears to hear?

The temptation narrative that follows lacks specifics or an outcome. Yes, Mark names the principal players, yet he refrains from confining any of it. I think maybe it's because our

temptations might be different, even though, Lord knows, we will have them. Or maybe because we already know that temptation is real, that it brings us to the wilderness, and that it lingers. We're maybe never free from it. But what Mark wants us to remember is that we don't need a dramatic triumph. Rather, we must learn how to not get stopped by all those temptations, even and especially if they are beyond us.

It's not just the story I want you to pay attention to this morning, but the verbs. Did you even notice? Because the verbs in the temptation are markedly different from everything else in Mark's gospel. Mark is a gospel so full of active words and verbs. Jesus came, Jesus passed, Jesus healed, Jesus taught. And all of it seemingly immediately. But here in this pivotal starting off point of temptation, Mark puts every single verb in the passive, and he lets this moment linger. Notice it was the Spirit who drove Christ, it was Satan who tempted him, it was the beasts who accompanied him, and the angels who waited on him, all for forty days, which is an eternity in Mark's gospel. Maybe that's exactly what we need as we set out on our pilgrimage. As we, like Anna, strive to surrender our knowing into simply being in Christ's presence. And as we, like Anna, strive to lessen the grip on our being, that in this Lent we might yet still become.

And then notice that proclamation in this reading. It's not addressed to any particular one, no crowd, no location, because Jesus is speaking to us and now. The kingdom is near, Jesus says. Get up. Repent. Jesus says change your direction. Get out. Believe, Jesus says. Give your life to something. Get moving.

I love Lent, and all its beautiful, time-worn formality. But this year I hope to do something different, because these times are different. I hope you listened and lingered on that mountaintop last week, because then you see where we are going this year, with everything we've been through. Friends, don't get too wrapped up in rules and answers, because we have been desperately seeking them for so long. Instead, bring that empty suitcase, to find questions and to let truth find you. Let that joy and nervousness mingle. Notice what needs to be changed, and change what needs to be noticed.

I love the irony in what Anna shared with us this morning in the Sharing Moment. That idea that that religious place that had provided a ministry to so many on pilgrimage for so long had learned that they needed to have rules to keep it working. And one of those rules was if you're not here when we close the gate at night, it locks. And yet that rule prevented them from helping the person in most need that night. And it was those tattooed street people, who maybe had been cast out from all those rules for so long, who got it right and noticed who needed help, and who simply cared for her the whole night long.

As we set out together, let us leave any heavy bag behind, no matter how small, that we might have room and freedom to capture everything we are about to find and to bring it home to our hearts and our homes.

This Lent, I'm intentionally reading something not about this journey, but about beauty. And I'm starting with a remarkable book named that very thing, "Beauty," by John O'Donohue. Here's what he teaches about journeys. In the midst of them, we need to leave room in whatever we carry for beauty. So in Lent, don't just make room for truth or proclamations or even commands

of Jesus, but for the beauty of the journey itself. To look everywhere at the edges for beauty that is there. For beauty is the bridge that brings all things together. Beauty is that thing that blurs the lines between surrender and encounter, beauty that both opens and clarifies at the same time, beauty that keeps truth no matter how profound from becoming dull, beauty that makes each of us keep going to see what might yet astound us. Beauty – and I love this one – that brings memory and possibility into dance. For isn't that why we stand here at the starting line in the first place? Isn't that why we do Lent each year? Yes, remembering the journey of Christ, and yes for the realness of this moment, and yes for the possibility of what will yet be.

Friends, it is time to go. So unpack your bags. For we set out to see and to be seen. We set out to find and to be found. And we set out because so much is just waiting to come back home with us. Amen.