

Be Tender, Beloved

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

Mark 1:4-11 ~ January 10, 2021

I am recording these words on Saturday morning. The flag atop our Nation's Capitol is flying at half-mast – upon direction of Speaker Pelosi on the death of Officer Sicknick. Next steps are being considered by our elected leaders – to impeach, to hold accountable. Individually and collectively we are reeling from the sinful desecration brought upon the people of this land in Wednesday's act of domestic terrorism incited by the President.

One horror was the failure of the U.S. Capitol Police to protect the building and those within. I hope and trust we shall one day know the cause, and how far up the chain of command responsibility lies. A miscalculation, or something more nefarious? Some could see foresee; others connected the dots after the fact: that the disparity between this response and the overwhelming force of armored vehicles and personnel that some of us witnessed first hand in the Black Lives Matter protests this summer is yet another manifestation of this nation's sin of white supremacy. My heart sank on Wednesday afternoon as I watched on TV and realized, they're not coming – until too late.

What are you feeling about all this... today? It is overwhelming. It's important simply to acknowledge that. I need to sort through the swirl and name what I am experiencing, if just for myself and for God: Moral outrage, shame, anger, horror, sadness, indignation, vindictiveness, fury, bewilderment, hopelessness, hopefulness, confidence, trust, feeling wounded, maybe sadness - again, and horror, and anger. What else? What other feelings? Responses? That's a lot for our human hearts to bear. God is here, with us. We need to pay attention. We are reeling. We need to be tender with those around us. We need to check in with one another. We need to love one another.

We also need to check in with God. To lift before God in our own prayers, whatever we are feeling in our hearts. To ask God, help me. Let me know your presence God. Hold all this mess with me, with us. God, what am I to make of this, what are we to make of this tumult?

God of mercy, God of justice, hear the cries of your people. In these hours of distress, pour out your love upon us, and upon this nation. Gather us to your self, take us by the hand, show us a better way, and lead us to your truth. Amen.

I am grateful that I am charged today with proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I was at the Jordan River in February – just last year. With twenty-five of St. Columba's finest – pilgrims in the Holy Land. A couple of days before our visit to the river, one in our number approached and asked me if I would baptize him. For the record, my answer is always yes. I will baptize anyone, anywhere, with any water available. Just before he was baptized, another one of our pilgrims said, "me too! I don't think I was ever baptized. Maybe, but I don't think so." So, we got him wet too. You never can tell what might happen when you start messing with the Holy Spirit; she's likely to stir things up in people's hearts. And the rest of us who were there that day? I believe we each one of us felt doubly, triply blest for being present.

Does this Gospel have any Good News to speak to our aching hearts? You be the judge.

As a text, the Gospel of Mark is crisp and straightforward, the narrative and sentence structure compact. Chapter one, verse one: the beginning of the Gospel – the Good News – of

Jesus Christ, the word “beginning” set to invite us to connect verse one of the book of Genesis: in the beginning.

Three verses later, we’re here, at the Jordan River. No birth narrative, no shepherds in their fields or magi bearing gifts. This is the beginning. For Mark’s listeners, that John is clothed in camel’s hair, eating locusts prompts direct lineage from the great prophet Elijah. As if I told you, behold a tall man with gaunt cheeks and stovepipe hat. Elijah confronted the kings and the powers, proclaimed the end of times, with the coming of a new era.

John’s message? Repent: turn; turn from. Repent for the forgiveness of sins. Sin: misdirected appetites that harm your relationship with God, with others, with yourself – your soul. Turn from those ways. John’s further message? I am just the messenger. Repentance is the first step. One far greater (than I) is coming.

Often the prophets present a vision of a future. I have a dream. With John, in Mark’s Gospel, the prophecy is immediate. The next verse: “In those days Jesus. . . .” Here he is, the one foretold, the future at hand. “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.”

That Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee means, among other things, that Jesus left home, left his family. In the ancient Mediterranean world, family was the most important construct. Without family, you are no one.

Where are we? John appeared “in the wilderness.” This is not an REI or Patagonia adventure wilderness. This is end of the known world, out in the desert, wilderness, where forces beyond our ken are known to reign and will surely prevail. The kind of wilderness where you’re really, really far from safe home. And we’re at the Jordan. Except in the immediate aftermath of the spring rains, the Jordan isn’t much of a river. It has nothing on the Potomac for volume or force. And yet the Jordan River: this is the threshold, the place of crossing, where John’s forebears, and our forebears and now we ourselves, might traverse from the wilderness we inhabit, to the land flowing with milk and honey, into the Promised Land.

We are gathered at that river, that place, that threshold. Who is gathered? “People from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem.” That’s a lot of people come out to see a guy in camel’s hair. Did they all come at once? Or maybe snuck out in two’s and three’s when no one else was looking, as word spread. I suppose some came for the novelty, curious to hear the carnival barker. But I also suppose things must have been pretty bad up there in Jerusalem, and in that whole Judean countryside. I mean when we’re fat and happy we don’t need to go out and hear someone tell us to repent. No, it’s when we’re hurting, when things are broken, when we’ve already exhausted the usual remedies, when the doctors or priests or politicians have done what they do and still it hurts.

Now, it sounds as though there are a lot of people that have come out to the river. But when reporting, it’s easy to enhance crowd size. You don’t even have to be a politician; why, some Sundays back when we actually gathered in person, I could look out and see just thousands of y’all, come to feast at the table. I raise this because even if the crowds *were* large that came to hear John preach, I am guessing the vast majority of folks in Jerusalem did not. Most of the folks stayed home. They weren’t bad. Maybe they were busy, maybe they were resigned to things staying as they do, maybe the status quo was working pretty well for them. And of the folks that made it to the river, how many actually waded in? To repent, to turn from the ways we’re living

our lives, even when those ways might literally be killing us, or cutting us off from people we love, or prompting us to live in ways that directly contradict our deepest held beliefs and values.... When we get right up to the brink, many a good person, has turned away.

Well, if John's baptism is about turning from, Jesus' baptism is about turning toward. The threshold we are given to traverse, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, includes freedom *from*. And freedom *for*. Freedom from the ways that destroy us, and freedom for a life that's all about love. There it is, you knew we'd get to love. It's not yet a sermon, it's not yet good news, until we get to love.

What happened? Jesus stepped into that water, and the heaven's opened, and the Spirit descended like a dove, and a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased."

This text of course is not – at first – about us, at all. It's about Jesus. It's about who he is. He left his family back in Nazareth, came to the river, and now none other than God has claimed Jesus as "my Son, my beloved, my family." It's all about Jesus, but everything about Jesus is all about you and me, too. Jesus embodied the love of God, so we might discover that we also embody the love of God. Said Jesus, I am the sick person you visited in the hospital, I am the widow and the orphan you took care of and loved, I am the refugee you welcomed, I am the young man in prison whom you visited. When you did it for the least of these, my children, you did it for me. When you and I step into that river, as surely as the heavens opened for Jesus, they open for us, the dove of the Holy Spirit rests upon us, and God proclaims, you are my beloved.

So here's the thing. Here's the truth in two parts that paradoxically contradict one another. One truth is that we are already beloved children of God. It's done. God has done this. And there is nothing you or I can do to undo God's love. No amount of whatever sins you commit – yesterday, today, tomorrow – will make you less beloved of God. And if it's true for you, it's true for them.

And – here's the flip side: it is our life as beloved of God to step up and step into that role of being beloved every single day. It's great if I loved my neighbor yesterday, but today, the question is how am I loving my neighbor today? It is great if yesterday I stopped in prayer to open my heart to receive God's love. And today. Am I available to living God's love day?

James Finley, the contemplative teacher and student of Thomas Merton, was asked one day about the path toward holiness of life. He said you get up in the morning, you go to your quiet place, light a candle, you sit in silence, in prayer, trying to be aware of being in God's presence. And after a time, you blow out the candle, and go about your day. The next morning, you get up and do it again. And you keep doing that every day, until you die; that's holiness of life.

Bringing this back to the matter at hand, I think the late great John Lewis was telling us much the same thing when he said, "Democracy is not a state. It is an act, and each generation must do its part to help build what we called the Beloved Community, a nation and world society at peace with itself."

Beloved, we are always beloved of God. And, it is for us to live as beloved today, and to see as beloved all whom we meet. Democracy is an act. The same can be said of what it means to be a disciple of Christ, and of the liberating power of the Gospel, and the love of God itself.

These are not states and are not static; discipleship is an act, liberation is an act, God's love is embodied in human action.

First and foremost, our call is to bind up the wounds of the tens of thousands of people suffering right now from COVID-19 – from the disease itself, and from the economic, emotional, and societal crises it has wrought. Our call is to cry out for, advocate, and insist upon integrity from our public officials, to uphold the promises they made to care for the people of this land and to the common good.

As we discern a collective role as the church – in efforts for truth, for accountability, for reconciliation, for community, for hope, for love – I believe everyone's going to need to head out and gather at the river. Not as a call to be baptized - but, like I said, the answer to baptism is always yes. Because to get to the river, we all have to leave the security and safety of our own constructs. We have to go willingly into the wilderness in search of a better way. And when we get there and face the prospect of turning from and toward, the prospect of freedom from and freedom for, we'll need to step into the bracing waters and fiery winds of the Spirit of God to stir up our collective hearts and direct our paths in God's holy ways.

For today, I want to repeat what I said in the beginning: be tender. Our hearts are full. Everyone's heart is full right now, to the point of breaking. Be tender with yourself. Be tender with those you love. Be tender with the stranger. God is with you. Amen.