

Sermon 2-18-24

Paul Purdue preaching

Mark tells no back stories: no theological images like John, no genealogy like Matthew, and no birth narrative like Luke. Mark begins with John the Baptist.

Jesus was about 30 years old, the age when many men got married, when he decided to travel to the Judean wilderness to hear John the Baptist preach. John was a powerful, prophetic, political preacher who drew large and diverse crowds out into the wilderness with fiery sermons. Regular folks, leading priests, politicians, and even Roman Soldiers came to the wilderness. I grew up thinking about Jesus' baptism as a formality, as an "according to all righteousness" box the Holy One checked for our benefit, after all orthodoxy teaches that Jesus had nothing to repent. But I'm beginning to wonder if Jesus' baptism and wilderness experience are pivotal moments, where Jesus discerns what his life will be about? Lent Invites us to slow down and ponder deeper questions like: who will we be?

Geopolitically Jesus' world was a mess. Within a few years, a drunk King Herod would execute John the Baptist for preaching about politics. (Mark 6) An earlier King Herod ordered the slaughter of the innocents. (Matt 2) Within two decades tensions between Jewish zealots and the Roman Empire would spark a war and the total destruction of Jerusalem Temple. Titus, the Emperor, would build a Roman victory arch where the Temple once stood. Jesus will leave his time in the wilderness preaching about the "kingdom of heaven" 32 times in Matthew and "God's Kingdom" 30 times in Luke. Jesus' kingdom offers an alternative vision to that of Herod, Titus or Pharaoh. We build the kingdom of heaven with peacemaking, pure hearts, mercy, forgiveness, hungering for justice, flipping tables, feeding hungry people, and free healthcare. Given the state of the world, why did Jesus not just get right to that Kin-dom work? Why spend time with John? Why spend 40 days in the wilderness, praying, fasting, and facing temptation? Why not right now?

Without time in the wilderness, without sabbath, we can be overwhelmed by our schedules, the problems in the world, and the distractions of our phones. There can be a "tyranny" of the "right now". The world's needs are great. We all have so much to do. We do not want to miss out or worse yet have our children or grandchildren miss out on anything. Our electronic leashes ding and flash with distraction, diversions and fears. Our pace makes little time for the pause of sabbath, spiritual formation, devotional practice, small groups, meaningful connections, prayer, and worship. A friend confessed that their smartwatch was ruining the pleasure of running by posting to Strava, measuring and judging each run- so they feel the need to defend a slower run. We are so busy doing and going we struggle to be present where we are. Lent invites us to slow down and be present with God, ourselves, and others.

Jesus, a thirty year old artisan, decided to make the trip to hear John's preaching. Maybe that was all Jesus planned, a long weekend in the wilderness away from the carpentry shop? Did John's message, "Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the

kingdom of heaven!” stir something deep that shaped who Jesus was becoming? (Matt 3) Upon leaving the wilderness, Jesus takes John’s message as his own “Now is the time! Here comes God’s kingdom! Change your hearts and lives! Trust this good news!”

Mark tells us “straightaway, immediately, while the water was running down Jesus’ face, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. And there was a voice from heaven: “You are my Child, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness.”

In Luke and Matthew, the Heavenly voice is more like a public service announcement played for the benefit of the listeners: “This is my child, who I love”. Mark employs the messier second person pronoun “you”, sharing the more intimate language of you and me. I love you. “You are my child” Mark’s personal pronouns remind us of Isaiah 43 where God says to us all “Don’t fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine.”

Rev. Doctor Kate Field shared “the thin places kind of happen outside of normal time and space. They are moments where the veil between heaven and earth is thin. They are holy and distinct moments. I’ve been in thin places, when I’ve been by their sides when congregants died... I’ve seen it when new life comes into the world. I saw it in the vigil we had after Covenant. I think Ash Wednesday can be a thin place.” Lent invites us to be present in the thin moments, to look for them and share them with others.

Wednesday morning, Pastor Heather marked my forehead with ashes and I heard her say, “Paul you were created as beloved, you are loved, and to Love you will return.” I repeated those words “God created you as beloved, you are loved, and to Love you will return,” over every forehead or hand I marked with an ash cross. Hearing the word and receiving the ashes some people slipped into tears, maybe it was a thin place for them.

Our thin places can come in different ways. Few people have ever been more sincerely pious than John Wesley. Wesley was a Bible moth, visited prisoners on death row, fed the poor, fasted, studied, prayed, and lived so modestly his parents worried about him. Wesley was extremely devout but consumed by self-judgment . On May 24, 1738, John’s journal recounts how he “went very unwillingly to a Society in Aldersgate- Street, where (some)one was reading Luther’s preface to Romans”. Around 8:45 pm as Wesley listened to Luther’s insights about God as the source of all grace and personal holiness, a flip switched, and Wesley wrote “I felt my heart strangely warmed.” This careful and odd phrase marked a deep change in Wesley. Wesley began talking about salvation not in terms of theology or good works but with a question “Has the Love of God been spread abroad in your heart?” Again and again Wesley’s writing returned to Romans 8, “So now there isn’t any condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus... all who are led by the Spirit are children of God. God’s Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are children of God. God helps us in our weakness... nothing can separate us from the love of God.” Aldersgate street, the Damascus Road, Ash Wednesday, Christmas Eve,

birth, baptism, communion, a Bach concerto, a cardinal's song all might be thin moments if we are attentive.

The moment when the sky split open, the Spirit glided down like a Dove and God spoke Love deep into Christ's soul made a difference in Jesus' life. Mark writes "Jesus saw!" Jesus shared what he saw and heard with the disciples. Jesus sharing his thin place is a model for us. Perhaps, Jesus learned from his mom to treasure the thin moments in his heart and tell them to others. (Luke 2) Lent invites us to be present with God and ourselves by rehearsing our thin moments within our souls and then sharing them with others. Others need your story- for in your thin moment they may overhear the good news that they "are beloved by God, they belong to God, God has called them by name!" Maybe Wesley's 1738 journal does not stir your spirit, but you have leaned in just a bit, as you heard again the story of Moses, the Burning Bush, and God's call "Go down Moses, way down into Pharaoh's Land, tell oh Pharaoh let my people go?" Your thin moments may help someone see Christ in a sunrise, discover their belovedness, or have courage to face something new.

Now, there is always a risk in sharing about your thin places. Someone might say as you show them a photo of a new baby, "that baby is not that cute". We even in church sometimes say, "what do you mean the sky split open", "that can't be right because second Jeroboam 47:19 says", "are you sure you heard that?" or "your heart was strangely warmed", that sounds weird!" Still, it is worth the risk, the world needs a different story, one that makes room for thin places and the kingdom of heaven. Our neighbors long to believe the Good News they are beloved.

Jesus heard the Divine Voice claiming, calling, and naming him as beloved! I wonder if that same moment Jesus heard God's call to a life beyond friendships, fun, and beyond making fine furniture? "You are my child, you are mine, I have called you, (you have a bigger holier work to do: Trust this good news, change hearts and minds here comes the Kingdom of Heaven)?" It helps to remember we are beloved when we step away from the safe life inside our carpenter shops. In "Strength to Love" Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. tells how he wrestled with the weight of leading the civil rights movement. One night unable to sleep, Martin wrestles with his fears in prayer. King shares "At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never before... It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying, 'Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever.' ... I was ready to face anything." Lent helps us think about what we need to face and who we face it with.

Immediately, straightaway, with the water dripping from his hair the Spirit drives, forces, pushes Jesus out into the wilderness for 40 days. Matthew and Luke use the polite language of being "led by the Spirit" but at times a moment, a truth, an assurance compels us into action. Whether we experience a gentle leading or a sky splitting moment we need your story. Someone may overhear their belovedness in your recalling a thin place. We Americans struggle to be present with God, ourselves and others. We want to get onto the outcomes and measure the productivity of Sunday

School, small groups, lent or sabbath. Lent invites us to step away and be present with ourselves, with God, with each other, to sabbath: remembering and sharing our thin places. If we leave the wilderness knowing we are beloved then maybe that is where our real productivity begins. Amen.