

February 21, 2021
Pastor John Chaplin

Sermon

Mark seems to do everything quickly in his Gospel. And our read today, his account of Jesus' first public appearance, is no exception. If Mark's story were the only one we had, we would know nothing of John's attempt to make Jesus the baptizer instead of him. (As we do in Matthew). We would have no debate between Jesus and the devil in the wilderness. (As we do in Matthew and Luke). All that we would have are those seven spare verses, moving along at quite a fast pace. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it: "Blink once, and Jesus is traveling from Nazareth to the Jordan River. Blink twice, and he is preaching his first sermon, with his baptism, his vision of divine favor, his wilderness temptation, and John's arrest all behind him."

Mark moves quickly, yet he fills those verses with important echoes from Israel's past. And for the preacher today, in this Gospel read there is certainly a lot of material to work with. The challenge is whether to treat this passage as a sort of an introduction to the season of Lent, and if so, how. I wrestled with that!

The most obvious approach is to recognize Jesus as the ultimate model of self-surrender to God. Taylor explains it this way: "Jesus freely chose John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (practicing what he was about to preach). When the voice of heaven told him who he was, he attached no privilege to that announcement of divine favor. When the Spirit drove him into the wilderness, he did not seek a way out. The Beloved Son accepted the company God gave him in the desert—Satan, wild animals, ministering angels—with no drama of preferring one to the other. Here is someone who wastes no time defending himself against what comes to him, knowing that everything comes from God. Here is someone who shows us what it means to please God."

And yet, I kept getting drawn back to the Psalm reading for today!

Psalm 25 contains all the typical elements of a prayer for help—it has sections of complaint, and lament, and petition. But along with that it also has sections of praise and trust. The Psalms reflect such a wide range of human experiences.

Maybe that particular mix is speaking to us in the midst of a pandemic this Lenten season. Perhaps Psalm 25 casts a vision for the season: we lift up our very souls to God—everything we are; our authentic selves—trusting that this is the road to life. To paraphrase those first few reluctant words: “I have lifted up my soul, my all, to you—don’t let it be for nothing.” It is a plea for balance, for the world to make sense once again.

As Frederick Buechner writes, “If you want to know who you are, watch your feet, because where your feet take you, that is who you are.” Lent is a time to choose who we will be and whose we will be. Our identity will not be totally defined by what we claim to believe, but maybe more so by the road we take.

Brian Erickson says: “The call for patient trust, for keeping to the road, is a powerful judgement on all forms of Christianity that promise comfort and quick results, and is especially appropriate in the context of Lent. Patience is more than mere virtue when dealing with an elusive God. In a culture that lusts after quick fixes, patience is one of the most difficult things that can be asked of us. It can also be a message of grace, however, because it validates dry spells within the Christian life. Faith is more than mountaintop moments; it also encompasses times of solitude and struggle. The right road will not always look like the right road.”

And so we cry out, in the same fashion as the psalmist, “Make me to know....Teach me....Lead me on the right road.”

Though we sometimes do this in isolation, can you think of some people in your life who have done these same things for you? Reflect on the loving, patient, compassionate guides you may have had in your lifetime. A professor, coach, family member, teacher, neighbor: Think about this person’s imprint on your life. Think about the time spent together, the sort of activities you did together. What was the best advice you got from them?

Even when we feel estranged from God, God gives us the gift of human relationships. It is through these relationships that new worlds, new possibilities, new ideas are cultivated and nurtured.

The late Cicely Tyson was an expert in that kind of loving touch. Viola Davis, who considered Tyson a mentor and more, said this: “You made me feel loved and valued in a world where there is still a cloak of invisibility. You gave me permission to dream...because it was only in my dreams that I could see the possibilities in myself. Thank you for shifting my life.”

Davis, I think, captures the heart of what the psalmist declares. We need human beings around us who make us “feel loved and seen and valued,” especially in a world that is unkind to the most targeted among us. We need human beings who give us “permission to dream.” To have that someone who can “Make me to know..Teach me...Lead me on the right road!”

The New York Times reported last Tuesday that more than 700 people have been keeping digital diaries as part of the Pandemic Journaling Project. It may be the most complete record of our shifting moods in this isolating year.

The article reads like a modern day version of the Psalms, that sort of full spectrum of human emotions. One particular entry from a case manager in her 60’s from Illinois struck me: They said:

“I can’t help thinking about someone I know who is very vulnerable to any passing pathogen. A talented musician who is self-isolating because he doesn’t want to catch Covid but is dying inside due to loneliness...The pandemic has attacked us right where we are most human; it has tried to rob us of our connectedness.”

May we not lose that sense of connectedness—to ourselves, to each other, and to the Divine. Lent asks us each to choose our path, to make a decision about who we are and whose we are. Here at the beginning of this strange season, we answer God’s call not with words, but with our steps. May we watch our feet!