

Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15
First Sunday of Lent
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Mark's version of the temptation of Jesus is amazingly sparse. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark says virtually nothing about what happened in the wilderness – only that Jesus was there for forty days, that he was tempted by Satan; that he was with the wild beasts; and that angels waited on him.

There is no conversation with Satan, no temptation to turn stones into bread, or to throw himself down from the temple or to rule all the kingdoms of the world, as there is in Matthew and Luke's versions. None of that.

Mark boils it down to just two verses. He tells us how Jesus gets into the wilderness and who else was there with him.

In other years, we would typically zero in on what happens to Jesus in the second verse, during his time in the wilderness. But this week, I couldn't get past the first verse - how it is that he got there in the first place.

You see, Mark doesn't say the Spirit suggested that Jesus go spend some time in the wilderness. There is no invitation to be gentle with himself, no quiet time alone with God, no retreat from the difficulties of the world.

In Matthew and Luke, the Spirit *leads* Jesus into the wilderness. But in Mark, the Spirit *drives* Jesus into the wilderness. The Spirit does not take Jesus by the hand and guide him here. The Spirit pushes Jesus into the wilderness.

So what does Mark know about Jesus that requires this shove? Would Jesus dare to refuse if he were given a choice? Would Jesus not willingly go where God wanted him to be?

This year, as we begin our 40 days of Lent, I feel like I'm being shoved into the wilderness. Some years I can be led there, but this year, I need the Spirit's push. Without it, I could not go where God is calling me.

You see, for far too long, I have been afraid to talk about controversial issues with people I know disagree with me. For far too long, I have been holding onto the illusion that someone else will start the conversation so I don't have to. For too long, I have been afraid to do little more than dip my toe into the water.

On Ash Wednesday, after the massacre in Parkland, Florida, all that changed. I felt a hard shove from the Spirit then and so today, I'm going to commit myself to something different. I'm going

to let go. I'm going to let go of my fear. I'm going to let go of the delusion that I have to be invited into the conversation before it can start.

I'm going to let go because I'm convinced that's what Lent is all about. My friend and mentor, Joe Harvard, writes this:

Lent is the season when we as followers of Jesus Christ are called upon to do some uncomfortable things like take a hard look at our personal lives and our common life in the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in preparation to celebrate the incredible reality of Resurrection. God's love endures all things, even death, and nothing can separate us from God's love. How do you get ready to celebrate the power of God's love to set things right in a broken world?¹

On Wednesday, thirty of us got ready for that celebration by coming together to receive the mark of ashes on our foreheads and to hear the reminder that we are mere mortals. "Remember, you are dust and to dust you shall return." We came to confess, in the words of that traditional prayer of confession, that we have sinned in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone; that we have not loved God with our whole heart, mind, and strength, or our neighbors as ourselves; that we have not forgiven others as we have been forgiven; and that have not listened to God's call to serve as Christ served us.

I suspect the focus on death and confession is what keeps some people away on Ash Wednesday. "The commitment to spend time in self-examination and be open to God's power to transform us," flies in the face of a culture in denial of our need for repentance."

But hey, I have news for you. We are going to die. You are going to die. I am going to die. Every single person in this room is going to die, one day. Our challenge, in the words of poet Ben Okri, is to live while we are alive.

Do you remember the first time you jumped into a swimming pool without a floatation device? Or the time you decided to get started on your bucket list with a sky driving lesson? Or the time God called you to a new vocation or out of a difficult relationship?

How did you feel? Was that leap easy for you or did you have to screw up your courage to do it?

When you jump into the pool, you have to let go of the steady pavement at the edge of the pool. When you jump into the open air, you have to let go of the plane. When you answer God's call to a new vocation, you might have to let go of the security of a well-paying job.

¹ Joseph S. Harvard, "Preaching Repentance in Lent", *Journal for Preachers*, Vol. 41, #2 – Lent 2018, p. 3.

We have all known that feeling at some point in our lives, perhaps some more than others. It's scary. You have to learn to reach beyond yourself, to trust someone other than yourself.

You have to trust the parent who stands in the waist deep water waiting to catch you when you jump. You have to trust the parachute to open the way the instructor explained. You have to trust God to lead you as you take on a new vocation and or enter a new relationship.

And when you do, there's no guarantee that you won't get hurt.

I've decided that I'm okay with that.

I've decided I'm okay with that not because I'm into self-flagellation but because that's what love demands. Love demands that I repent from my need to keep myself safe: safe from pain; safe from criticism; safe from the risks of following the one whose path leads to the cross.

During Lent we are called to meditate and pray about how our lives can better reflect the love of Jesus in our relationships, not just with people who are easy to love or people with whom we agree, but with all for whom he lived and died and was resurrected.

This kind of love is risky. We might have to say things that risk our getting hurt. We might have to do things that might cause us to be rejected or ignored by people we thought were our friends. We might even stumble and fall. But isn't that exactly what the one we follow, himself, endured?

Lent is the season when we are called to jump in the water without our floatation devices; when we are called to jump from that airplane when the instructor says go; when we are called to speak the truth to power, to risk finding out what we *can* agree on for the sake of our children, and to challenge the false assumption that there is nothing we can do to stem the rising tide of violence in our communities, in our nation and in our world.

I am tired of hearing that there is nothing we can do! As Christians we are called to love one another and love requires action, even if we fail, the kind of love Christ demonstrated for us.

Our Book of Order puts it like this:

The Church is called to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, even at the risk of losing its life.

The Church is to be a community of hope, rejoicing in the sure and certain knowledge that, in Christ, God is making a new creation and living in the present on the strength of that promised new creation.

The Church is to be a community of love, when sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished, and the dividing walls of hostility are torn down.

And the Church is to be a community of witness, pointing beyond itself through word and work to the good news of God's transforming grace in Christ Jesus its Lord.²

And here's the thing. In Christ, we have all we need for this task.

Again, from Joe Harvard,

In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, something happened that was and is a game changer. When you come to the awareness of this reality, that God's love has been let loose in the world, things are not the same. It leads to a change of heart and to a new way of living in the world. Because the forces that seek to counter this reality are so strong, it needs to be retold through our liturgy, [but more importantly through our lives.]³

During the next forty-odd days, we will be challenged "to pry loose our fingers, one by one, from the things to which we cling for security and plunge us into the waters. But these are not just any water. They are baptismal waters."

When we jump, "rather than falling back into nothingness, we fall back on [the] everlasting arms"⁴ of a God who is trustworthy, a God, who is gracious and merciful, a God who is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and a God who will never let us go.

Let's not wait for the Spirit to push us again. Let's go for it! Who's with me?

² *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, Part II: *Book of Order*, F-1.0301(Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 2015-2017), 2.

³ Harvard, 5.

⁴ Peter C. Bower, ed., *The Companion to the Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2003), 110.