



TRAVELLING COMPANIONS

February 18, 2018, The First Sunday in Lent

Mark 1: 9-15

Douglas T. King, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

If you needed one of the gospel writers to distill the story of Jesus into a haiku, you would turn to Mark. What takes Matthew, Luke and John, respectively 28, 24, and 21 chapters to lay out, Mark accomplishes in a pithy 16. He hurtles along at breakneck speed painting a vivid and intense minimalist portrait of Jesus. Mark is the Twitter gospel.

We see evidence of this in our text this morning. Matthew and Luke, sharing the same story, give us an extended dialogue between Jesus and some personified adversary during his time in the wilderness. Mark just sticks to the bold facts. Jesus was tempted by Satan. We are left to fill in the blanks about what that may have entailed.

What strikes me most about this text is the quick transition from that joyous baptism moment to Jesus' time in the wilderness. We get this glorious image of the Spirit in the form of a dove descending on Jesus and these wonderful parental words from above, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

And then the gears shift suddenly and dramatically. We are told, "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness." No time for congratulations, or pictures or cake. If that is to what being beloved and pleasing your parent leads, let me be the less than favored son. In this third sermon in the series, "God on the move in the Gospel of Mark" we once again are struck by the relentless momentum of Jesus' life. In the two previous weeks we have seen Jesus running ahead of us as we try to keep up. This week is a little different. This time Jesus is being shoved forward. If he wanted to catch his breath and enjoy the moment, he



was not afforded the opportunity. The past two weeks we have talked about how if we want to be with Jesus we need to keep moving forward. This week we are learning that even Jesus is trying to keep up with God.

Often, when we speak of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, we are struck by how alone he is. We have a lovely Lenten hymn in our hymnal, *Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley*. We focus on the solitary nature of his journey. But this year I am struck by the company along the way. The Spirit pushing him from the safe and comforting place of baptism to the wilderness. And we are also told of the wild beasts out there and the angels who ministered to him.

We draw parallels between Jesus' time in the wilderness and our forty day journey in Lent. Seeing how Jesus is driven into the wilderness and then eventually ministered to while he is there has something to teach us about the nature of being the church. Even the biggest Type A people can run the risk of stagnating in their spiritual life. We can fall into mind-numbing ruts of how we pray, or worship or whatever we do to seek to be faithful. That is one of the reasons why we need to be in community together. Sometimes we need the Spirit, speaking through our fellow church members, to give us a nudge, to encourage us to swim in deeper waters. It can come in so many forms; an invitation to a Bible Study; encouragement to come and serve a meal on Wednesday night at Neighborhood Coalition for Shelter; a sermon that provides us with fresh insight; a conversation at coffee hour that opens our eyes.

As I have been saying for the past two weeks, if God is constantly on the move, then we too are called to be on the move if we want to experience our God. And it is nearly impossible to stay on the move just by ourselves. We need each other, we need the church to cajole and persuade us to move forward, to extend beyond our previous comfort zones, to be challenged as to what we believe and how we live that out.

You might say this is a pretty watered down version of the temptation that Jesus faced. Trying out a Bible Study is not quite grappling with Satan in the wilderness.



But it is important to remember the purpose of that temptation for Jesus. He is being challenged to understand whom he is called to be as a Messiah. At the very beginning of his ministry Jesus faces a fundamental identity question. Now, we are not dealing with questions of our messiahship, but we do face identity questions as well.

In Lent, as we seek to journey with Jesus to the cross, we are not solely called to learn more about who Jesus is, but also who we are. And what most of us learn when we go on this journey is a complicated stew of things. We can learn what is remarkable and unique about ourselves; the ways in which we are distinctly generous and loving and kind; the special qualities we bring to the world that perhaps no one else brings. When we are brought face to face with our gifts, the church is the place where we learn to share them. But we also learn about other parts of ourselves; the common elements of who we are that we share with too many others; our insecurities and pettiness and fears, our stingy places and less than perfect proclivities.

And when we are brought face to face with those parts of ourselves with which we are less proud, the church is the place to be. When we are wounded by the world, the church is the place to be. When we feel like our life is in the midst of the wilderness, this is the place to be. For the church is called to be like those ministering angels that waited upon Jesus. We are called to be a place that brings comfort and care when we need it most.

We can learn a lot on the road with Jesus in Lent. We can learn about who Jesus is. We can learn more of who we are. And we can learn who the church is called to be. This morning we baptized Anderson. Not exactly the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, but there are a lot of the same things at stake. Anderson is not being driven by the Spirit into the wilderness. But soon enough Anderson will be facing the challenges of life; even if it is just the adventures of a preschool classroom learning to share toys; and figuring out who he is. Before Jesus is driven into the wilderness by the Spirit to figure out who he is, God speaks to him to tell him the single most important definition of who he is. “You are my Son, the Beloved, with



you I am well pleased.” That identity will shape every choice he makes after that. And that is just what we did this morning, celebrating Anderson as a beloved child of God. And we made a solemn promise. We promised that we would continue to tell Anderson that he is a beloved child of God; whispering it in his ears from his time in the nursery on through Sunday School and confirmation class and all that is to come. And we pray that it will shape his entire life.

Being a child of God comes with a fascinating inheritance. We are offered the ultimate comfort of knowing we are beloved and offered the care of the community of faith, the church.

As well, we are pushed forward. Pushed forward by our God and by our church to grow in our understanding of who God is and who we are and what that means for how we live.

The past several weeks I have been talking about how we need to be on the move if we want to keep up with God on the move. I have to admit the entire escapade sounds rather daunting. Life on the road can be exhausting. For those of you who travel often for work I do not know how you do it. Living out of a suitcase; hopping continuously from time zone to time zone; sometimes waking up in the morning and needing to remember where you are and why you are there. Even if the kind of travelling of which I am speaking is metaphysical, it is nonetheless to be considered a challenge.

But this is not a challenge we undertake solely on our own. Our spiritual life on the road is not unaccompanied. We walk with God before us. When we find ourselves in unfamiliar territory, it just might be God’s Spirit that has led us there. And we should presume that God will provide comfort and sustenance to us even and especially when we are confused by where we find ourselves. We as the church are called to mirror and embody God’s actions with each other.

In this season of Lent we are called to challenge one another to continue to grow in our identity as followers of Jesus Christ, to reach out into places yet unexplored



within ourselves, to learn more about who exactly God has created each of us to be. And we are called to provide comfort to each other; to recognize the wilderness moments in each other's lives; to join each other on the journey; and care for each other in whatever ways we know how.

When my friend Ted Wardlaw dropped off his elder daughter, Shelby, for her first year of college at Vassar there was all of the usual parental angst. It is not easy to have a child stepping out into the world. All of the parental worries bubble up. Will she be safe? Will she be happy? Will she remember who she is? How will she do on her own, all alone?

After he and his wife Kay had said their final goodbyes and were reluctantly driving away, Ted took one last lingering glance in the rearview mirror hoping to catch a glimpse of Shelby. She stood there looking at the car and then reached up with her hand and made the sign of the cross on her forehead. She made the same sign that was placed on her forehead at her baptism. Shelby remembered that she was a beloved child of God. Her parents and her church taught her that. She would be fine. She would be just fine. She was not alone.

The journey of discipleship is not an ever clear and easy path. For the past three weeks we have talked about how God is ever leading us forward, which means we have no choice but to be in motion. However, we do not travel alone. We have each other beside us and God's Spirit before us. And that makes all the difference.

And, by the way, if we did distill the Gospel of Mark into a haiku, it would be this:

God is on the move
And Jesus shows us the way
Let's join the journey.

Thanks be to God. Amen.