

February 21, 2021

Mark 1:9-15

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Late last summer and into the fall, I developed some intense neck pain that required quite a bit of physical therapy to alleviate. In addition to the therapy, I began to delve into the practice of yoga to further stretch, lengthen and open my spine. I scoured YouTube and tried a variety of different classes and instructors. While there were differences among classes and instructors, one similarity I found lie in the fact each focused on some sort of centering practice. Perhaps it was a word or simply the deep, rhythmic inhalations and exhalations of air rich in oxygen. Some provided their own words, while others suggested exploring your own. One repeatedly told her audience in a soothing, encouraging voice to remind oneself, "I am taking time for me." Those mantras and/or breathing exercises act to ground one's mind and body. They assist in bringing stillness, calmness, and focus.

It is not unlike a religious practice of centering prayer in which one might focus on their breathing or pick a word or phrase to help distract the mind from wandering and returning it to a state of peace. Perhaps a word such as "love" or "grace" or "hope". I have heard of others using a short passage from the Bible or the refrain from a hymn. Whatever it might be, the intent is to bring focus on the spiritual practice at hand, to let go of outside distractions and to ground oneself in the realm of the divine, in the loving relationship with our Creator, Lord and Savior.

Today, we have the story of Satan's temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Mark's telling of the story is, like most everything in Mark's gospel, brief. Only 2 sentences. Matthew gives us 11 verses, while Luke tells it in 13. Mark gives us no communication between Jesus and Satan. He provides no indication into the ways in which Satan tempted him. He does not tell us Jesus was famished. All of these are provided by Matthew and Luke. The differences between Mark and his contemporaries are striking. Yet, there is one commonality between the three accounts. What precedes each one.

All three follow on the heels of Jesus' baptism by John. In Mark and Matthew, the words immediately prior to hearing Jesus being sent into the wilderness are, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:11 NRSV) (Matthew states, "This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." 3:17). Luke uses the same words; however, inserts 16 verses between this divine announcement of Jesus' identity and his time in the wilderness with a genealogy of Jesus' ancestors, giving further acknowledgement of who Jesus is. The proximity of the words, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" to his temptation in the wilderness are at the forefront of Jesus' mind. They are fresh as the cool waters he was baptized in. Whatever it means to be in the wilderness. Whatever Jesus might experience at the hands of Satan. However, famished he may become or what wild beasts he might have encountered. Jesus is grounded in the knowledge of who he is and whose he is. He is God's beloved Son, with whom God is well pleased. I wonder how many times Jesus might have uttered these words repeatedly in his mind over his lengthy time in the wilderness. Might they have been his mantra to help set his mind on God's will and way. Might he have even uttered them to Satan to ward off his evil plot, tricks and lies. I imagine them to have been a great source of comfort and strength for Jesus.

We might ask, just why does Jesus need to know this good news? If he is fully God, should he not already know this? Well, yes. However, we also know he was fully human. We confess it in the Creeds. The Apostle Paul reminds us,

“Though he [Jesus]
was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form, he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8 NRSV)

When Jesus cried from the cross in Matthew's gospel, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (27:46) may it have been his humanity that was experiencing the same thoughts and feelings of despair, hopelessness and God's absence as did the psalmist many years who uttered those identical words in the face of peril saying,

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest." (Psalm 22 NRSV)

While it is difficult to comprehend how Jesus' divinity and humanity worked together and has been at the center of many a theological debate, a source of contention, and resulted in many schisms within the church; there is no doubt Jesus was both. The pain he felt was very human. The grief he experienced at times moved him to tears. The illness and death he witnessed, the hypocrisy, hardness of heart, exclusionary and oppressive practices he observed, often moved him to anger. It seems only plausible his temptation in the wilderness, along with his humanity, would have been a perilous time of isolation, famine, exhaustion, and perhaps even led to doubt and despair. I wonder if he might have asked himself, "Why has the Spirit drove me out here?"

This, it seems, is why those words, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with whom I am well pleased with" are so vitally important and immediately precede his time in the wilderness. In the face of any adversity, he was to endure, he knew his identity. He knew God was with him. He knew no matter what happened, God was pleased with Him. He was loved.

The author of Hebrews, in speaking about Jesus, wrote, "we have one (i.e., high priest) who in every aspect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." (Hebrews 4:15) Jesus, in all his flesh and blood, experienced everything and then some humanity faces. As we are tempted, so was he. We often do not have the strength to fend off the lies of Satan that tempt us to find our identity elsewhere. Thankfully, our identity lies in the One who knew fully whose he was and why he was sent into the world. Our identity is grounded in the One for which Satan was

no match. While we may fail in our wilderness temptations, the good news is Jesus did not. The good news is he has won the battle for us. The good news is he with us just as the angels were with him. The good news is that even we might give into temptation, turn from God's will and ways, do something we think there is no way God could forgive or love us, we are clothed in the garment of Christ's innocence and can stand before the God of grace and hear once again, "With you I am well pleased."

These are words we need to hear over and over and over and over – at least I do. "You are loved. You are mine. With you I am well pleased." They are the mantra that grounds us when so many other competing voices attempt to tell us otherwise. Voices that say, "You are not good enough." Voices that say, "You must act like this, dress like that" or fit into some stereotypical box that has been created and ultimately holds individuals back from being themselves whom God is well pleased with. Voices that say, "You are but a miserable sinner." Voices that tempt us to think the unique gifts, qualities, and characteristics God has equipped and created us with are not good enough. There are so many temptations we face, both individually and corporately as the body of Christ. So many vying for our attention and ultimately, vying, to lead us away from who and whose we are. We are God's. We are beloved. We are well-pleased in God's eyes. Whatever wilderness we might find ourselves, let us recall our baptismal identity and hear the divine voice that is permanently etched into our minds, bodies and souls, "You are mine. I love you. With you I am well pleased."