

Baring Our Souls
Genesis 9: 8-17 and Mark 1: 9-15
Eastminster Presbyterian Church
1st Sunday of Lent...February 21, 2021

Temptation as defined by the dictionary: being drawn to something that is evil or the act of enticing others into sinful ways. Temptation as understood by children: lead us not into temptation but deliver our emails. And, according to some adults, the consequences of temptation: while my wife and I were shopping at a mall kiosk, a young woman caught my eye. Without looking up from the item she was examining, my wife asked, "Was it worth the trouble you're in?" These definitions, understandings, and consequences of temptation are pretty clear.

To better understand temptation, Jesus is driven into the wilderness, and even there, he experiences God's grace in, through, and on the other side of temptation.

Mark's gospel reminds us that John the Baptist, like many religious zealots of his day lived in the wilderness. But John is proclaiming a different kind of truth. He can symbolically wash away sin in nature's water, but One is coming who is greater than he who can, by the power of the Spirit, transform the heart. As Jesus himself has taught us by way of prayer, oftentimes that transformation requires us to lay bare our souls, take off our masks, fall to our knees and trust in the God who guides us in and through our wildernesses.

Today we enter Mark's story at the point of Jesus' baptism. Just before this Jesus was revealed as the one and only Son of God and God is pleased with Jesus' faithfulness. Then true to the character of Mark, with speed and intensity, the Spirit immediately drives Jesus into the wilderness. And in those forty days of desert time, Jesus was made ready for his mission and ministry. In those forty days of desert time, just as God has claimed Jesus as Son, there is no doubt that Jesus understands that God is his Father. And let us face it folks, our country and world have been in the desert for a while now. I have to ask myself, "Is the Lord preparing our hearts for a new understanding, accepting, and doing of the mission and ministry we already know to be our calling?"

No, I am not suggesting that God has brought these harrowing times on us. God is not punishing us. But, in the midst of the order of the created world and all its trials, are we not being asked to return to the good and faithful way God intended for all creation? A way that will help us walk through the wildernesses or the ice storms or the floods and fires, with hope on the other side.

Heading into Lent this year, gone were many familiar rituals because of the pandemic. Gone was the pigging out on pancakes for Shrove Tuesday. Gone were the street parties of Mardi Gras, as people exchanged glittery, ornate masks for more mundane, sterile ones. These two events all by themselves at least led us into the wilderness of Lent with a grand send-off. But this year so many feels like they have never left the wilderness. We are being driven to take off our proverbial masks of who we think we are and embrace who we really are...God's beloved, loved like no one else can unconditionally love us.

As Jesus has taught us, it is in the wilderness that we often find our true selves and are given the opportunity to be cleansed with the waters of God's grace. Every time we enter the wilderness, we are given an opportunity, through our own suffering, to deepen our compassion so much so for others, that we are moved to action.

When Jesus emerges from the wilderness, he hits the ground running. Disciples are called. Healings happen. Demons are driven out. Meals were multiplied. The Son of God is weary and needs renewal! And the very same place he is tested, is where he returns for rest. Why? Because God is there, always there, in the times of plenty and in want; there in the good runs and the dry spells and there, Jesus can lay open his life with all confidence that God is always near. Lent asks of us to strip away all that holds us at a distance from God and lay our souls naked before God to be cleansed and made new.

Speaking of naked, many of you know that I grew up in a small Baptist church where baptisms took place with full immersions in the baptismal pool. The pool at the church of my childhood had glass around the top so that the symbolic dying and rising to new life were exposed. In the case of Eddie, exposure went beyond symbolism. The story goes like this. Eddie opted out of wearing the customary white baptismal robe, choosing instead to wear his usual pants and shirt, minus one necessary accessory, suspenders. He was a thin man. When Brother Frank DiMiceli dunked him into the water, let us just say the water filled space between Eddie's clothes and his body and...the rest of the story... he was raised up and his pants went down. Thank goodness, pants stripped away did not mean total nakedness.

Stripping away, getting naked are not concepts we normally associate with church, are they? But is that not exactly what Lent is asking of us? To strip away the masks of our own making, to expose our entire beings before the One whose hands know exactly how we were created and shaped. Lent asks us to bare ourselves before the One who so wants us to remove all the things that seek to keep us hidden and separated from each other and our Creator. Lent asks of us to believe from our very core, holding nothing back and putting nothing between us that when we walk as Jesus did in the wilderness, that even in times of temptation, we find God's grace.

As disciples, we are called to be grounded in the knowledge that, we will, like Jesus, be driven into the wilderness. But as people of faith, we are asked to hold on to the truth that even in the worst of our wilderness wanderings, God is with us. God is not an overprotective parent, but a parent of great patience and understanding who prays with us and for us that the desert times of our lives will transform us, like Jesus, into more compassionate and other-centered servants.

There are times when God's presence in the wilderness is unmistakable. Moments when amidst all that feels dry and lifeless, the wilderness is flooded with life-giving water. Moments when we face the fear of the wilderness and gather the courage and strength to step one step closer to the other side of temptation. In those moments, we are standing in the kingdom of God on earth and the kingdom of heaven has come near.

Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent. It is time for us to strip off the masks and get naked. Time to acknowledge, confess and ask forgiveness for the things that come between us

and God. It is time to remember that in the waters of baptism, we have been claimed as God's own, just as Eddie was claimed.

Eddie, up to the point of baptism, had been known as mean-spirited. But, despite looking at him through an old mask, three men rushed to the baptistery, spreading across with their bodies, giving him time to collect his pants and his composure. As Eddie's story emerged over the years, it was apparent that he had been in the wilderness for a long time, stuck in the middle until he laid bare his soul and embraced the grace of God all around him, even in the wilderness.

The message of God's Word for us today is this: If we find ourselves there, stuck in the middle, not willing or able to, by God's grace to move beyond our temptations, God invites, compels, and in love, even drives us to take off our masks, to bare our souls and leads us in and out of the wilderness with a promise that says, on the other side of the wilderness, you will encounter a rainbow. A sign. A promise. A covenant. God will forever be our God and we will forever be God's children. May we remember and believe that promise when we find ourselves in the middle of the wilderness, our souls bared, and our hearts transformed. Amen.