

The First Sunday in Lent

February 18, 2018

"DEAD IN THE WATER"

Genesis 9:8-17 ~ Mark 1:9-15

I have a friend who spent over thirty years in misery, I mean, "ministry," trying to hold everything and everybody together for righteousness' sake. He had a bad marriage, which they worked on for years like the doctors you see on television who just won't give up on the patient and keep trying the paddles just one more time. He was born and raised a Southern Baptist, and always served in those good-ole-boy-Baptist churches. They were mostly good people, but he was an intellectual and a mystic ... a fish out of water who had to hide his true self from the congregations he served. One church was always beating him up emotionally for not being evangelical enough, by which they meant "flamboyant." He was so miserable for so long, but as the years went on, he had more and more invested in his career and contacts in the Southern Baptist fold. And then one day, he just couldn't pretend any more. He resigned his church, he left his wife, he moved into a bare one room apartment with no furniture, and took a part time job supervising childcare at an Episcopalian church.

It was a sudden death to what he had labored to build for thirty years ... and do you know what ... he was never happier. He was suffering, of course ... sadness about a long marriage that never worked ... sorrow about the pain his grown children felt in its ending ... regret for the people in churches he had disappointed ... uncertainty over what the future might hold financially for a divorced Baptist pastor over fifty. But down deep in his heart he was happy because for the first time in thirty years he was being entirely honest and he was free to be who he really is. Now he is studying to be ordained as an Episcopalian priest, and he will make a fine one.

I'm certainly not advocating divorce or mid-life crisis today, but I want to observe a pattern I have seen in human life which is described by our text in Mark. It is the moment of repentance, in the original sense of the word as "turning point," where Jesus is baptized in the Jordan, then tempted in the wilderness, and then begins to preach the good news of God's rule. It is the rite of passage where Jesus ends one significant stage of his life and makes a new beginning in God's loving care that moves him towards his Divine destiny as Savior of humankind.

We don't know much about Jesus before he was baptized ... a few lovely birth stories ... one occasion in Luke where he is bar-mitzvahed in the Temple and wows the priests and scribes. Most likely Jesus did what firstborn sons did in those days. He learned his father's trade ... took responsibility for his family business ... became the primary leader and breadwinner of his family when his father died. Tradition is strong that Joseph died while Jesus was young, so Jesus was the head of the household now. What possessed him to desert his family ... to shirk his duty

... to leave his craft and career behind? Did he somehow realize that it was a dead end ... that for him, at that moment, carpentry was not what God had planned?

James Forbes talks about discovering your "*life project*." Can you say what your life project is ... or the life project of First Congregational United Church of Christ in Eagle River? Jesus realized that the time had come to pursue his destiny ... to define his life project ... so he started by ending all that gone before. He ended his career. He ended his childhood and childish faith. He ended his childhood and youth. He started by dying, in the waters of baptism. Baptism is a ritual of beginning, yes, but it is a ritual of ending first, a ritual death, a living sacrifice, if you will. Like the waters of Noah's flood, baptism erases what has gone before. You begin by dying, and then you are truly free. Death is a kind of harsh grace. When you have already died, what have you left to fear? At his baptism ... where he let go of a dead-end destiny as a Galilean Jewish carpenter ... Jesus heard the affirming voice of God. But soon he heard the voice of Satan.

Death ... understood as any kind of ending ... always leads to a new beginning. But the passage is difficult, the birth is painful. Whenever we pass through any kind of ending, we inevitably experience a season of disorientation and confusion and grief ... a time of testing our wills when we look back and try to hold on ... when we think we might even go back, if we can, to the way we were. In Mark, we aren't told exactly what this testing was like for Jesus as he wandered in the wilderness. Just that it came from none other than Satan himself. We're told it lasted forty days and forty nights, which is the biblical way of saying, a very long time. To Jesus it must have seemed an eternity. But, hey, forty days and forty nights ... that's not that long to go from dead in the water to alive in God, is it? It's a fascinating passage, moving from total immersion in the floodwaters of the raging river that buries him ... to wandering in the waterless waste and void where nothing seems to live ... to proclaiming the birth announcement of a new creation by the glory of God!

In the wilderness it must have seemed that he made a mistake. In the wilderness it must have seemed there was no possibility of ever knowing joy again. We've all been there ... in the wilderness it seems that nothing good can ever happen now. This is the pain of new birth. This is the struggle of growth. This is the suffering that heals and redeems. The Spirit leads. The Spirit led Jesus through ... so that after this wilderness time ... Jesus went up into the Galilee and started preaching, and he was preaching good news ... and he preached the good news no matter who may have opposed him. He said to everybody: "The time has come. Your time has come. This is your turning point. The rule of God is here. Trust the good news and start over." That's quite a turnaround for a Galilean peasant tradesman ... to give his life for God and turn the whole world upside down.

What I am noticing in this passage from Mark ... what I am seeing in this passage in Jesus' life ... what I am suggesting to you today is a process in three stages ... a human rite of passage I'll call "the journey through turning." Describe it as you will ... use theological or psychological or any highfalutin' jargon you want. *Baptism, wilderness, new beginning! Crisis, disruption, synthesis! Disaster, disintegration, regeneration! Crash, reboot, rewrite! Death, burial, resurrection!* It's still the same basic pattern.

I can't tell you how many times I have seen people pass through these same three stages. They come to a hard ending ... go through a wilderness period of confusion and turmoil ... then find a joyful new beginning on the other side. I've heard this story from gays and lesbians who resisted coming out because of the consequences ... but when they did, and even though some of those consequences happened ... they felt free and honest and happy for the first time in their lives. I have seen it happen with people who hated their jobs, no, hated their careers, but thought they were too old ... that they had too much invested ... that their families couldn't take them starting something new. But when it finally became intolerable, and they took the risk ... they made the transition ... they discovered some new venture that made their hearts sing again so they felt glad to be alive ... and their families felt glad to be alive. People who should have gone to the doctor months ago finally make the appointment and immediately feel relieved ... even if the news is as bad as they feared ... because at least they are dealing with it ... they know what's ahead. People like me who felt called to seminary for years ... who knew that was what they were supposed to do ... but it was hard to trade in the financial security of the job they had grown weary of ... to take up the vocation to which they were called ... but they took the plunge and found themselves feeling free. Parents have struggled with rebellious grown children, and when they finally let go, they discovered a new adult to adult relationship. Students who gave up on the law degree that their parents had pushed and majored in forestry or became poets instead. I have even been with people who prayed to die because only death would free them, and everyone was relieved for them when death finally came. These are just a few examples.

What does this pattern say to us? I think it says that there are times in life when you have to face facts and do what is true, even if it's hard. I am beginning to think that one of the arts of living well is knowing when you're done ... when you're over ... when you're finished, and when it's time to let go ... to suffer the transition, and start over again. Most of the things that we dread ... the things that stop us in our tracks ... either don't ever happen so all the worry is wasted ... or they happen anyway and there's nothing we can do about it. But embracing death, accepting the end, is the first step towards our new self. Oh, the transition time is hard. It will test your mettle. But by the grace of God, my friends, there is life on the other side of death ... a new beginning ... a new creation. In my prison ministry I dealt with so many people who were stuck and afraid to trust God with what came next. So, they lived in death and fought and held on to avoid the inevitable and necessary end to which they had come. The first thing we all have to do is let go and let God. It's about honesty and authenticity. It's about courage and vulnerability. It's about faith and the willingness to start over by taking the first step.

Now sometimes, people don't choose this turning time. They get chosen. Sometimes it happens to you whether you drag your heels or not. We have people here today who have been through losing a job ... a partner leaving ... the death of a loved one ... the failure to accomplish a goal ... trouble with a child ... declining health ... new limits on your energy ... all your life plans turned to mush. You know what I'm talking about today! *Baptism, wilderness, new beginning! Crisis, disruption, synthesis! Disaster, disintegration, regeneration! Crash, reboot, rewrite! Death, burial, resurrection!*

Can I get a witness? Because somebody here in this room today is stuck ... holding on for dear life ... terrified to give up, give in, let go. They don't want to face the reality that their life ... or something dear to their life is already dead in the water. They need to hear it's okay. That

they're going to be okay. That new life is coming if they will let go and move on. And somebody else has hit that wall already but is wandering in the wilderness dry and desiccated, thirsty for just a drop of hope, just a sip of good news. And they need to hear they're going to be all right, that God will see them through ... that a new day is dawning ... a fresh start ... a good destiny lies ahead for them by the power and grace and glory of God if they'll move toward it ... claim it ... trust it ... trust God! You see, it takes a rare eye ... a real prophetic sixth sense ... to see the savior in that lowly carpenter ... to see the good news in the sad day ... to recognize the stirrings of the new in the days of dislocation after a hard ending. But trust God, it will come. It will come. Trust God.

It's a hard process, this journey of turning ... it's a real ordeal. So, who would choose it if they didn't have to ... if it weren't chosen for them? Only the people who realize they're already there ... they're at an end. They aren't going anywhere. They aren't doing what God made them to do ... that they aren't living like God made them to live ... that there's no life in their livin' at all ... that there has to be something more because this ain't it! It may not be sudden at all. It may just be a dawning recognition that you've bought into the propaganda from a culture that says your life is all about what you drive and how you look ... where you live and who you know. It may be a nagging, creeping thought that you could be doing something more with your time that would help some other people. It means that even though you could very well stay where you are ... doing what you're doing ... and getting what you've been getting in return ... that it feels like you're already dead. You want a life that counts for more than that ... you want a life that means more than that ... so you yourself decide it's time to end all that and move in a new direction, by the grace of God. And you begin to turn ... turn away from what has been ... turn into a new and strange direction ... turn towards the light of the glory of God on the far horizon ... just on the other side of the wilderness of dislocation.

In the faith brought to us by the spiritual journey of the saints who have gone before us through the years, we even have a season for making this journey of turning together ... Lent. This season of Lent ... this journey to the cross is a serious business. It's real life and death, as in, what does your life matter? As in, what is worth dying for? As in, face it, it's time to get busy living. For God's sake, do something worthwhile with the short time you have here. *Baptism, wilderness, new beginning! Crisis, disruption, synthesis! Disaster, disintegration, regeneration! Crash, reboot, rewrite! Death, burial, resurrection!* That's the journey of turning to which God calls us in this holy season. Will you be coming along? May we pray?

God,

In this season of turning lead us by your Spirit.

Give us the faith to see ourselves as we are and to let go of what about us needs to die.

Give us the hope to endure the in-between and to walk the gauntlet of creative growth.

Give us the love to claim the new beginnings which you hold ahead for us if we will follow you on this journey to and through and beyond the cross, for Jesus' sake. Amen.