

## First Sunday of Lent – Year B - 2018

In those days... In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee... In those days, there had been no prophet in Israel for so long that perhaps no one could remember. In those days, the people of Israel were living under the domination of both an oppressive foreign government, and an oppressive religious system of laws designed to bring them up short. And in those days, John appeared in the desert, Isaiah's "Voice of one crying out, Prepare the way of the Lord!" John appeared, in the wilderness – offering people a baptism of repentance. A chance to step out of their spiritually tepid lives, where there had been no prophet saying, "Thus says the Lord!" – no one speaking with God's voice for some time – into a baptism of forgiveness and change.

And then in those days.. "In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.""

When things are torn apart, it's a sign – a signifier that something has dramatically changed. The temple curtain is torn in two at the crucifixion. The prophet Isaiah cried to God, "Rend the heavens and come down!" "And just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw *the heavens torn apart* – and the Spirit descending... with a voice saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved." There is a sea change here. God is again speaking. And he speaks the name "Beloved."

In the context of today's first reading – where God establishes a covenant with Noah – and with all of creation – this rending of the heavens, the Spirit's descent, is another sign in the sky – like the rainbow – showing us the *new* covenant in Jesus. And what's new about it is this: Under that early covenant, the people saw their relationship to God as dependent upon their behavior. If they followed the rules, God would favor them. If they disobeyed, if they were unfaithful, then God would punish them. We heard it in today's Psalm: "All the paths of the LORD are love and faithfulness to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies." But when Jesus emerges from the water, when the heavens are torn apart, the voice of God speaks *relationship -not behavior*.

There is a line from the film *The Shape of Water* that I think describes so wonderfully what this difference means – between our covenant with God being dependent on our behavior vs. being dependent on relationship. The main character is describing her relationship with a creature and says: “When he looks at me, the way he looks at me. He does not know what I lack or how I am incomplete. He sees me for what I am, as I am. He’s happy to see me. Every time, every day.” That is how it is with God and us, that is what God reveals when God tears the heavens apart and calls us “Beloved.” When God looks at us, the way God looks at us... God does not know what we lack or how we are incomplete. God sees us for what we are, as we are. God is happy to see us, every time, every day. “You are my Beloved. With you I am well pleased.”

But of course, the story does not end there.

“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.” Not as punishment – but as the place where we all must go to do some serious soul-searching, as a movement from one part of life to another as we see in the Native American vision quest tradition. And as a place for deepening relationship as God spoke through the Prophet Hosea “Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her... And in that day, says the Lord, you will call me 'My husband.' ...And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord.” Those are the reasons we are led into the wilderness.

Mark continues: “Jesus was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.” 40 days - as Noah and all the inhabitants were in the ark while it rained for 40 days and nights. And as the people of Israel wandered in the desert for 40 years.

And that’s how we end up here, spending 40 days in the season of Lent – where we, too, are invited into the wilderness. Mark does not tell us what sort of temptations Jesus experienced in the wilderness. But Anglican priest and monk Harry Williams gives a good description of the temptations that confront us. He says:

“And so we are tempted of Satan, tempted to give up, to despair. Tempted to cynicism. Tempted sometimes to cruelty. Tempted not to help others when we know we can, because, we think, what's the use. Tempted to banish from our life all that we really hold most dear, and that is love, tempted to lock ourselves up, so that when we pass by people feel, 'There goes a dead man.' And behind each and all of these temptations is the temptation to disbelieve in what we are, the temptation to distrust ourselves, to deny that it is the Spirit himself which beareth witness with our spirit. God in us.” [-Harry Williams 1919-2006]

The temptation to deny the Spirit – to deny the voice that names us Beloved – To deny God in us.

We are in “those days” – when the voice of God seems not to have spoken to the people for some time. We are in those days, when the people and all of creation with whom God entered into covenant marked by a bow in the sky are living under systems of domination that foster oppression. We are in the days when once again we are mourning the senseless killing of innocent children and teachers.

And the temptation I had as I was writing this missive was not to speak aloud the question that kept coming to me, which is this: Did anyone ever look at Nikolas Cruz not as lacking or incomplete but as who he was and is – as Beloved of God? What if we each spent these 40 days in the wilderness of Lent learning to look *with the eyes of God* at all that God has breathed into being, at each person in front of us or in our mind's eye? To look with LOVE?

We are indeed called into the wilderness – to come to know fully who we are – the Beloved of God. And to come to understand that God sees us that way – not dependent on our behavior, but dependent on our relationship – which is that we are of God, all of us, and all of creation. Nothing we do or don't do will change that.

It's a sea change, this revelation of God – that God loves us without condition. That's the “good new of God” that Jesus preached with his life. It's what we long for, for ourselves, but don't find easy to extend to others. It may be that the biggest “repentance” – the biggest CHANGE of heart we have to make is a change in our perspective – a change in the way we look at things – in the way we see ourselves, in the ways we look at others, and in the ways we see God.

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

- [Genesis 9:8-17](#)
- [1 Peter 3:18-22](#)
- [Mark 1:9-15](#)
- [Psalm 25:1-9](#)