



Sermon – February 21, 2021

Do you remember when you got your first job? Do you recall how you felt when your first paycheck was cashed? Maybe your career was just beginning, following college or some other training, and you couldn't wait to make a difference in the world. I imagine Jesus might have felt excitement and a certain amount of anxiety about starting his ministry. His mentor and friend, John the Baptist, had just baptized him in the Jordan River, and it is only in Mark where Jesus is the sole person who hears the voice from heaven, "You are my beloved." His friend and mentor, John, says nothing about hearing a voice from heaven. The Gospel of Mark tells us that Jesus, upon hearing of John the Baptist's arrest, begins his ministry immediately. Had Jesus and John the Baptist already made plans for Jesus to continue John's preaching if something happened to John? I very much believe that would have been the case, because John the Baptist was a prophet who preached forgiveness outside the walls of the temple, where his preaching and teaching would have made enemies, both at the Jewish religious level and at the political level of King Herod. Only the priests at the temple could administer forgiveness. John the Baptist pushed boundaries that few Jews lived to tell

about, and now Jesus will take up that role of protester, healer, and martyr following the death of John.

There is so little known about the life of Jesus prior to his baptism, other than what we read about his birth in Luke or other books outside the bible. Jesus came from a peasant family existence, where day to day survival would have been the norm for existence. The life of a peasant was one step away from being homeless, where you received your wage for the day and hoped it covered your expenses. Yet, within the mind and heart of Jesus was a young man prepared to unravel the very existence of the Jewish temple and change how Jews worshipped God. The journey of Jesus did not begin on the day of his baptism, no, his choice to rebel against the religious authorities began sometime when he was young, probably alongside the life of John the Baptist. The only thing we are told in the Gospel of Mark is that when Jesus hears the news about John's capture, Jesus starts his ministry.

Most of us during our lifetimes have wrestled, too, with our own vocations, our marriages, and our families. I know few people who have lived a straight line to where they are today. Life is full of twists and turns. In today's Gospel, we read that Jesus is sent by the Spirit out into the wilderness to do what? Discern his future?

We read that Jesus was dealing with wild beasts and Satan in the wilderness, but we also read how angels cared for Jesus during his forty days in the wilderness. People are about to hear the name of Jesus for the first time, and this

story that we continue to read each year about the life of Jesus can take on new meaning for us also.

We all have been spending time in the wilderness, where we have been isolated from our normal ways of being with people, where church has moved to a screen, and wearing masks is the new norm. We have beasts present in our own wilderness, where the fear of being struck down by Covid-19 is a very real and present threat to our wellbeing. Forced isolation and feelings of anxiety are constant companions as people wait to be vaccinated. On the surface, we tell ourselves, we can and will deal with our wilderness experience, but we will be changed by our experience, just as Jesus was changed by his time spent in the wilderness and his baptism by John.

There is a tendency within the church to over spiritualize Jesus, meaning, Jesus is more divine than he is human, but the Gospel reading tells us that Jesus needed care, and angels stepped in to help. So, too, with us. We have needed help to survive our own trials of separation and anxious thoughts; I hope spending time each Sunday together has helped you cope with your own personal trials on some level.

If reading Mark is any indicator of the journey of Jesus, then we will be short-changed on the inside facts on how Jesus managed to go from being baptized, to being sent into the wilderness, and then he is ready to pick-up the ministry left by John the Baptist. Jesus, may know his destination, but he did not know, if you read Mathew, Luke, and John, all the details to his journey. Did Jesus know angels would care for

him when the devil left him in the wilderness? No one can really answer this question.

What we can do is claim that God is with Jesus, just as God was with Noah in Genesis. I've often been told that the bible is confusing to read and doesn't prove that God is an active and engaged presence in our current culture. I am not here today to prove or disprove the presence of God, but I will share what Abraham Heschel says about the Torah, "The way to perceive the presence of God in the words of the Bible is not by inquiring whether the ideas they designate are in perfect agreement with our reason or the common sense of man ... What we must ask is whether there is anything in the bible that is beyond the reach of reason, beyond the scope of common sense." Because when we reach beyond our reason and commonsense, we are in a position for the Spirit of God to be revealed. God the Spirit actively engaged with Jesus in the wilderness, why would the Spirit change how God's presence is revealed in humankind today? As we read different Scriptures each week, we are given only one thing to do, listen. Just listen to where God shows up in this ongoing storyline. We cannot sense God's presence in the Bible except by being responsive to it. Where do you see the presence of God showing up in your life right now?

In the story of Noah God shows his divine presence by using the metaphor of a rainbow to symbolize an ongoing relationship with God, and all humans. "The book of Genesis says, "When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth ... God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have

established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”
When a devout Jew sees a rainbow they recite this Jewish blessing, ‘Praised are You, LORD our God, Sovereign of the universe who remembers the Covenant is faithful to it, and keeps promises.’”

You may be thinking, yeah, what about the takeover by the Assyrian Empire, the Babylonian Empire, the Romans, and the list of travail for the Jews is a long road that leads to the Holocaust, but the Covenant between God and man is not broken, the relationship between God and man is strengthened if humans claim that God is present in all situations.

What about the ongoing wars that have killed millions of people? The bible says, God is with us. That’s all I want to say, because any other words of defense for God are a waste of time. I can only be responsible for myself when it comes to seeing beyond reason and commonsense to talk about the presence of God. I just know God exists, in spite of my doubt, in spite of my fears, in spite of my disappointment that God doesn’t ‘zap’ us all into seeing his presence in all things.

What I do know is that not all people want to spending time thinking about the presence of God, so they don’t. First, we must be open to the idea of looking for the presence of God in Scripture and in the world that surrounds us, especially during a pandemic. Where has God shown up for you in the last 9 months? You will find your faith will be strengthened as you look for the presence of God in yourself, as you peer

out into nature and revel in the beauty of this earth, and as you choose to love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.