

“The Wilderness of Love”

Genesis 9:8-17, I Peter 3:18-22, Mark 1:9-15

**Part II of X in the Sermon Series
“The Journey Back to Love”**

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February 21, 2021

From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent I, February 21, 2021, dedicated to friend and brother Richard Murch, to my colleague Rev. Jess Peacock in celebration of his ordination into Christian Ministry, and always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Gary Charles tells the story of a young woman interviewing him for a paper she was writing on world religions. After going through questions like, “How does your denomination understand God?” “Who is Jesus for you?” and “Does your church believe in a heaven and hell?”, the young student came to her final question, **“What is the central message of your faith?”**

Gary answered each question as best he could but found the final question stuck with him long after she left. In fact, it never left him. He couldn’t shake it. It held on to him. (Found in *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*, Brian Blount and Gary Charles, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2002, pp. 36-37.)

“What is the central message of our faith?” Think about that. What is the central message of your faith?

Perhaps the best answer to this question can be found in our text from Mark 1:9-15 today. Still dripping wet from his baptism in the Jordan River with John, Jesus is still holding on to the loving word of God from heaven, Jesus is driven into the wilderness by the same Spirit who was present at his baptism. There for 40 days, he is tempted by Satan, protected by wild beasts and attended to by angels.

Now wet with sweat, now exhausted from his fasting, he exits his wilderness encounter and speaks his first words of public ministry. Jesus says, ***“Repent and believe in the good news.”*** God has been unleashed and is now on the loose in the person of Jesus. In these words of Jesus, there is no distant hope, no other worldly predictions and proclamations of things to come. Things are going to change NOW. We must brace ourselves for what is coming NOW.

What is coming now is **Metanoia!**

And Metanoia or “Repentance” – is everything.

Metanoia is a word that is shouted not whispered – although what happens in its path can come from the whisper of God into your ear and into your heart. It is a word full of meaning. It has two primary meanings. It is a word that will take us to the central meaning of our faith.

In the Hebrew scriptures, Metanoia means “to turn or return.” It directly relates to ancient Israel’s exile in Babylon and their return home. It literally means, *“to embark on a journey of return to the*

'homeland',” to the Holy Land where God is found. But you are not only traveling to the place where God is found, you are traveling with God on the return. The entire journey is embraced by God, leads back to God and the experience is Metanoia.

There is a second meaning which comes alive in the Christian scriptures beginning with Mark 1:14-15. It means, *“to go beyond the mind we have.”* This phrase is both evocative and provocative. “The mind we have” is acquired from our socialization experiences of time, of people, of place. We are all enculturated in ways that shape us, by people and places which shape our thinking and our actions. “To go beyond the mind we have” means to see and act in a new way – a new way shaped by God known decisively in Jesus. **This is repentance.**

Although the Bible speaks of repenting of our sins, the emphasis throughout scripture is not so much on contrition and sorrow and guilt, it is on turning from them and returning to God. Repentance is about change. It is not primarily a prerequisite for forgiveness, though that may come. It is about change. (Drawn from *Speaking Christian*, Marcus Borg, Harper One, NY, NY, 2011, pp. 157-159.)

While that may shock some of you, it is the truth. Repentance is about returning. It is about turning around. It about making the turn WITH God, not just TO God. It is about a new mindset. It is about everything shifting. Repentance is about change.

And what is the new way that “the gospel” is calling us to? What do we see when we turn around?

We see Love. We see the face of God and the face of God is Love.

It was Love that called Jesus to the waters of baptism in the Jordan River with John. It is Love that comes from the voice of God – “*You are my son whom I LOVE!*” It is Love that pushes the Holy Spirit to push Jesus out of the water and into the wilderness. It is Love that battles evil and the presence of Satan. It is Love that gathers the wild beasts to stand by Jesus’ side during the trying times in the wilderness and it is Love that gathers the angels and their Love offers protection for Jesus. It is Love that Jesus is calling us to turn around and see and feel and experience and share. It is Love that fuels the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

LOVE is the central message of our faith.

We get to love through Metanoia – through “turning around,” through “returning to God,” through “going beyond the mind that we have.”

I believe Love is everywhere – if we only have the perception to see and feel it. For example, in Genesis 9:8-17, God places “a bow in the sky” as a reminder of the Covenant of God with God’s people. The Rainbow sign is a sign of God’s love for humanity. Walter Brueggemann writes:

“The ‘bow’ is likely not understood in romantic ways, nor with an accent of political pluralism. Rather, it likely refers to God’s bow (and arrows) as a weapon of war, hostility and destructiveness. God suspends the ‘bow’ in the heavens as a gesture of disarmament and as a promise not to be the aggressor or the adversary of humanity.... It is God’s gesture of love and peace and reconciliation. God intends to be at ‘peace’ with God’s world, recalcitrant though it has been. The ‘bow’ is not a message for humanity, it is a reminder to God to be faithful and everlasting as God has promised to be” (Texts for

Preaching, Westminster, John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky, 1993, p. 193).

The Rainbow is like God's tab-it note in the sky – *“Note to Self: Remember to Love them today in spite of all the evidence not to.”* The bow constantly reminds God to remember to be loving to people who are always remembering to be loving.

In I Peter 3:18-22, Peter reminds us as followers of Christ to love as completely as He first loved us. Against the opposition of a hostile culture, Jesus walked into Jerusalem armed with gentleness, kindness, reverence and love and laid down his life for the life of the world. In total and complete sacrificial love – a love which overcame principalities and powers – he died, was laid in the tomb, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven and lives with the angels and the power of God to love eternally. Peter reminds us in his letter to always maintain a hopeful view of the world in spite of all the evidence to give up. Isn't that essentially what true love looks like? Love perseveres when other evidence points to giving up and simply laying down and dying. Love lifts us up when there is no logical reason to be raised up.

Returning to Mark, we are reminded of Love in the wilderness.

While Matthew and Luke's Gospels love telling complicated stories of Satan temptations of Jesus in the wilderness, Mark is more interested in talking about the wilderness than temptations. Mark is focused on the wild work of Jesus and the wild beasts and angels that attend to him there.

If you were in the wilderness and you knew that the wolves were your protectors and the bears were your friends, if you knew that

wildebeests and the scorpions were watching out for you, and the rattlesnake and coyote had your back, you could face all the heat and cold, you could take on any spiritual and physical hardship knowing “these wild beasts were ministering to you.”

And then, when the beasts were resting from the scorching noonday sun, if you knew the spiritual heavy artillery of angels were on your shoulders giving you cover from the oppression and temptations of the wilderness heat, you could muster all the courage and strength in the whole world to face the devil and anything he puts in your path to trip you up and hurt you. Just like Jesus, “Be gone Satan” would roll from your lips with ease and sureness with such love.

The God of Love who sends the bow as a reminder to Godself to keep the peace with people who destroy life with a callous disregard, the God of Love who sends wild beasts and angels to protect and defend his beloved son in the wilderness, the God of Love who gives us a Savior who is gentle, kind, compassionate and one who lays down his life for us out of his complete and absolute love for us, is a God we can trust and follow.

My friends, **LOVE is the central message of our faith.**

As we learned today, and we get to Love through Metanoia – through “turning around,” through “returning to God,” through “returning with God,” through “going beyond the mind that we have” we can face all things together in love.

May the Wild beasts minister to you this week. May the angels on your shoulders knocking down all the lovelessness that comes at

you from behind or straight on. May our God of Love care for you in ways you never saw before or ever imagined possible. Amen.