

2018-2-18 SermonsB18Lent 1

Genesis 9:8-17

Psalms 25:1-10

Mark 1:9-15

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Four minutes ... all it took was four minutes for the lives of seventeen people to be taken; the lives of seventeen families to be devastated; and the sense of safety and security for students, teachers, administrators, friends, siblings, parents and entire communities all around this country to be shattered once again ... four minutes. That's about three times as long as it has taken to get from "Good Morning. This is the first Sunday of the Season of Lent" to this very moment right ... now.

Since the beginning of 2018 there have been 25 mass shootings in this country ... a mass shooting being defined as four or more people being injured or killed in one location. Some of those mass shootings didn't make the news and have faded quickly from collective memory. Many of them were, of course, shootings that happened in poor neighborhoods in back alleys at night or behind apartment doors. Others though ... others like this school shooting ... those that happened in predominantly white middle class neighborhoods, delivered image after image to us of grief, terror and disbelief. Shootings like these ... shootings *like this last one* ... where the media has covered and served up every possible detail ... these will stick in our minds for a long time because of the power of those images.

One that is indelibly etched into my mind may have taken up residence in yours as well. It's an image of a scene that captured some photographer's attention outside of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland this past *Valentine's Ash Wednesday*. There in the sunshine ... among the shocked and suffering crowd ... a tall middle aged blond woman stood ... her face contorted in sorrow. On her forehead she bore the dusty grey mark of the cross. Her left arm hung at her side. Her right she wrapped around the shoulders of a shorter brilliant-red haired woman whose ferocious sobs one could almost hear just by looking at the photograph. Maybe we'll even be reminded of that image and of this shooting year after year each time our foreheads

are marked with an ashen cross and we hear the words, “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

Of all the Ash Wednesday’s we’ve ever experienced, of all the Seasons of Lent that began with a cross on our forehead and a reminder of our mortality; this may well be the one where we take our mortality, our vulnerability and our need for Christ and resurrection faith most seriously.

It’s not just this one heinous and heartbreaking action though. The news, both near and far – both personal and societal – has many of us wondering how much more we can take. It has us wondering how deeply we’ve descended into dark, dangerous, and desperate waters. Struggling in the depths of feelings and fears some of us have never known, we find ourselves wondering, “Is it even possible to be filled with the fresh air of a new spirit and rise to the surface and the light again?” We pray, “Lord, let their be light and let their be life after these and all our painful deaths!”

We long for hope and in the light of today’s scriptures ... both the reading from Genesis and the Gospel from Mark ... we find reason to hope. The word of life found in these scriptures shows us that we are not the first of God’s beloved children to experience these thoughts and feelings of disorientation and uncertainty when things seem to be spiraling downward out of control. We are not the first of God’s people to struggle with temptations and trials that lead us to doubt, disharmony, and the danger of despair. We are not the first of God’s people to live in the promise and cling to the promise that destruction and death are not the final word ... that God will bring us through the flood even if we can’t let go of our wonderings: “Where God is in the midst of this mess?”

So, let’s turn to the Gospel today now so that we can be lifted up and out of the deaths.

As we open ourselves to God’s Word of Life found in Mark, we discover a truncated version of a narrative that Matthew and Luke give us in much greater detail. There’s no

conversation between Jesus and John about the need to be baptized and fulfilling all righteousness. There's no dialogue in the wilderness with Satan challenging Jesus to do this and then that "IF you are the Son of God!" What we find here is a terse statement telling us that Jesus was:

- Driven into the wilderness where there were wild beasts
- Tempted by Satan
- And waited on by angels

My first semester at Seminary included a class on Mark's Gospel. I still remember with great clarity how the instructor of that class, Professor Donald Juel, practically harped on the importance of the difference between how Matthew and Luke describe Jesus' exodus into the wilderness and how Mark describes it. In Matthew and Luke the action is more gentle almost passive. Jesus is "led" into the wilderness. I kind of get the sense of the Spirit going on ahead of Jesus like a mountain wilderness guide or a Safari guide would do today. I picture Jesus obediently following with a look of adventure if not sheer determination on his face. Here in Mark, though, it's more like the Spirit boots Jesus out ... or picks up a bull whip and cracks it. It's like the Spirit gives Jesus a supernatural shove into wild and wooly place. Notice, if you will, the text doesn't say a thing about whether Jesus was excited, scared, determined, hesitant or maybe even ticked off by what the Spirit does and what situation he finds himself in because of it. It's even possible that Jesus would NOT have chosen the kind of character building, self-discovery and soul expanding opportunity of being in a wilderness place any more than we would choose it for ourselves.

But, it is there in this challenging place ... this place of vulnerability ... this place where life and death literally hang in tenuous balance ... it is here that Jesus's final preparation for his earthly ministry takes place. We have to look at Matthew or Luke to learn more about the specifics of his struggles ... the exercises in his training program. But, in some ways there is an openness here in Mark because of the lack of specifics.

Her in Mark we can fill in the blank ... fill in what isn't said ... with the specifics of our own individual and communal struggles ... the kind of human struggles we all face and that Jesus himself faced. We can find comfort in knowing how intimately Jesus Christ understands the things that wear us down, tear us down, deflate us, enrage us, scare us and generally make us face the fact that we ARE human and we CAN'T do it or get through it all ourselves without God's help.

Then, in the last of the three points we made about Mark's twitter-like- forty- characters-or-less account of the beginning of Jesus' ministry. We find another word of comfort. We find that Jesus wasn't tossed out and left alone to his own devices, resourcefulness and resolve. He wasn't out there on his own. Yes, there were beasts out there like we said in the first of the three points, but there were also angels who cared for him in tangible practical and maybe even spiritual ways. Jesus had what we would call "a support system" in the wilderness. When he emerges and begins his ministry he is ready not just because of the ministrations of angels. He is ready also because of the trials, temptations and even because of the beasts he encounters ... both the ones on the outside and the ones on the inside.

Each one of us has places and circumstances where we find ourselves being tested, tempted and even threatened. Collectively we face temptations and are presented with pop-quizzes as well as with major tests of skill, will and soul. Sometimes we even face threats to life, limb and spirit. Nothing short of our shared humanity guarantees that those things will come. They are part of any meaningful life. So, as much as trials and temptations are things that we wouldn't choose for ourselves or wish on anyone ... these are the very things that we need to shape us and strengthen us for the ministry.

None of us knows how and where we will be called next to live out the Gospel and share in the coming of the fullness of God's reign on earth. Sometimes we may have an inkling of what that "next" could be but need some time in the wilderness, time away from other distractions, to listen more attentively to the whispers of the Holy Spirit ...

time to listen attentively until we begin to hear those whispers as a roar that cannot be ignored. Also, if you pretty much know you need that time but are dragging your feet ... don't be surprised by the magnitude, means and extent to which God will go to get you unstuck and right where and into a place where God can work on you to fit you for what comes next. Our God won't let anything or anyone stand in the way of what's best for us *especially* if we are the ones standing in the way.

If any of us or all of us are standing still and wondering how-much-more-of-whatever-it-is-we-can-take ... it doesn't have to be school shootings it could be anything ... maybe we can do more than just pray for God to fix things. Maybe it's the right time to invite God to boot us into wilderness places and challenges like the Spirit did to Jesus. Maybe we need the strength and wisdom that comes from dealing with things we would rather not deal with ... maybe we need the wilderness to be shaped and strengthened to share with Christ the work of fixing, healing, bringing of light into dark places, raising of creation out of the depths. Maybe we need wilderness training in the same way Jesus did. That would make sense if we truly believe that we follow in his steps and walk in his way.

Now ... if you are willing, and even if you are afraid, please open your hearts for prayer:

Holy Spirit of God, if each of us or all of us need it for what comes next ... go ahead and give us the boot. AMEN