

02-18-2024 Worship Service

Welcome --

Opportunities --

Call to Worship/Opening Prayer --

One: Teach us your pathways, O God – our eyes and our souls are trained on you.

Many: For you are the greatest guide, and your map is always good.

One: Other paths have left us lost; other ways have left us confused.

**Many: You guide us along the trail of your mercy, drawing sinner and saint
Down this well-worn way.**

All: All your paths are love, made smooth by your steadfast presence.

We are led into your truth by following the tread of your feet.

Prayer – Thank you for your presence here with us this morning, God. May your Spirit be welcome among us. May our hearts and minds be open to its nudges. Amen.

Hymn – *God is Here Among Us* (VT 62)

Children's Time – Chrystiana Miller

Morning Prayer – God, we thank you for this season, a time to reflect and remember our nature as humans – loved and created in your image, invited to participate with you in redeeming and loving your creation. And your nature as God – loving creator, who takes great joy and grief in your children as we exercise the free will you've granted us. We ask for wisdom and compassion and for grace and forgiveness each day.

We pray for healing for those whose bodies or minds are not well. We ask you to heal illnesses and wounds, scars and grudges, grief and loneliness. Fill our empty spaces with your love.

We pray for Colby and the other students who've spent the weekend at Snow Camp. Nurture the seeds of what's been planted, learned and experienced that they may grow into strong vines of discipleship. We ask for safe travels for all the campers as they return home today. We pray for the rest of our youth group as they gather this evening for games and fellowship. May the bonds that they share continue to grow stronger as members of your body.

We're grateful for those who work the earth; we ask for wisdom and safety as that work will pick up soon.

We thank you, God, for those who are working around the world to bring relief from pain and hunger, homelessness and hatred. We pray for those in the midst of violence and fear, death and trauma. Give us courage to speak for those whose voices cannot be heard. Be present with your Spirit of Peace with Justice. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Worship Music -- (choir)

Prayer of Dedication – For all your good gifts we give you thanks, O God. Bless these gifts of money and those who’ve given them. Bless the gifts of our time, our talents and passions, the ways we show your love to those we meet. Amen.

Message --

The Power of The Dove – Mark 1:9-15

Pastor Lois Harder

The writer of the gospel of Mark leaves the reader feeling breathless. He wrote as if he was hopped up on caffeine. Some of us know better than others what that feels like... kind of jittery and anxious and moving quickly from one thing to the next. He used the Greek word *euthus* “immediately” – 42 times in the telling of the gospel story. There’s an urgency in the delivery of the message for Mark. For instance, here’s chapter 1.

John was in the wilderness preaching and then he was at the Jordan baptizing and Jesus went to be baptized and the dove/Spirit landed on him and the voice from heaven spoke and *immediately* the dove/Spirit forced him into the wilderness and he was with the wild animals and the angels. And then John was put into prison and Jesus went to Galilee to preach and he saw Simon and Andrew fishing and he said, “Come and follow me” and *immediately* they dropped their nets and followed him! And then he saw James and John and he called them and they left their father Zebedee and followed him. And then they went to Capernaum and it was the Sabbath and Jesus was teaching and the people were amazed and he cast out an unclean spirit from a man. And *immediately* they left the synagogue and went to Simon and Andrew’s house and Simon’s mother-in-law was sick in bed and Jesus healed her and she got up and began to care for them. And then people brought all kinds of sick and demon-possessed folks to him and he healed them and wouldn’t let the demons speak. And then early in the morning Jesus got up and went off by himself to pray but then Simon and the others went looking for him and said, “Everyone is looking for you!” and Jesus said, Let’s go! So they traveled all through the Galilee and Jesus was preaching and casting out demons. And then a man with leprosy came and asked Jesus to heal him and Jesus touched the man and said, “Be clean!” and *immediately* the leprosy left the man. And Jesus sent him away and said, “Don’t tell anyone.” But the man went out and started telling everyone! Jesus couldn’t even go into any towns, so he stayed out, in the wilderness, but the people flocked to him. And that’s just the first chapter.

Along with the urgent and hurried delivery, Mark also gives his readers some dramatic language and images that are straight from the Hebrew prophets right off the bat. They would have known *immediately* what he was talking about. In verses 1-3, he quotes Malachi – “I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me.”... and then without taking a breath he jumps right to Isaiah – “A voice of one calling: In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” In the next 5 verses Mark describes John the Baptist out, in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (that’s a mouthful!) and then he writes, THE WHOLE JUDEAN COUNTRYSIDE and ALL THE PEOPLE OF JERUSALEM went out to him! Come on! Talk about dramatic hyperbole! And *all* of these people were confessing their sins and being baptized by this weirdo, John who wore hairy camel skins and ate locusts. And all the while John was saying, “I’m not the one. I’m

baptizing you with water, but the one who's coming, he'll baptize you with the Holy Spirit."... And that's where we pick up at today's passage.

Mark doesn't give us anything about Jesus' genealogy. There's nothing about any angels or wise men. There's nothing at all about Jesus' birth or childhood, not one word about Herod or the escape to Egypt, we don't hear anything in Mark about Mary's song or Zechariah's song. The writer of Mark is eager to get ON with the message, the good news. It's urgent and he doesn't want to mess around with birth stories – virgin or otherwise.

So, what is it in these 7 verses that's so pressing? As we enter this season of Lent and we read about Jesus entering his public ministry, he gives us at least three examples that the writer of Mark presents as imperative that we try to follow.

First, Jesus of Nazareth, the Lamb of God, the Son of Man, the Messiah, went to John, like everyone else, and received baptism in the Jordan. His repentance was, perhaps, not so much of sin, but a confession of readiness to align his will with God's, to risk and to sacrifice – his very life, if that's what it would come to. One commentator wrote, "Jesus' baptism is not only a religious act, it's also a political and an economic assertion about God's lordship rather than Caesar's." When John objects to baptizing Jesus (as is recorded in Matthew) Jesus replies that it's "the proper thing to do, to fulfill all righteousness" – to signal that his ministry would be done with honesty and integrity. Some of us haven't yet been baptized and some of us were baptized many years ago. But all of us can consider or re-consider what it looks like to repent – to turn around – to make decisions every day about the sorts of thoughts we think and words we speak and ways we treat people and business deals we make – that will indicate that we're trying to live our lives with Jesus-like honesty and integrity. We're trying to align our will with God's will and we're ready to take risks and make sacrifices in order to follow Jesus.

Second, Mark gives us more dramatic language to describe what happened when Jesus came up, out of the water. He saw the heavens being "torn open", ripped apart, as the Spirit descended on him. It's the same word used in Isaiah 64:1, as the prophet was pleading with God, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." And Mark uses this word again in chapter 15 as Jesus breathed his last breath on the cross. Mark writes that the curtain of the Temple was ripped in 2 from top to bottom. This is not a word we generally associate with the appearance of a dove! But it does speak to the distance decreasing between God's kingdom in heaven and here, on earth. Jesus' willingness to align himself with God, to release his own human hubris and pride, "to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners" – to fulfill those words from Isaiah, would bring God's kingdom. And along with that willingness came the power of the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove. Jesus was so convicted and so certain of his call to this ministry that he heard God's voice, assuring him of God's love and approval. Here Jesus gives us the example of trusting God so completely that we can fully know and accept our belovedness. Each of us is a beloved, precious child of God and here we see Jesus fully embracing that.

Third, the same power of that same Holy Spirit not only led Jesus, but the word actually means "forced" him out, into the wilderness. It's actually the same word used for "cast out" later, when it's talking about Jesus casting out the demons. This was not just a gentle nudge; he was cast out

into the wilderness. Again, Mark's description is very brief. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan. Mark tells us nothing about what that was like – we depend on Matthew and Luke to give us some details there – but Mark also tells us that Jesus was with the wild animals. It could be read that Jesus was safe with the wild animals, because in the same sentence it says that the angels waited on him, or ministered to him. So the Spirit forced him into the wilderness where he was tempted by Satan, but the wild animals kept him safe and the angels ministered to him.

Now, there are some Indigenous Christians for whom this third point makes much more sense than it might to us. This is actually an ancient practice that has been largely lost to contemporary cultures. Many peoples know it as a Vision Quest – a ritual passage into selfhood. It has been described as “a very real exterior adventure beyond the margins of society and an interior passage of cleansing... the journey into the “spirit world” is a sojourn... in order to encounter the story and destiny of one's self and one's people.”

Using the number 40 is clearly intended to remind the readers of Israel's 40 years in the wilderness after Egypt. It's been suggested that Jesus was sojourning on behalf of his people, “mystically re-tracing (their) footsteps in order to discover where the journey of his nation went wrong. Jesus believed that his people had lost their bearings, and that course-correction could only come through a kind of ‘re-visioning’.”

So here, Jesus sets the example for us of making a retreat in order to be fully equipped for our ministry. What better time than Lent, once a year, to make a retreat, however long or short, however wild or domesticated? The point is to spend some time re-visioning the journey, remembering our commitment, recovering – or maybe discovering – our connection to the power of The Dove.

So again... the three examples Jesus gave us in these few verses:

- 1) Repent of our pride and get in line with God's way of doing things – with honesty and integrity.
- 2) Accept and embrace God's love for each one of us! We are all God's beloved children, gifted and tasked with building God's kingdom.
- 3) Make some space and some time in our lives for The Spirit. The Dove has a hard time descending on us if never stand still.

The writer of Mark is brief and breathless, but not simple. These are three challenging examples of ways we can follow Jesus. May we have courage and conviction as we try. Amen.

Through the season of Lent we'll include a prayer of confession in our worship services. As a way to remember Jesus' journey towards Jerusalem, we'll extinguish one candle each Sunday.

Communion --

This is the table of love – the table set for us by Jesus and open to all who know and love Jesus and want to try to follow him in their words, their decisions and their lives.

- Words of explanation

- This morning we'll again invite you to come forward to receive communion.
- We ask that you come from the center aisle, to the front, to receive the bread. If you're sitting at the outer edges or under the balconies, we ask you to go to the back of the sanctuary and come forward. Karen and I will be here, in the center, serving the bread. We do have corn tortillas also. You can form two lines. Eat the bread as it's served to you.
- Then continue out, to the north or south side where the Jim and Marilyn will offer you a cup of juice. Drink the juice as you take it from the tray and then put the cup in the wicker basket. Then return to your seat continuing, down the side aisles.
- If you choose to stay seated, Karl and Justine will come to you with communion elements.

Words for the Bread –

We remember that as Jesus was sitting at the table with his friends, he took bread, broke it, gave thanks for it and said, "This is my body, broken for you. Whenever you eat it, remember me." Loving God, we thank you for the bread of life made known to us through your servant Jesus.

Words for the Juice –

And after supper Jesus took the cup and said, "This cup is the new covenant with God made possible by my death. Whenever you drink this cup, remember me." We give you thanks, loving God, for sending Jesus to us – the one who showed us what sacrificial love looks like as he died on the cross.

We invite you to come now and receive these symbols of Christ's love...

Prayer of Thanksgiving –

O God, with deep gratitude, we thank you for this moment, this meal, this congregation and for your children everywhere. Having tasted your goodness, let us share your peace. Send us out, to live as your people, ordinary people that you have called to follow you, to share your love, to live for you as people of this earth and citizens of your kingdom. Amen.

Benediction – The feast is ended, but the worship continues. Go into the world secure in God's love for you. Amen.