

Wesley United Methodist Church

Rev. Beverly E Stenmark

Bread, Bath & Beyond

February 4, 2018

Title: Beyond the Chaos

Scripture: Isaiah 40:28-31

Mark 1:29-39

“I believe in the sun even when it is not shining. And I believe in love, even when there’s no one there. And I believe in God, even when he is silent.” These words were written by a Jew trying to hang on during World War II. It was a desperate and dangerous time to be Jewish and the unknown person who wrote these words was proclaiming a word of hope where hope seemed dead.

These words could have been written or spoken by the prophet Isaiah trying to offer a word of hope to people who were desperate and whose faith was in trouble. Jerusalem was razed and sacked by Babylonian soldiers in 587 BC. The temple was destroyed, and the leaders of the community were taken to Babylon. The words of the prophet Isaiah, “Even youths will faint and be weary and the young will fall exhausted” may have reminded them of the forced march to Babylon.

Their faith was in danger. It felt as if God had deserted them, but the prophet tried to remind them of what they knew but seemed to be forgetting. “Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.” He recalls the forced march, “Even youths will faint and be weary and the young will fall exhausted;” but then a word of hope and inspiration, “But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

By the way, despite what a friend of mine from Philadelphia seems to think, I don't think that Isaiah was speaking about the Philadelphia Eagles football team when he said that, or at least, today, I hope he wasn't.

Anyway, the prophet was trying to give hope to people who were so wrapped up in their despair, their disappointment, the circumstances of life, that they either felt abandoned by God, or seemed to have forgotten God. These words are used frequently today in funerals and memorial services to remind us that even in the middle of great sadness and grief, God has always been present with us, is present with us now, and will be present with us into the unknown tomorrows.

It's easy to get caught up in life, think about what you are doing, or what's happening around you and lose sight of God. In Mark's gospel, today, we see Jesus living out the way to help prevent that from happening.

The last few weeks, we've been walking through the first chapter of Mark's gospel. We've seen Jesus being baptized by John and the spirit descending on him like a dove and a voice from heaven proclaiming, "you are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." We heard Jesus call disciples to follow him. We heard Jesus teaching and healing with great authority and people being amazed by what he said and did. Today, we find him healing Simon's mother-in-law. Word about Jesus spread quickly and when the sabbath travel restrictions ended at sundown, the town gathered around Simon's house and brought all those who were sick to Jesus to be healed.

There would have been a great temptation for Jesus to think highly of himself, to get wrapped up in what he was doing, to build a ministry and a following of those who wanted to see more miracles. I know that we don't like to think about Jesus being tempted, and when I was writing the sermon

for this morning, I kept re-writing that last sentence because what I wanted to say was, “If it had been anyone else, it would have been a temptation to think highly of himself and so forth.” I wanted to exclude Jesus from being tempted by all that was happening around him, but that would not have been true to what the scripture tells us.

Yes, Jesus was the son of God, but it is equally as important that Jesus was also fully human. It is important that Jesus experienced all the emotions and temptations that go with being human. Right after his baptism and before he began his ministry, Jesus was sent out into the wilderness for forty days where he was tempted in several ways, ways that would have a profound effect upon his ministry. He did not succumb to the temptations to have a ministry where he would be the superstar. He stayed faithful to God and to what he had come to do and who he had come to be.

After a day of teaching and healing with authority, a day of people being excited about his healing, and with people wanting more, Jesus began the next day very early, while it was still dark, by going out to a deserted place by himself to pray. In the middle of the chaos, in the middle of the adoration, in the middle of the human highs and the possible temptations, Jesus withdrew and went off by himself to pray. It’s something we see happening frequently in the gospels.

Every demonstration of Jesus’ power presents him with the human temptation to misuse it, so he must return over and over again to prayer. You may remember that in the garden of Gethsemane, on the night he was betrayed, where the temptation to run away might have been strong, Jesus spent time alone in prayer. He prayed, that if it were possible, he would not have to go through with all this, that he would not need to die. He prayed,

“may this cup pass from me,” but Jesus had been and continued to be so focused on God’s will, that he also prayed, “not my will but yours be done.”

I think sometimes when we think about praying, we think about asking God for something. We come with our long list of people who need healing, people who need strength, people who need something. We come with our own long list of needs and we pour them out to God. But there is more to prayer than just asking God for what we need.

When we come to God in prayer, we should also be asking what God wants. We should be asking how God wants to use us, how we can be part of the work of God. That is what Jesus did in prayer. Jesus went beyond the chaos of life to be alone with God in prayer.

Simon and his companions came looking for Jesus and told him, “Everyone is looking for you.” I would imagine that the word had spread beyond Capernaum; people were coming from other towns to see this miracle worker, to have their loved ones healed. I wonder if they even remembered how impressed they had been with Jesus’ teaching in the synagogue before he healed that first man who interrupted his teaching. Even then, before they knew about his ability to heal, they had been amazed at his teaching.

But now, they were probably more impressed and interested in the healing that was taking place. They came looking for Jesus. It would have been easy for Jesus to stay in Capernaum. People would have traveled from further and further away to bring their sick to him for healing. It would have been easy for Jesus to stay in Capernaum for at least a few more days but after spending time in prayer, Jesus was focused. He knew **exactly** what he was supposed to be doing. When Simon and his

companions found Jesus, and told him that everyone was searching for him, Jesus knew what needed to be done, what God wanted him to do.

Instead of staying and healing more people, Jesus responded, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came out to do.”

Jesus came out – out of his hometown of Nazareth – he came out and disclosed who he was – his identity, the Son of God. He came from God into the world – his origin, he came out – although especially in Mark’s gospel, he was often telling people and especially the demons, he cast out, not to tell anyone who he was.

That can be confusing. We might wonder why Jesus would teach and perform miracles in public if he did not want people to know who he was. In the Old Testament, in Jesus’ culture, there was a sense of mystery in anything that manifested God’s presence and power. Ancient people believed that if someone knew and spoke your name it gave that person power over you. Jesus could not allow others to “name” him if he was to retain his integrity and power. He could not allow anyone else to tell him what kind of ministry he was to have – that belonged only to God. Spending time in prayer helped to keep Jesus focused on what God wanted him to do, not on what others wanted. Renewed in prayer, Jesus gets up and goes to the next place.

In our own lives, we may find ourselves caught in a flurry of activity. I found myself thinking about a hurricane. When a hurricane passes directly over, first there are all of the manifestation of a storm, the wind, the rain, the damage. But then suddenly there is a strange calm. The eye of the storm. We are usually warned to be careful because the storm is not over; there is only a short lull and then the storm rages again.

In the storms of life, we can have sabbath moments, times of calm in the middle of the storm. We can take time to step beyond the chaos and spend time focused on God and our relationship with God. In those quiet times we may become aware of important things that have previously been hidden from us in the chaos. We may discover a focus that we had lost.

In our life together as a community of faith, it is also important to take this time. It is easy to find ourselves rushing through a packed program year, trying to be all things to all people, engaging in a flurry of high energy activity without pausing to fully renew ourselves in worship and in prayer.<sup>1</sup> In prayer and in worship, we realign our ministry, we reimagine our shared ministry in ways that more faithfully mirror Jesus life.

In our finance meetings, while we want to practice good financial stewardship and business practices, we do this being aware that it is first and always about ministry. Money and business practices are tools to be used in ministry, not an end in themselves. Trustees remember that while caring for the building – our building is a tool for ministry. When we prepare a meal for a funeral, we remember that we do so to practice hospitality, and to share God’s love with those who are currently grieving. When the choir sings, they sing to give praise to God and to help lead us in worship, not to draw attention to themselves. All of our committees, programs, and activities are really about how we can do ministry together, seeking to be faithful to God’s call.

Isaiah reminds us that when we focus on past events, or on ones that we expect to happen, that focus can prevent us from being able to see God’s work in the present. The Upper Room Discipline for this week, notes that “The people of Israel had to adjust their understanding of what God was up to when the Babylonians took them into exile. They felt abandoned

by God. But the prophet asks them to remember and reframe their experience, so they can live in confidence and hope as they will face restoration and more change. ...

“Isaiah relays the good news that the end of exile is in sight, although the people cannot see it yet.” They have not yet been told that they will be free to return home and to make new choices for their lives. Isaiah reminds them of experiences they have known and can build on: God is powerful and gracious. God who created still holds creation. God can free them and bring them home. ... The prophet asks the people of God to remember and ponder what they once knew about God’s action in their lives and to reconsider how they build on their trust in God.”<sup>ii</sup>

The words of the choir’s anthem reminded us to look beyond what we think we see, to what truly is, and what can be. Jesus reminds us to go beyond the chaos of the present, to step aside and to spend time with God building that relationship. We are reminded to open our eyes and our hearts to what only God can offer. There are times when we need to be intentional about this, but there are also unexpected times when we can experience God’s presence and promise in ways we didn’t imagine.

“I believe in the sun even when it is not shining.

And I believe in love, even when there’s no one there.

And I believe in God, even when God is silent.”<sup>iii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Abingdon Preaching Annual, 2018.

<sup>ii</sup> Upper Room Disciplines, 2018, January 29, 2018

<sup>iii</sup> Miller, Mark, I Believe