

Wesley United Methodist Church

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What R U Up 2?

February 18, 2018

Title: Come Up

Scripture: Genesis 9:8-17

Mark 1:9-15

You are God's much-loved child and God is pleased with you. That is not only God's Valentine message to you, but it is God's everyday message to you and to me.

At the beginning of Lent, we recall Jesus' baptism. After he was baptized in the Jordan River by his cousin, John, Mark tells us that the heavens were opened and a voice from heaven spoke, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Whenever we baptize a child or an adult, we are reminded that baptism is the time when God claims us as God's own child. We commit to helping the person remember the story and to grow in relationship with God.

As I have said before, Mark does not waste words. He has an urgency about everything he tells us, so as soon as he tells us about the voice from heaven affirming and claiming Jesus, he tells us that "the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him."

Forty Days – the length of the season of Lent. As I kid that always confused me because I could count from Ash Wednesday to Easter as well as anyone, and it never equaled 40 days. Eventually I learned that Sundays are not counted as days of Lent because liturgically, every Sunday is considered a "little Easter" a day to remember the resurrection.

Within the Methodist Church there was never as much focus on Lent as there was for mostly Roman Catholic friends. I knew that there were

rules about certain foods that could not be eaten. This year, with Ash Wednesday occurring on the same day as Valentine's Day, our Catholic brothers and sisters were reminded that Ash Wednesday is one of the two most holy required days of fasting so they should celebrate Valentine's Day some other time.

Within the United Methodist Church, we have some traditions, but we do not have any specific rules about how we are to observe Lent. Still, we normally think of Lent as a time when we spend more time on self-reflection and doing those things that help us draw closer to God. During Lent, many of us may take up, or begin some devotional practice that helps us pay more attention to our relationship with God.

That's what Jesus was doing in the forty days that he spent in the wilderness. By the way, we find "forty" in the Bible many times, and most commentators agree that it does not signify specifically forty days, but it is a way of saying "a long time" more than a month.

It is important that Jesus spent this time in the wilderness being tempted because throughout his ministry there would be many opportunities or temptations to do things a certain way – to be the superstar, to do the spectacular, to perform great miracles, to be the center of attention. Although Jesus did perform miracles and was often the center of attention, he never did these to draw attention to himself, but only to bring glory to God, to try to bring people closer to God. The entire story of the Bible is about God wanting to have a relationship with us, God's creation.

Like many of you, I grew up with the story of Noah and the Ark. Somehow, I always thought that the story about the flood was because God was angry at people and wanted to destroy the earth to punish us. I

have now come to understand that it wasn't about God being angry, but rather about God being sad and grieving over the way humanity was behaving just as a parent might be sad and grieving but still love the wayward child.

As the story goes, at the end, God realized that punishment or retribution was not the answer. This is really a story of grace. God had every right to get angry at humanity. God had every right to destroy the earth but in God's great love – God shifted from punishment to grace.

If God wanted to stay in relationship with creation, then God must be the one to change.ⁱ It is a hard lesson to learn, but, hopefully, we eventually also learn that we cannot change another person, we can only change ourselves. So, God made a covenant with Noah, his family and all living creatures that never again would God destroy the earth through a flood. A bow in the sky – or a rainbow – would be the sign of this covenant.

From there on the Bible is all about grace, all the time. As a child, and often as an adult, I had trouble with this story, but am finally coming to understand and see the possibilities, the hope, and the promise in it. When we think about the rainbow bending over Noah's ark, the doors open wide and animals spilling out into a brand-new world, this is a reminder that even in the midst of the worst chaos – God will never forget us; God is always present.ⁱⁱ

In this covenant, the rainbow reminds us that not only is God the creator, but God is also the protector.ⁱⁱⁱ God is committed to preserve and protect every living creature, which is why I have difficulty when people – especially religious leaders – insist that a devastating hurricane or earthquake is God punishing us for something.

We believe that this story was first recorded or written down by the people of Israel when they were in exile from their homeland. It was a time of great chaos for their community. The message of this story is that even during great chaos – God is present. God is not the one who causes the chaos, but God is the one who is present with us.

It is not surprising that God would become frustrated with humanity. Even when we can see the great ways that God has saved us, even when we can see the great mercy that God has extended to us, forgiving us and loving us, even then, humanity has been, and continues to be, filled with chaos, continuing on a course that pulls away from God.

We know that chaos as well. We know all too well about terrorism, about war, and natural disasters. We know about the chaos of the gross inequity of distribution of resources and wealth. We are all too familiar with the chaos of much too frequent mass killings. We know about individual chaos – about death, divorce, illness, addictions, unemployment, and other kinds of chaos in our individual lives.

Jesus also knew about chaos. Jesus went from hearing the voice of God calling him God's "beloved son" and then immediately Jesus found himself out in the wilderness, in the middle of chaos. The Bible tells us that Jesus was in the wilderness forty days – a parallel to Israel being in the wilderness for forty years after escaping from Egypt. They were tempted to turn from following God, but Moses helped to keep them on track most of the time. Jesus, homeless, was exposed to the elements and the wild beasts and was being tempted by Satan but he was also finding God's help at every turn.

After being in the wilderness, Jesus returned even more sure of himself, of the ministry which God had given him. Jesus returned and began sharing the good news of God.

One of the benefits of exploring scripture many times throughout our life is that we often discover new insights, new ways of seeing something that we thought we already knew. I had that kind of experience this week thinking about Jesus going into the wilderness.

I think that going into the wilderness became a sort of symbol of Jesus' ministry. Jesus always went into the places of the world. He was not afraid of the things that most people would avoid. He healed lepers. He commanded demons to come out of people. He was accused of eating with sinners. His disciples were hard working fishermen. Jesus was present in the middle of life. More often than not, we find Jesus right in the middle of the pain, sorry, and disappointment of life. Very rarely, can I think of him being in the middle of great celebrations. Off hand, I could think only of the wedding at Cana – and even on that occasion, he was also called to save the host family from great embarrassment when they ran out of wine. Jesus was always present in the places of need.

Jesus' baptism and God's covenant with Noah are significant to the beginning of Lent, because God's heartbreak over sin leads to the ultimate expression of grace, the cross itself. God takes on the sadness of all the sin in the world. God takes on all the tragedy of human history. God's willingness to limit God-self, to limit divine freedom reaches its climax in the passion of Jesus.

When we are willing to accept that God placed limits on what God can and will do, then we start to discover the weakness and the

vulnerability of the cross. We discover where God most fully embraced a relationship with humanity by embracing all of our experience, even death.

In baptism, God spoke and claimed Jesus as God's Son, the beloved, with whom God was well pleased. In baptism, God speaks and claims each and every one of us as a beloved child of God, well loved by God. God sees us not as we see ourselves but as we can be in Christ.

I want to invite you to hear those words spoken to you. Insert your name at the beginning and think about God's great love for you. Each morning for the next week– or maybe for all of Lent – or even for the rest of your life, look in the mirror each morning and hear God say, "Mike, Linda, Irene, Valerie, Betty, Bruce you are my dear dear child. I am delighted with you."

When we hear God speak our name and claim us as God's own, it makes a difference in our lives. Like Jesus, we often find ourselves in the wilderness, in the places of chaos. This week, we were again in chaos as 17 people were killed in a school shooting. Immediately, we heard from politicians that our prayers and thoughts are with those who were killed and with their families. There was a response from others, that we don't need prayers and thoughts, we need action.

We do need prayers – we always need prayers. Still others pointed out that our prayers need to have feet on them. Our prayers need to have actions attached to them. It is too easy to simply say that we are praying, but not doing anything to help be an answer to our prayers. We cannot simply expect God to step in and make everything all better.

This week, I read about a teacher who since the Columbine shooting in 1999 has had a practice in her classroom that helps her identify children who are left out, or who are bullied. She finds intentional ways of having

others get to know them. This is one of the ways that she hopes to prevent even one child from becoming a shooter.

I read about a school in Bar Harbor Maine where students put on a peaceful demonstration – standing silently and walking silently with signs – pleading with adults and politicians to keep them safe.

This is one of the crises and part of the chaos of this week. Some of the chaos is ongoing. We definitely need to bring prayer into all of this, but I think we need to remember that Jesus went from his baptism into the wilderness. He spent his ministry in the places of need.

Like Jesus, we have each been called and named by God as a beloved child. We are in our own unique and different ways, sons and daughters of God. We are called by God and given a name and identity. God has declared that we are people of worth and dignity simple because we are. We are rooted and grounded in the eternal, unconditional, unchangeable love of God.^{iv}

If we are people of worth and dignity simply because we are God's children, then it also means that every person we encounter, and all the people we do not encounter face-to-face are always God's children and are people of worth and dignity. We are invited to come up out of the place we have been – the waters of our baptism, the places where we have become comfortable, the places where we want to hide from the chaos – and come up to know that we are loved by God and that God has created us to be part of God's plan for the sake of the world.

James W. Moore retold and adapted a story previously told by Fred B. Craddock, a great preacher. "Some years ago, in a small town, a baby boy was born out of wedlock. As he grew up, life was tough for him. Some children were not allowed to play with him. He was shunned on the

playground. People whispered behind his back and called him ugly names. He was scarred and marked for life. He felt rejected and worthless.

“However, on his own, when he got to high-school age, he started going to church; but he stayed way in the background. Then one Sunday morning as he was leaving the sanctuary, he heard the minister call his name. As he stopped and turned, he heard the minister say those words he had come to dread: ‘Whose boy are you, anyway?’

He froze in place, felt his whole body tense up, wished that he could disappear and just vanish right through the floor. But the minister said, ‘Hey, I know who you are. I know whom you belong to. I can see it now. I see the family resemblance. You are a child of God. I can tell by the way you act that you are close kin to God.’ The boy was speechless. Then the preacher put his big hands on the boy’s shoulders and said to him, ‘Son, you have a great heritage. Now, you go out there in the world and claim it?’

“That brief incident changed that boy’s life. It gave him a new identity, a new sense of worth and purpose. It turned his life around. Later, he became a great governor of one of our southern states. His despair had turned to hope.”^v

That same thing can happen to you and me when we remember that we really are God’s beloved child. We can give that same hope to someone else when we share that good news with someone who needs to hear that he or she is a precious child of God – someone with a purpose, an identity, a hope.

Now is the time for us to come up out of the depths of whatever seeks to keep us under and know that we are beloved of God. Come up, for now is the time to be fully who you are created to be for the sake of the

world. We are challenged to believe it, live it, and declare its truth for every woman and man who is, was, and ever shall be. We are all declared to be God's beloved children and called and empowered to live and serve in newness of the life that is ours in Christ.^{vi}

ⁱ Feasting on the Word, Commentary on passages for Lent 1 Year B

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Ibid

^v Moore, James W. The Common People Heard Him Gladly. Abingdon Press. 2004, p.68

^{vi} Feasting