

## **Vision and Voice**

A Sermon Preached by Anne Keener  
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee  
February 21, 2018  
*Midweek Lenten Service*

Mark 1:9-15



We find ourselves in this sacred space again. Just a week ago, we were here wrestling with our dustiness, dining together at the table with bread and wine, receiving the mark of the cross on our forehead, hearing those words “dust you are and dust you shall return,” and then walking back in the world.

We have been on this Lenten journey for only a week. For some it feels like the week has flown by but for others it feels like much more than seven days have passed since we gathered in the dim light of this sanctuary that is normally flooded with light shining through the windows when we gather on Sunday. The darkness that rests on the other side of the windows tonight speaks for some of the emotions that accompany us as we enter the wilderness of Lent.

I imagine some of us have reluctantly entered Lent, and if we took the time to look for the cause of that reluctance, we would likely find fear at its root. Fear related to the uncertainty of the journey, to what we may discover, or to not living up to the expectations we have placed on ourselves for the season. Some of us have observed Lenten disciplines for many years while others are taking something on or giving something up for the first time.

It is easy to get ourselves caught up in the doing of the disciplines and miss the messages and gifts God has for us in the midst of them. Lent isn't about following a Lenten discipline perfectly but rather about creating space for self-discovery and for God to speak.

Mark is very succinct in our Scripture text for tonight. He shares Jesus' baptism, temptation, and beginning of his ministry, all in seven short verses. Since we are in the midst of our annual 40-day journey in the wilderness, I initially considered skipping over Jesus' baptism to solely focus on his temptation. However, as I reflected on the passage as a whole, I realized this temptation story

where the Spirit immediately drove Jesus into the wilderness is bookended with the voice of God and the voice of Jesus. We need both those voices to give depth and meaning to the temptation.

In Mark's gospel, only Jesus sees the vision and hears the voice as the text says, "And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"

This was a secret epiphany for Jesus. This can easily be lost on us, the reader, since we have an insider view of the experience from Mark, but those who were present as Jesus was baptized didn't hear or see this epiphany.

Baptism was important for Jesus, and baptism is important for us. As you know, it is one of our two sacraments and the second we will experience together shortly with the breaking of the bread and pouring of the cup.

Baptism is our identity. It is through his baptism that Jesus hears and sees. I have tried to imagine what that moment would have been like for Jesus. He goes into the water fully in touch with his humanness and emerges from the water seeing the Spirit, hearing God, and claiming his identity as also divine.

As I reflected on Jesus' baptism, I naturally began reflecting on other baptisms. Since I do not remember my own baptism, I thought about when my children, Julie and Brian, were baptized. We brought each to this font in front of this community of faith. Jim and I, as their parents and relying on God's grace, promised to live the Christian faith and teach the faith to them, and then you, this congregation, promised to encourage them to know and follow Christ. Each was deeply moving, and our response was to celebrate and give thanks. Following the service, we took pictures right here in this space between the font and the table, and then invited friends and family to come to our house for lunch.

Our response to baptism was certainly one of thanksgiving and celebration. What do you think about Jesus' response to his own baptism? From Mark's description, there doesn't appear time for celebration, since the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. Why would the Spirit have done this? Why couldn't Jesus have just stayed there in that moment?

Maybe it is the same reason Jesus wouldn't let Peter, James, and John build dwellings for Moses, Elijah, and himself on the mountain after the Transfiguration. You may remember this is where we heard God's voice sharing these familiar words with a twist, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Instead of staying on the mountain and celebrating the moment, Peter, James, and John accompany Jesus down the mountain and through his ministry while carrying the Transfiguration experience with them as the journey to the cross.

Jesus needed the 40-days in the wilderness to wrestle and be tempted which led to self-examination and self-discovery. To embrace the idea of paradox which we have discussed in our Growth Groups, these wilderness days are exhausting and yet life-giving.

I imagine Jesus was unsure of what was happening as the Spirit drove him into the wilderness. It was a threshold place between what Jesus has always known and what lies ahead for him.

The verb drove is a strong word compared to Matthew and Luke's gospels where Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. Led is much gentler word. Led insinuates that Jesus chose to go into the wilderness, while drove indicates that Jesus didn't have a choice. Whether he was led or driven, the destination and the outcome are the same.

Jesus is tempted in the wilderness. Even divine sonship does not exempt Jesus from struggle or from being driven to a place he may not have wanted to go. If this is true for Jesus, it is certainly true for us. Our baptism and identity as a child of God doesn't prevent us from experiencing the struggles of this world. Each of us have felt, are feeling, or will feel tested. We have, are, or will experience feelings of being pushed beyond what seems reasonable. Our identity as beloved doesn't prevent these experiences, but thankfully God promises to be with us through them and to use them for good. God is present in the wilderness through the angels that are always waiting on us, always attending to us.

Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark doesn't offer any details regarding the temptation. We only know Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan, and angels waited on him. This allows us to use our imagination to think

about what it means to be tempted in the wilderness instead of being limited by the gospel writer's details.

The wilderness brings different temptations for each of us. We can be tempted to choose complacency over action. We can be tempted to listen to the chaos of the world instead of the stillness of our hearts. We can be tempted to engage the world from a place of scarcity rather than a place of abundance. We can be tempted to let the negative voices in our head overshadow the voice of God spoken to us through those baptismal words saying, "You are my child, my beloved, with you I am well pleased."

Jesus emerges from the 40 days in the wilderness to begin his ministry with a newly discovered clarity of vision. After hearing John had been arrested, Jesus knew the time had come for him to proclaim the good news saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near." The exhaustion that he experienced must have also nourished his soul. Using the words of Jan Richardson, "The baptismal waters may have evaporated from his skin, but not from his soul."

I imagine the voice in Jesus' head while in the wilderness was God's voice repeating those words that proclaim his identity, "You are my Son, the Beloved." The repetition of which created grooves and a place of home for Jesus to return in his mind throughout his ministry.

I pray that even though the baptismal waters have evaporated from your skin, that they haven't evaporated from your soul. As you come forward for communion, I invite you to dip your hand into the baptismal font and then trace the sign of the cross on your forehead like the ashes last week. Just as you went out into the world nourished from the table with ashes on your forehead, may you walk out these doors tonight nourished and carrying with you the sign of the cross from these baptismal waters.

As you continue journeying through Lent, may you experience God's abundance and live into your identity as a beloved child of God. When you are tempted to live from a place of scarcity, may you have eyes to see the vision of the Spirit at work all around you and ears to hear the voice of God that is always there whispering, "You are my child, my beloved, with you I am well pleased."

May it be so. Amen.