

“ReLent: Control”

Mark 1:9-15

February 21, 2021

For many years, the most popular course at Duke University was taught by the late Southern novelist Reynolds Price. It was a small group seminar titled, “The Gospels.” The class began with close readings of the Gospels of Mark and John, which the course description described as “documents largely unprecedented in world literature.” After studying these two gospels, students were asked to complete the one assignment the class required—an *original* gospel of 30-50 pages, based on the readings and discussion of the seminar. These many years later, I still remember this as one of the most challenging assignments I’ve ever been given. Some of that was the length—I’d never written thirty pages on anything. But even more had to do with the content. How can one possibly write an original gospel? How do you summarize the life of Jesus in your own words?

This overwhelming assignment was precisely what faced the man we call Mark as he sat down with pen and parchment to record his story of the life of Jesus. He began without precedent or guide, simply convinced that the story must be told.

To tell it, Mark chooses his words carefully; his story is succinct. No space for the story of a miraculous birth in Bethlehem or a detailed survey of Jesus’ family tree. Instead, readers are cast into the wilderness where John the Baptizer appears preaching repentance, change, and forgiveness for sins. No sooner does John predict the coming of the Messiah than Jesus arrives on the scene. Mark proceeds at an almost breathless pace, barely pausing to describe characters or setting, so focused on the plot itself, so compelled to tell the Gospel story.

Anticipation is high when Jesus arrives at the Jordan River, where John has been preaching and

baptizing. The dramatic scene concludes with the baptism of Jesus, the Holy Spirit descending as a dove, a voice from heaven saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved.”

In my gospel for Professor Price’s class, this compelling moment leaves no doubt about who is in charge. The baptism scene marks the perfect beginning to a story about how Jesus takes control of this messed-up world.

It was a good story, I think, but it’s not the one that Mark tells. Instead, the same Spirit who descended at his baptism drives Jesus into the desert, where he will spend forty days facing his greatest temptations. Jesus’ ministry begins not on the big stage, but in the wilderness.

The wilderness. It is the place where pretension passes away and honest vulnerability becomes possible. In the wilderness, we are confronted with our deepest selves, including the parts that we’d rather paint over, hide away, or ignore altogether. This morning we stand at the beginning of Lent in the Christian year. We commence this sacred season of reflection and repentance, of spiritual discipline and hope for renewal, in the wilderness.

As I’ve prepared for this series, I’ve been reflecting on the last time we were together in this wilderness season. The first Sunday in Lent 2020 was March 1st. A year and a lifetime ago. Lent 2021 is, I think, an invitation to consider what we’ve learned, how we’ve grown, what God has given and taken away in this crucible of crises.

As a community of faith at Second, we’re going to spend the next six weeks in prayerful discernment. Relent. To accept something you’ve been resisting.

To abandon harshness and cruelty, toward yourself or others. To cease the struggle. To let go. Re-Lent. A season for letting go. My hope is that the season, this wilderness time, can give us space to think through what we might want to relent. I have some suggestions to guide us along the way; you will have others I am sure.

Let's start with this question. What do you no longer need to carry? In a powerful sermon on the 23rd Psalm, my friend Rev. Jenny McDevitt considers the call to lie down in green pastures. She writes, "I wonder if perhaps the psalmist calls not only for us to lay down ourselves, but to lay down other things, too — all the things that burden us, bewilder us, or haunt us. Not only will the Lord provide all that we need; the Lord may also offer us the chance to lay down the things we do not need. Your unending fear of inadequacy? The Lord says lay it down. Your guilt over snapping at your child the other day? Lay it down. Your bruised heart, still hurting from own childhood? Lay it down. Your fear about the cancer diagnosis? Lay it down. Your exhaustion from fighting so hard, for so long? Lay it down. Your anger from an argument? Lay it down. Your grief, from the loss of a loved one? Lay it down. Lay it all down. And if you cannot lay it down for good, lay it down for a while. Let the pressure, the grief, the brokenness sit quietly beside you in that gentle green pasture. Rest your weary shoulders."¹ Relent—what do you need to lay down? It's a question worthy of some meditation this season.

To begin the journey, we're going to have to release our death grip on the control panel—that's the first step. This is not easy, but it is a lesson we learn in the wilderness, the place where we are so clearly not in charge. I'll speak for myself here, but I do think many of you can relate. I struggle and I strive to stay on top of things, to maintain order, to display mastery over my life. I try to keep an empty email inbox and a clean desk and a calm demeanor. What are your symbols of self-sufficiency? When we are driven into the wilderness, by pandemic or personal

crisis or liturgical season, we are brought face-to-face with our deepest temptation—to be Godlike.

Both Matthew and Luke describe in great detail the temptations that Jesus faced in the wilderness—three of them, each one urging Jesus to take control, to display divine power, to tame the wilderness. Each one modeled after the oldest temptation in the book, all the way back in Eden when the serpent held out the forbidden fruit with a promise, "God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God." Our ancient parents were hooked by that line. They wanted to be divine.

Our temptations may be less dramatic but they are no less real than the ones faced by Adam and Eve in the garden or Jesus in the wilderness. We too are tempted to take complete control of whatever we can get our hands on. I love to clean. Whenever I am asked to list my favorite hobbies, I'm tempted to begin with that one. I'm particularly passionate about floors. There is something so satisfying about taking a section of wood or carpet or stone and watching it become new again as I pass over it with a vacuum cleaner, broom, or mop.

I know what you are thinking—control freak! I think it's rooted in my need to have control of one small part of my life, but the principle certainly is expandable. If only I was in charge—I would only use that power for good, clean things up, get things organized. Oh, how the craving for control eats away at us. Control of our children; control of our parents; control of our schedules; control of our futures; control of our past.

As we begin this journey of letting go, we should take some time to acknowledge and name the temptations that trouble and even torment us. Don't harshly judge yourself for having them—we all do. Don't seek to push them aside or outrun them—that never works. In the wilderness of Lent, just open your hands and release your grasp. Pray for the courage to trust that the same Spirit who drove you into this wilderness will guide you through it.

For many months now, I've been drawn to a passage for the book of Second Chronicles. The context is invasion. God's people, as ever, outnumbered by enemy forces. The king of Judah, Jehoshaphat, proclaims a fast and prays for deliverance—"we are powerfulness against this great multitude that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you." In that moment, the Spirit of God descends on a previously unknown Judean, Jahaziel, and he speaks, "Do not fear...for the battle is not yours but God's." They relent control. God is faithful.

Now, I don't know which wilderness you find yourself muddling through this morning, what kind of baggage you are dragging around or battles you are preparing to fight. I do know this—trying to control your way out of it will bring only frustration and disappointment. You cannot relent if your fingernails are dug in. The only way forward is to let go. And here's the good news: there is a promise that stands at the heart of this morning's story and this sacred season—a detail that even Mark is sure to include. A voice from heaven—you are my Son, the Beloved, I am pleased with you." It is the baptismal promise—you are loved, you are claimed. This promise allows us to journey into the wilderness; it gives us the strength to relent and let go. We do not need to control the world or even our lives, because all of it is held in the arms of God. The battle is God's. The future, your future, is held in God's hands.

The promise is kept in a powerful way in Mark's story. Driven into the wilderness, Jesus is tempted by Satan and surrounded by wild beasts. We know those beasts—all that attempts to devour us. All that we seek to control, to tame, to fight, to destroy. But the beasts are not Jesus' only companions in the wilderness. Mark is clear on that. The angels waited on him. It should not be lost on us, who are so easily exhausted and overwhelmed, that the angels walked Jesus into the wilderness. They did not leave him there.

As we set out on this journey through the season of Lent, let the promise of your baptism echo in your heart: you are claimed; you are chosen; you are God's beloved.

In this wilderness of life, surrounded by the wild beasts, God keeps the promise. Angels without number stand watch over you.

It's okay to let go. Amen.

¹ Rev. Jenny McDevitt, Pastor of Pastoral Care at Village Presbyterian Church in Prairie Village, Kansas, shared these reflections at our gathering February 9-13, 2015.