

Lent 1B 21 February 2021
Mark 1:9-15
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. Let's pray:

I can't stand before you today with any sense of integrity and faithfulness and not say something about either the existence or lack of laws in our country that continue to white ant human dignity and identity, made in the image of God. You know my pet peeves - homelessness, abortion, prostitution, rape, slavery, domestic violence particularly against women and children, the ideological poison of identity fluidity, and alphabet sexuality. Anything that distorts or denies the image of God that people have been made in, gets right up my nose and I've been really struggling with it a lot lately. It's nothing new but things never get easier.

I'll continue to think, pray, and lend a sympathetic ear but that stuff gets old and tired for me. That doesn't mean I'm against prayer and compassion. But when will I turn my prayer and compassion into change and action? It's easy to ask the usual questions: How has society come to this? How do we prevent such things? What are we going to do now as a country, as a church, as individuals? But we ask the same old questions, have the same old debates, and offer the same old answers. People are confused, anxious, without hope, and dying. Society is fractious, not unified. I know; let's blame the politicians, the banks, the lawyers, the self-interest groups, or our society in general. The problem is, that only leads to one-upmanship.

I don't want to do any of those things today. And it's not because those things are unnecessary or irrelevant. They're important. We need to *do* something. But we continue to say, ask, and do the same old things and nothing changes, *least of all us*. So, I want to deepen the conversation and ask a different question. Instead of talking about responses and asking what we should do, there's a question that needs to be asked first: "Who do we want to be and does what is happening truly reflect who we are or who we want to be?" To do otherwise is to keep the conversation outside of ourselves and make it about them, whoever "them" might be. This is about us. I can't help but recall the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Few are guilty, but all are responsible."*

Who do I want to be in light of the grotesque distortions that affect our identity? Who do you want to be? What does it mean to be a Christian in society today? That's personal. That's about each one of us. The gospel isn't just a nice story about Jesus that gets read each Sunday. The gospel is a way of being. "Who do we want to be?" is the kind of question that arises in the wilderness of life.

I'll rephrase the question: "What does our baptismal identity look like and mean in the wilderness?" That's the question with which Jesus is struggling. He was baptised and immediately the Spirit drove him into the wilderness. Our baptismal identity is always at risk in the temptations of life. And I don't mean that God might withdraw or cancel our identity. The risk is always that we might set it aside and act in a way that is contrary to who God has declared us to be. That's the issue in today's gospel (Mark 1:9-15).

At Jesus' baptism God declares Jesus to be God's Son, the beloved, with whom God is well pleased. That's Jesus' baptismal identity. That's who he is before he ever enters the wilderness, before he ever faces the first temptation, before he ever teaches, heals, preaches, or walks on water. Now he must learn what that means in the wilderness of life. It's one thing for God to believe and declare Jesus to be his beloved Son with whom he is well pleased, but it's another for Jesus to believe that for himself, and let everything he does arise from that baptismal identity. That's the temptation and struggle in the wilderness. It was for Jesus and it is for us. And today that wilderness is the confusion surrounding human identity. We have once again stepped into the wilderness of lost identity.

The wilderness temptation, however, isn't so much about choosing what we will or won't do, but choosing who we will or won't be. The identity we choose will determine what we will or won't do. Do we choose our belovedness or do we choose something less than being beloved?

Jesus doesn't go to the wilderness to prove something to God but to learn for himself who he is, what it means to be a beloved child of God, and the cost that carries. That's true for us as well. That's our wilderness journey whether in the wilderness of identity theft, the wilderness of a broken marriage or friendship, the wilderness of chronic illness, the wilderness of sorrow and loss, or the wilderness of a shattered dream. The wilderness tempts us to forget who we are or to believe we are less than who God has declared us to be.

The temptations we face come from within us. The deceiver tempts us from within. See if any of this sounds familiar:

- Have you ever acted a particular way and presented a particular persona in one situation or with one group of people but changed how you acted or the persona you presented in a different situation or with a different group?
- Have there been times when you were conflicted, one part of you said this and another part said that?
- Have you ever claimed a particular value or belief for yourself but then said or did the exact opposite, contradicted your own values and beliefs?
- Have you ever kept quiet and been afraid to speak the truth because it was unpopular or costly? Do you ever go along just to get along?
- Have you ever looked in the mirror of life and not recognised yourself or not liked what you saw?

These conflicts are ultimately about our identity. If we are baptised into the life of Christ, declared to be beloved children of God; if that's our given identity shouldn't it also be the identity that governs who we are, the words we speak, and the actions we take? Shouldn't that be the thread that runs through our life with all people and in all situations? Shouldn't we be and act like God's beloved in this current wilderness?

The wilderness of life is where we face the truths and untruths about ourselves. It's where we discover for ourselves who we are and to whom and what we give our loyalty. It's where we see the values that govern our lives. I wonder what truths and untruths about us individually, as a church, and as a nation are being revealed by these assaults on human identity and dignity.

Who have we become that this madness continues? Is that really who we want to be? I want us to be more than that. We are better than that and our baptism asks more of us than that.

Are we Christians in name only but not action? On Sunday mornings in the church but not the rest of the week in the rest of the world? We happily wear Christ's cross around our necks but are we willing to take up our own and follow him? Are we willing to deny ourselves and pay the cost it takes for another to live? What does taking up our cross look like in light of homelessness? What does repentance mean in the wilderness of domestic violence? At what point do we risk betraying our baptismal identity?

I don't ask these questions as a judgement or criticism of you or anyone else. They are the questions in my head and the struggles in my heart. That's all I've got for you. I don't have any answers. I only have my baptismal identity, the wilderness, and my struggle to reconcile the two.

Who do we want to be? Do we truly want to be and live as the beloved children of God?

These are the challenges we face. We are baptised into belovedness. Do we believe this is the way God sees us? Do we believe this is what Jesus died for? Will we accept the belovedness of one another? Do we acknowledge the belovedness of those whose identities have been distorted? Will we embrace the belovedness of life created in our Lord's image?

What does that look like for you? Who do you want to be? Struggle with me brothers and sisters, and may the feet of God walk with us through this Lenten Season. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

* Abraham Joshua Heschel was born in Warsaw, Poland, 11 January 1907, and died 23 December 1972.

Heschel was a descendant of preeminent rabbinic families of Europe, both on his father's (Moshe Mordechai Heschel, who died of influenza in 1916) and mother's (Reizel Perlow Heschel) side, and a descendant of Rebbe Avrohom Yehoshua Heshl of Apt and other dynasties. He was the youngest of six children including his siblings: Sarah, Dvora Miriam, Esther Sima, Gittel, and Jacob. In his teens he received a traditional yeshiva education, and obtained traditional semicha, rabbinical ordination. He then studied at the University of Berlin, where he obtained his doctorate, and at the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, where he earned a second liberal rabbinic ordination.

https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/5545.Abraham_Joshua_Heschel accessed 16/02/2021.

The quote is taken from one of Heschel's many books, *The Prophets*, which is recognised worldwide as a masterpiece of biblical scholarship.
