

In his book “Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith,” Henri Nouwen says, “Many voices ask for our attention. There is a voice that says, ‘Prove that you are a good person.’ Another voice says, ‘You’d better be ashamed of yourself.’ There also is a voice that says, ‘Nobody really cares about you,’ and one that says, ‘Be sure to become successful, popular and powerful.’ But underneath all these often very noisy voices is a still, small voice that says, ‘You are my Beloved; my favor rests on you.’ That’s the voice we need most of all to hear. To hear that voice, however, requires special effort; it requires solitude, silence, and a strong determination to listen. That”, says Houwen, “is what prayer is. It is listening to the voice that calls us ‘my Beloved.’”¹

Are we open to listening for God’s voice this Lenten season? Are we a little excited deep down inside to see where the Lenten season will lead us, what it will bring us, how it will threaten us, protect us, fill us, or empty us?

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, a season in the Christian life of communing with God more deeply, drawing alongside Jesus more closely, and being guided and strengthened by the Holy Spirit in more thoughtful and prayerful ways.

Today’s scripture lesson from Mark chronicles a time early in Jesus’ ministry when he communed with God more fully, came to know himself as our Lord and Savior. In just six verses, Mark takes us through the baptism of Jesus, to the temptation of Jesus, and out into the world to witness and follow the ministry of Jesus.

There is so much more detail of this given by Matthew and Luke. Not different; just more detail. But Mark knows sometimes less is more, particularly in matters of spiritual growth and devotion. Lent is a season of discovery when it comes to “less is more.”

The first thing Mark tells us is that “Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee.” Jesus showed up at the place where God was calling him to ministry. The second thing we learn is that, while there at the Jordan river, Jesus was baptized. Jesus felt the need to acknowledge God’s place in the entirety of his life. Likewise, from the moment of our baptism, we acknowledge we belong to God, that our life is not our own.

¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith* (Harper Collins, 1997), 13.

Next, Mark tells how Jesus saw “the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.” In our baptism, we commit to follow the Spirit of God throughout our lives, listening for that “voice ... from heaven” Mark described, and knowing that we, too, are counted among God’s beloved through our faith in Jesus.

So the Christian life begins with showing up for ministry, acknowledging and embracing God’s place in our lives, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and listening for what God is saying to us at all time, in all circumstance.

That’s the Baptism of Jesus – and us – as described by Mark: showing up for ministry, embracing God’s place in your life, being guided by the Holy Spirit, and listening for God’s word.

Next, says Mark, “the Spirit immediately drove (Jesus) out into the wilderness,” where he tempted by Satan. Here we see that Christian ministry is not easy. There will be wilderness moments when we feel lost. There will be times when we, like Jesus, are “tempted by Satan,” as Mark puts it. But, just as Jesus was visited by angels who protected him, we too, can trust in God to protect us from the temptations and dangers of this wilderness world we live in.

Last week, when I was thinking of how God loves us and protects us, a vision came to mind of a time when a father you all know and love protected his children. I was speaking to the family of Don Best, and his son, Chris, told me about a time when he and his brother, Greg, were coming out of a Chiefs’ game with their dad. And it was a mob scene. So much so that Don was really concerned about his young boys getting through the crowd. So Don put the boys in front of him and then encircled them on the right and the left inside his arms, creating a barrier between the boys and the crowd. “Just watch where you’re walking,” Don shouted to the crowd as they moved along. A guy jostling along next to them looked at Don, saw what he was doing, and got this quizzical look on his face. After another moment, the guy spoke up, saying to all those around him, “This father needs a little extra space. Give him some room.” What a tender moment, right? I can’t imagine a more vivid picture of how God protects us from the dangers of this world, looking after us in our wilderness moments.

That’s the Temptation of Jesus – and us – as described by Mark: stepping out into the unknown wilderness of Christian ministry, overcoming the temptation to give up or give in, and trusting God to protect us through it all. The blessing of baptism, the wilderness of temptation, and a devoted life of ministry – that’s the path we walk as followers of Christ.

The beginning of Jesus’ life of ministry took place in this way, according to Mark: “After John was arrested, Jesus came from Nazareth, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’”

In those two short verses, we are given a simple-yet-profound pattern for our ministry as follower of Christ: Listen for Jesus, believe in God, devote yourself to the kingdom of the Lord, and proclaim the good news of the Gospel to others. Listen, believe, commit and proclaim – that is the life of Christian ministry. When journeying alongside Jesus from baptism to temptation to ministry, this becomes our pattern for the Christian life.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, a season in the Christian life of communing with God more deeply, drawing alongside Jesus more closely, and being guided and strengthened by the Holy Spirit in more thoughtful and prayerful ways. Whether or not you undertake a Lenten practice this year is between you and God. This is your opportunity to make those needed adjustments to the pattern of your life that will better reflect a Christian life of devotion and ministry.

Last week on Ash Wednesday, several of us gathered online to observe this occasion through a sacred and holy act of devotion as we enter the season of Lent. We each took time privately after our online devotion to wash our face and anointed our forehead with oil, in the sign of a cross. There was no schmear of ash on the forehead. No procession of worshipers bowing their heads for the pastor to mark them with the ashen cross. No visible sign that everyone would look at and know we did something special.

No, instead, we followed the pattern Jesus set forth in Matthew 6, where he says: “Whenever you fast (or give something up), do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.” “But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen – not by others – but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Whatever devotional practice you commit to over the 40 days of Lent is between you and God, God who alone sees into the hidden places of our hearts and souls. If you weren't with us on Zoom Wednesday evening, I invite you to set aside time after this worship service to use either the ash-made soap and fragrant oil from the church or any household soap and oil, such as olive oil or even hand lotion. Prayerfully discern a meaningful way for you to observe a holy Lent. Then wash your face with the soap and use the oil to make the sign of the cross on your forehead.

Family members may want to anoint one another with the oil – that's fine. And you may want use the soap each morning to wash your face as a reminder of your devotional practice. This is your time to come before God seeking a new pattern for your life, and then living into that new way during the next six weeks of Lent, as you follow Jesus into deeper relationship with God and more faithful communing with the Holy Spirit.

In preparation for this Lenten ritual, we will now observe a moment to consecrate the soap and oil, both from the church and from your homes, setting aside these household items for this holy use and mystery. Let us pray:

Lord God, we remember and thank you for bestowing upon us and all humanity the blessing of your grace, never more fully than in the cleansing waters of Baptism. As we cleanse our faces this day with soap and anoint our foreheads with fragrant oil, we embrace with all humility your call upon us for spiritual preparation and devotion in this holy season of Lent. We pray your Spirit upon the soap and oil used by those gathered this day. Send to us in abundance the tender mercy of the Holy Spirit as we look at those areas of our lives that lack the conviction of our faith. In our moments of weakness, renew us in the strength of the Lord. Be with us in this Lenten season of preparation as we move toward the fullness of Easter and the promise it brings for us and for all creation. Amen.