

A Sermon for DaySpring

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“So That We Are Loving”

Mark 1: 9-15

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So, how are you feeling about being in a church observing Lent? What are your thoughts about it?

Curious?

Committed?

Confused?

It is confusing for some...After the Ash Wednesday morning service I went to office depot and a Hispanic woman took note of my ashes and I could tell the day had snuck up on her and she said, **“Oh, where did you go to mass?”**

I said, **“DaySpring Baptist Church....”**

She said, **“You Baptists do that.”** Pointing to my forehead.

“Some of us do... well... a few of us do.”

We do and I think some sense of what we're about is important... though analyzing it isn't nearly so important as doing it... Doing Lent. Still... what we think about all this as a community matters.

We aren't trying to be something we're not.

Aren't trying to be spiritually trendy.

That's not it at all... I hope.

We like “The Color Purple”... We think liturgical stuff is cool... Hope not.

We aren't trying to get God's approval...

Score some divine points...

There is nothing to prove before God.

What we're trying to do is to grow up. And lots of us have decided that it's impossible to grow up in your own wisdom... That never works and so we're listening to and learning from Saints about how to do that.

Most of us have tried our hand at self-fulfillment. We, all of us, have “gone our own way.” And most of us wind up wandering.

The way of spiritual growth is something like this. There are the plains... where folks walk about in any direction and it doesn't really matter how they walk or who they walk with... because there is no real destination.

But then they spy some hills on the horizon or some of them do. And they look interesting... inviting. Something inside says, **“go for it.”** And so they do... you do... you have.

And as you begin climbing the hills you find out real quick that they're steeper than they looked from afar. And there's lots of trees and brush... but thankfully there are paths. And it's clear to you that to advance much at all you have to be on one of these paths that have been marked... They've been there for a long time ... you can just tell.

But then you get higher up into these hills and you finally glimpse it... it's a great peak... sitting at the top of a great mountain. Down in the plains you didn't even know it was there... You'd heard rumors about it... but from here on top of one of these hills, you can finally see it... on a clear day, anyway.

So... you decide you're going to climb it because it's quite clear to you that you should... because, well, it's there... so you should and something in you knows you must. You can't not do this and off you go...

But someone grabs you and smiles and says, **"It's great that you want to go... I'm so excited for you but you can't get there without a guide. And by the way, the guide is going to make you get in shape first. And the guide is going to make you take some time. You'll go up for a while and then back down a ways to get acclimated to the atmosphere... back and forth even as you climb. Also, the guide's going to teach you certain skills and if you don't learn these skills, you not only won't make it to the top... it'll be dangerous."** (An image from Kabir Helminski)

So... having heard that... you start looking for a guide.

Observing Lent at DaySpring... is our attempt at finding a guide. We've glimpsed something in Jesus that we know we're made for and so we say together, **"Who can teach us?"**

And we're learning to say of the Church and to Saints... "they can". And what they tell us is that we need a time like Lent... we need times like this.

Jesus did. He is the temple and he reveals to us a path... and Jesus enters into the very experience that Lent calls us to... that's what was going on in our Gospel Reading.

Remember, Jesus "grows in wisdom and stature... in favor with God and man." Horizontally... vertically... Jesus grows up.

When he's three, he's not looking up at the Wise Men saying, **"If you guys only knew what I know. And, as soon as they teach me Aramaic, I'll tell you a thing or two."**

He grows up...

He becomes...

He is taught.

And he grows up in a different culture than you and I have grown up in. It's just very different... there's no natural world and supernatural world... it's all supernatural, it's all God's. There's no sacred and secular split. Working, playing, praying... it's all apart of what you do to live well towards God who is your center.

And in his culture, there are assumptions about what that takes.

You need to be taught... it's a culture of mentoring and apprenticeship and folks are submissive to that. There are things to learn.

Like the value of hard work...

The need for rest...

The importance of celebration...

And the basic necessity of self-denial. Prayer, Scripture, and Interpretation.

All this would be assumed and taught and Jesus grew up learning and being shaped by it. By a family and community and teachers who all knew that training in righteousness... holiness was important. And it was assumed that testing and trials would be a part of that.

You can't grow up a part from that... you can't strengthen the heart a part from it.

We don't know much of what happened to Jesus prior to his public ministry but we know what life was like. He was growing with, learning from, submitting to those who could help him climb the mountain.

Has he been off to the desert before.??? For 40 days??? I don't know but he had fasted plenty. He'd been taught how to do that and what impact it would have on his body and spirit. He'd been taught how do deal with his thoughts as they emerged? And even to deal with attacks by the Evil One.

However, the text today begins not in the desert where he's being tested but in the river... where he is baptized and where the heavens open up for him and where he hears who he is and how much he is loved.

Then he goes to the desert...

Then he goes to minister... to love.

Notice the progression the gospels give us... because it must be ours. First, there is this opening of the heavens... there is what is revealed to him and he hears and what he hears is that he is loved. This is settled and it's settled up front.

Get that... the blessing of God is up front.

The love of God precedes the training of God.

Grace precedes discipline.

And if we get that backwards we'll mess everything up... and we have... gotten it backwards.

"If I just do enough... get up early enough... get serious enough... get nice enough... I'll get something I don't have. NO! No... you have it and you've by God's grace had moments when you've known that and seen that. Nothing is truer than that you belong to God and have the blessing of God.

"This is my son... in whom I'm well pleased." He hears that and then... goes into the desert.

He's there for forty days... fasting... He's remembering, no doubt... and Julie Merritt pointed out at Lectionary Breakfast, grieving. She said, **"Why wouldn't he have to let go of some things to be faithful and go forward... we do."**

So he's letting go... grieving.

And he's turning towards what life has for him. He's facing what he must face. He's seeing more clearly. He's combating his thoughts... His bodily needs and instincts are being controlled.

We know from the other gospel accounts that he's renouncing the ways of the world. **"I won't compromise... I won't turn these stones to bread. I will not jump off the temple to draw a big crowd... I won't compromise to gain power."** No Idols.

Mark doesn't tell us about that... He makes very little of this but don't you make little of it or you lose the significance of the incarnation. You lose what saves us.

The Church Fathers said, **"What is unassumed is unhealed."** So, don't see Jesus as having some leg up on you. The temptation is real. It was just like the one you faced this last week. Remember... when you were tempted.

--To get mad or grumpy or sad

--To covet or lust or lie

--To talk... to tell... belittle

His temptations were like yours. And I suspect, even more intense. We aren't awake half the time, maybe most of the time... Satan doesn't even have to tempt us.

The more intentional we are about knowing and following God... the more significant the temptations... the depth and power of them. The more spiritual power we have... the more temptation... and the greater the need for God's grace.

Jesus goes into the desert for forty days... It's a time of self-denial... focus... testing... letting go... leaning on God. All of that... and all of that done deliberately.

And the Church looked at that and said, **"That's what we must do."** And so here we are... a bunch of ole' Baptists for the most part... observing the first Sunday of Lent.

And we're not in Jesus' culture, are we? Is there anything that calls you to self-denial for the sake of your soul... or the world's soul, or the world's sake? No... I'll answer that for you.

We are indulged. And the more prosperous we become... the more capable we are... the more technology we possess... the more indulged we become. And no one ever asks us, **“Is this good for you?”**

But Lent comes along and I have to ask it... of myself. What does my over-eating, over-sleeping, over-entertaining, over-consuming, over-“Googling and Tivo-ing” and text messaging... accomplish... and what does it cost me? I have to face that... thanks to Lent.

And what might happen if I learn during Lent to do otherwise. If I give up something good up for 40 days in order to develop the inner strength to resist later what hurts me.

What would happen if I fasted and as a result my self-awareness increased (which it will). I might see something I’d never seen. Maybe a fault... **“Look at that pride... I never even knew it.”** Or I might see something beautiful in someone I love and say, **“Wow, thanks be to God.”**

If I listened intently for 40 days... might I learn to listen everyday.

If I were disciplined for 40 days... might I be less controlled by whims and feelings. If I paid attention to...watched my heart...and guarded it, would I purify it?

If I suffered willingly for 40 days... might I celebrate more joyfully the other 316 days and even as I am more alive to life... be more compassionate towards those who have nothing to celebrate.

There is a wisdom...and it teaches us a progression to the spiritual life. It begins in graceful revelation... In our baptism... but it only proceeds through the desert... That place where we are taught. Where we’re disciplined... where we repent... where we deny ourselves and wake up.

But... but... make sure you see this... the desert is never for the sake of the desert. There’s a progression.

Jesus leaves... He goes preaching good news. He goes eating and drinking and joining people in life in appealing ways... in real ways. He was healthy. He goes to parties. He has friends. He loves.

Self-denial isn’t the point.

Sackcloth and ashes aren’t the point.

Looking and sounding “pious” isn’t the point.

Being alive... whole... is. Loving the world and knowing God... is.

Evagrius, who taught in the 4th century, would make his disciples memorize his words or teachings and just sort of let them sink in over time... they take time to get. Here’s one of the first, **“Faith: the beginning of love. The end of love: knowledge of God.”**

It’s on the front of the worship guide and Evagrius would tell us to memorize it and live with it... chew it... process it. We should... if we want to grow up...(repent it) Things progress.

There is a mountain we get to climb. Listen to The Faith of the church. Begin now... today... be obedient and especially during this season.

We are addicted... indulged... blind... driven... selfish. We’re angry... we’re wounded. We’re suffering.

Let’s enter a time together when we act humble... act repentant... act compassionate... act self-sacrificing... act whole. Let’s do what Jesus did in the desert... and as the mystics say, **“May our imitation become reality.”** So that we are no longer having to act... so that we are humble... self-disciplined, awake, compassionate... So that we are loving.