

Sermon for Calvary Episcopal Lenten Series, Memphis, TN

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3/5/2009

The organizers originally asked me to pick a text that I am passionate about. There are too many, so I responded by asking them just to use the readings for the day. I lucked out. Almost every time I gather with a group of clergy or lay leaders for an hour or two, I talk about Jesus' baptism. This window into the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry is absolutely foundational for what it means to be a Christian, and at least as basic as other parts of Jesus' life, his death and resurrection.

This bit of Mark's gospel is Jesus' very first appearance, and it opens by telling us where he has his roots and that he was baptized by John. In southern parlance, it's a way of saying, "who his people are." This gospel doesn't tell us who his mama is, but it gets close.

As he emerges from the waters, he hears a voice from heaven, "you are my beloved son, and I am well pleased with you." This is a new birth, where the first sound heard is not a baby's cry but a divine word of blessing, and this speech defines relationship between the new human being and the divine. Baptism is birth into new life, and a relationship defined by belovedness and God's pleasure.

That's all we hear, and then the spirit drives him out into the wilderness to be tempted.

Mark has set this up as new creation, and he's mirrored both of the creation stories of Genesis in his telling. The first creation story is about God speaking light, sky, waters, plants, stars and planets, birds and fish and sea monsters, cattle and snakes, and finally humankind in his own image, male and female he created them. "And God saw everything that he had created, and indeed, it was very good." Goodness and belovedness, speaking and blessing, and God takes pleasure in it.

The second creation story is about what goes wrong. It's about temptation and alienation.

There are several parallels going on here. The wind from God that sweeps over the formless void and the deep at the beginning of the first creation story is echoed in the spirit (same word) that drives Jesus out into the chaos or wilderness to be tempted, just as God drives the man out of Eden at the end of the second creation story.

God speaks everything into creation in the first story in Genesis, and God speaks Jesus' identity. His name is effectively beloved and God's pleasure. That also becomes his vocation, to make that love and divine pleasure a reality on earth. He claims it as his mission, which is probably most clearly stated in the same place in Luke's gospel, right after the temptation in the wilderness (Luke 4). He reads from

Isaiah, “the Lord God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, healing to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and proclaim the year of Jubilee.” We get a shorthand version here in Mark, “the kingdom of God is near, turn around, and give your heart to this good news.”

I think this is the foundation of the Christian message, of the good news. If you and I are baptized into Jesus’ death and resurrection, we are equally baptized into his baptism. God says the same thing to us, “you are my beloved, and in you I am well pleased.” God says that to us before we have a chance to go astray or wander off, and God continues to say that to us in every moment of our existence. We can no more escape that beloved identity than we can escape the breath that gives us life. God calls us beloved before we see the light of day, and God’s love continues to enfold us after we cease to breathe, and our body slowly crumbles once more into dust.

Being beloved and pleasing to God is both the beginning place for our journey in this life, and the air we breathe. It’s directly related to what Irenaeus said, that the glory of God is a human being, fully alive. When we know ourselves beloved and pleasing, we give glory to God and we make that glory evident. It is how we give voice to the conversation that God began with us before we were born.

And conversation is what our journey is about. That word comes from Latin, *con plus verso*, and it means quite literally, to turn about with. When it first comes into English usage around 1300 it doesn’t mean to talk, but to have dealings with, to spend time with, live with, to have a relationship with. Today we might say that it means “to hang out.” It’s related to that good Hebrew word, *yada*, “to know,” in the sense that “Adam knew his wife and she conceived and bore a child.” It is about deep and intimate knowing. The same word is used for the way in which God knows us. That word conversation has the same constellation of meanings. In English law there is a technical term, “criminal conversation,” that comes into use in the late 1700s. It’s a legal term for adultery. It means building a relationship, and spending too much time, with the wrong person.

Conversation is about living in community, whether the community of a marriage or the local coffee shop. Conversation is actually the purpose of Christian community – spending enough time with others that you can begin to see the beloved image of God in the people you disagree with or just don’t understand.

Conversation is something like intentional leisure. Prayer is conversation, but not just what we think of as using words to tell God our wants and concerns, but in the deeper sense of spending time in the presence of the beloved.

The other readings from last Sunday are also about conversation, in the fullest sense. Noah and God have a lengthy conversation – they develop a relationship that is so deep and valued that God tells Noah that his family and the animals he can collect onto his boat will be the ones who remain after the devastation of a flood. The covenant God makes not to do it again is the result of a long and fruitful

conversation. Indeed, covenants cannot be made or constructed without spending that kind of relational work and time – and we might note the lengthy process we’re engaged in to develop an Anglican covenant. It takes more than a committee sitting down to hammer out a text. Much of it must be built of relationship, rather than words. The words are only the outer sign of an inner relationship – they are sacramental in that sense. The words are the “I love you” that only mirrors a much deeper and richer reality.

So what does this conversation have to do with us? What or how do things change in the conversation as we abide in it? What happens out there in the wilderness, once the conversation has begun?

Those temptations in the wilderness are really about abandoning the conversation. Either because you think you are the only party involved, or because you can’t imagine that God would want to be in conversation with you. I met a fellow in a nursing home once with a sweatshirt that said, “Jesus loves you... but I’m his favorite.” It’s true, and it’s true for each of us – the only error there is the word “but”. We’re all God’s “best-beloved,” and nothing we can do can push ourselves out of the conversation, or push anybody else out – despite the fact that a lot of us spend a lot of time and energy building fences around the conversation pit.

We can, however, grow deaf to the conversation. We can refuse to bend our ear, or spend the time necessary to deepen the conversation. This Lenten season is an opportunity to attune our ears to that voice whispering, “beloved” and “well-pleased.” And all of the traditional Lenten disciplines are ways to do that. Conscious and deliberate time spent in prayer, paying greater attention to how we’re tempted to fill up the empty spaces in our lives with too much food or work or television; or choosing limits on our own consumption so that others’ lives may be enriched – they’re all ways to converse, to be still and know that God is God, and we are beloved.

I’ll suggest a beginning place for deepening the conversation. Find a time in your day when you can spend five minutes in quiet, without disturbance. Maybe it’s when you first awaken, or when you arrive in the parking lot at work, or perhaps it’s at the very end of the day before you surrender your consciousness. Five minutes. Close your eyes, relax your body, notice your life-giving breath flowing in and out, and hear that heavenly voice saying to you what Jesus heard, “you are my beloved, and in you I am well pleased.” Draw your attention back gently when it wanders. Repeat. And then practice that five minutes, each day. You may notice that your other conversations change as well.

You will likely find that your attention does wander. That’s one way of understanding what temptation and sin are about – wandering away from the focus of that foundational conversation. The response is the same, turn back again, gently, toward the source of your belovedness. That is what Jesus is talking about when he says, “rejoice, for the kingdom of God has come near, repent (turn around), and believe in the good news.”

Our sin, small or great, is either refusing to believe – turning away from the conversation, rather than toward it, or insisting that we're the only possible focus of the conversation, which is really just turning inward rather than toward God. The kingdom of God is as near as our breath. We can find it again in conversation.

That conversation is the source of our ability to help build a world that looks pervasively more like the world of which the prophets have always dreamed. It is the dream Jesus claimed as his purpose: good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, healing to the blind and sick. That is the outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace we know in that deep, interior conversation.

If we can have that kind of interior conversation it will change the larger conversations. As I explored the streets of this city early this morning, I saw the same wheelchair I saw yesterday, parked in the entry of a commercial building. Not just a wheelchair, but a gray tarp, apparently with a sleeper beneath it. A few blocks farther on, I was startled to see a big piece of cardboard move – it was windy, but no, there were boots sticking out from under one end. Another entryway, a pile of plastic, also with boots protruding. A trinity of God's beloveds. If they knew their belovedness, they would likely not be sleeping on your streets. If we knew their belovedness, they probably wouldn't be there either.

Conversation. Spend some time hangin' out.