

Tempted

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Mark 1:9-15 “Wild Geese” by Mary Oliver

First Sunday in Lent

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On this first Sunday of Lent, the Lectionary moves us backwards ... and we read once again about Jesus’ baptism in Mark’s Gospel ... the very beginning of his story according to this author. You will recall that during Advent and Epiphany we read several texts that come later in this first chapter of this oldest gospel.

Today’s reading gives us Jesus’ baptism by John ... followed by the Holy Spirit *driving* him into the wilderness. Then upon his return ... following the arrest of John ... he begins his own ministry. All of those events happen very quickly in this Gospel ... unlike the much longer and more detailed descriptions of these events that we read in Matthew and Luke. This gospel also is clear that the Holy Spirit doesn’t gently and lovingly lead Jesus into the wilderness ... rather the text says it drives him ... literally kicks him out into the wilderness ... a somewhat violent verb is used here in Mark ... the same verb that is used to tell of Jesus driving the money changers out of the temple later in this gospel.

And then ... when Jesus returns from his 40 days in that wilderness ... and he is ready to begin his own ministry ... he preaches his first sermon. He says: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near ... repent ... and believe in the good news.”

So ... both the Baptizer before his arrest ... and Jesus following that event ... are calling folks to repent. But we need to be clear that when the Bible speaks of repentance ... it is something much bigger than merely acknowledging all the mistakes we have made ... and saying we are sorry. Rather ... biblical repentance requires a basic turning ... it is a reorientation of our lives ... where we move from one framework of meaning to another ... from one way of thinking about ourselves in relation to God and others ... a way where we always put ourselves first ... to that other competing and compelling vision ... which calls us to first love God with everything in us ... so that we can love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

And so this season of Lent also gives us 40 days ... if we started on this past Wednesday ... 40 days to do some soulful introspection. And perhaps even some time to sojourn into our own wilderness ... to see where our lives do ... and where our lives do not ... align with the nature of God. And we may find ... as Jesus did ... that God will draw us into those uncomfortable places of wilderness ... where we find out that we don’t know everything ... that we don’t have all the answers ... that place where we can be emptied of nearly everything but God ... that place where our lives can evolve into more ... so that we can then help to transform our world.

That is the point of Lent ... it is meant to disrupt what is comfortable in our lives ... what is familiar and known and safe ... so that we may be startled out of our customary ways of seeing ... that we might see our own very real need for repentance.

Some of you may have seen the photo of a sobbing woman ... perhaps she was a mother or a teacher ... outside Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, following our nation’s most recent school massacre ... a photo ... so very much like the ones we have seen so many other times over the past few years ... in the aftermath of dozens of school shootings in our nation. What made this photo different ... what made it stand out from all the others ... was that this woman had a cross made of ashes on her forehead ... she had been to church that Ash Wednesday morning ... she was wearing the mark of an ancient Christian ritual ... that mark that says she belongs ... in life and in death ... to the God we know through Jesus.

It was as if she was there ... with that ashy cross on her forehead ... to remind us of that counter-narrative Lent calls us to live into ... so that even with all the evil in this world ... all the evil in that place on that day ... we can be assured that God is at work in this world building the Beloved Community ... always busy with resurrection ... always at work bringing life out of death.

Outside that school on that day ... and across our nation ... there have once again been promises of “thoughts and prayers” flowing ... and we need to continue doing that ... but the problem is ... in a few days ... we will move on with our lives. That is until the next such tragedy occurs ... and then we will hit the repeat button and do it all over again ... because the fact is that it has become abundantly clear ... as one New York Times columnist claimed ... that America has proven its disdain for children’s lives ... as a nation ... we do not value them as much as we value money ... we do not value them as much as we value our guns.

So yes ... go ahead and make this Lent a time of personal introspection and repentance ... give up Facebook or chocolate or whatever you want to ... but this year we must do more.

As people of this nation ... we need to do a great deal more.

Because we too are people with ashy crosses on our foreheads ... we too have to continue to remind ourselves ... and the world ... of that counter narrative ... remind them of the world God wants ... remind them ... and so remind ourselves ... there is another way to live.

But before we can do that ... before we can repent this national sin ... we have to become aware of one of our greatest temptations ... and that is our temptation to amnesia ... our temptation to become overloaded with the horror ... so that we shutdown ... push it to the back of our minds ... because we believe there is nothing we can do.

And when we do that ... individually or collectively ... consciously or not ... we begin to share that disdain for the lives of our children ... in our minds we assure ourselves that our children are safe ... and we become complicit ... complicit in every single child’s death.

And so this Lent ... let’s don’t be tempted by amnesia. Rather let’s allow these horrible, tragic, needless events to drive us ... to literally kick us ... into our own wilderness ... where we will lose our amnesia ... where we will lose our feelings of helplessness ... and instead be filled up with the power of the Holy Spirit ... that same Holy Spirit that has empowered so many before us.

Then ... like Jesus ... we can come out of that wilderness empowered ... and begin our ministry. Many of our *politicians* continue to say in the face of all these shootings ... that we have a mental illness problem ... but that is unfair to those who suffer from mental illness. As one study recently said: “Violence done by those with mental illness is so small that even if we could somehow cure it all ... 95 percent of violent crime would still exist. Rather violent crimes are committed by people who lack the skills to modulate anger, express it constructively and move beyond it.”

What many *experts* are saying is that we have a gun problem ... and we also have an anger problem ... that we are a culture awash in both.

Certainly there are things we can do to end our sea of weapons ... we can donate money ... we can write letters ... we can vote. But as people with those ashy crosses on our foreheads ... there are perhaps more things we can do on a daily basis to help young people ... in our own community ... deal with their anger. And maybe that’s where we start.

And where we have to start to do that is to give up our helplessness and not be tempted to amnesia. We have to come to deeply understand the places where that anger festers in young children ... so they grow up to be raging adults.

We have to realize how many of our children are hungry ... and live with food insecurity.

We have to realize that children need good affordable health care to grow up strong and healthy.

We have to acknowledge the daily fear of living undocumented in this country.

We have to acknowledge that children are being damaged every day by the ravages of poverty.

We have to acknowledge that physical and sexual abuse are not a rare occurrence.

There are all kinds of things that happen to our children that can lead to the buildup of that rage.

Every day at Cahoots ... those of you who are involved there ... are doing amazing work with young people ... to help them understand and deal with their anger. But is there more the rest of us can do? Are there other places we can take our ashy foreheads ... places where we can show up and battle the rejection ... the betrayal ... the abandonment so many of our angriest youth feel?

I have been in conversation with John Curtis ... who as you know is the principal of one of our community's elementary schools ... to see if there are things we can do there ... and we will be in further conversation.

Can we provide basic necessities for kids year round ... and not just at Christmas?

Can we brainstorm ways for poor kids to participate in band and sports and other extracurricular activities?

Can we go into the school and eat lunch with kids and mentor them as we do?

There must be things we can do ... even if it is just for the kids in one elementary school ... so they don't grow up believing they are unimportant to us ... don't grow up believing they are invisible ... don't grow up thinking they don't matter. We have to have our eyes wide open to the pain and fear so many of our children are living with ... perhaps that's what we need to really ponder this Lent ... and then push back against the temptation to pretend this evil doesn't affect them and us ... this temptation to pretend these aren't our kids too.

Because that photo of that woman ... with that ashy cross on her forehead ... put there by the church ... should remind us who we are as well ... remind us that we are a part ... she is a part ... those slaughtered children are a part ... that angry young killer is a part ... all of us are a part of God's beloved creation.

If we are paying attention on this first Sunday in Lent ... hearing what the author of this oldest gospel is trying to tell us ... we may have heard that word "beloved" ... may have heard Jesus called beloved. Called that before he began his ministry ... called that before he exorcised those demons ... called that before he healed Peter's mother-in-law ... called that before he had done anything. Beloved ... that word ... that most fundamental word we need to know in this or in any season. We are beloved ... all children are beloved ... all creation is beloved.

Both the author of this gospel and the poet Mary Oliver believe in that grace ... that it is that grace and that grace alone that can lead us to a new orientation. True repentance ... true change ... doesn't flow out of self-defeating guilt ... but rather from trusting that incarnate, wild, imaginative love of our God.

Change happens when we can somehow believe we are beloved ... and everyone else is too ... that it is a God who loves us already ... today ... that is calling us to something new ... to something better ... offering us that love that undergirds our attempts to live differently ... this God who needs our action and commitment ... to build God's realm.

Let's decide to do something proactive this Lent.

Today we will baptize a beloved child of God ... and we will make promises to that child ... promises we make to him on behalf of the church universal ... on behalf of the Body of Christ. We will promise once again that we will turn away from the evil that can entangle, confuse and break the human spirit ... and turn once again to God.

And ... we will promise to be the Body of Christ ... embodying God's love ... to that child.

When we make that promise to Rollie ... and to every other child we baptize in this sanctuary ... we are really making that promise to all children.

Jesus says the time is fulfilled ... it is now. Amen.