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Lent 2018 – Week 1
Reflection on Mark 1:9-15
The Ups and Downs of a Spiritual Journey

Jesus' baptism at the beginning of his ministry sounds like a real "high." It had to be a profound experience to see the heavens parting and the Spirit descending as a dove, or to hear an audible affirmation of God's blessing that God was pleased, and to be called "Beloved." (Mark 1:9-15) How wonderful it is to feel confident our path is the right one. Oops! Immediately following this "high," he is thrust into a "low" - a wilderness with wild beasts and the satanic power that instills doubts and tries to make us question our values. "Are you sure this is what God wants? What are you getting out of this?"

Isn't that just the way it is? Just when we feel confident, life takes us someplace we don't want to go, to hear things that we don't want to hear. Yuck! Metaphorically, we all prefer to live on the mountain tops with bright sunshine and beautiful vistas communing with the presence of God and, preferably, far removed from the nitty gritty daily grind in the valley below - for valleys can easily turn into a wilderness.

Some suggest that having doubts shows a lack of faith. It does not. Doubts, temptations, and trials are simply part of the natural ebb and flow of moving through life's journey. Sometimes we are confident and, at other times, we find ourselves in the wilderness, by our own choices or by the twists and turns of life itself.

Lenten season is akin to walking through the wilderness - a time to consider our tests and temptations to yield to the cultural despair or personal despondency or, to check in if in resisting powers and principalities, we are being sucked into the ever-present temptation of the vortex of cynicism. Some days we find ourselves on the mountain tops yet other days we are smack dab in the wilderness. But, Mark says even in the wilderness Jesus communed with angels. In our times of testing and doubting we can trust in the resurrection promise that Love cannot be defeated. Whether on a mountain top, in a valley or wilderness, what matters is to keep plodding through our circumstances trusting in the Power of Love: "I am never forgotten or abandoned." "God's grace is sufficient." "Love never fails." Think on these things.

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Lent 2018 – Week 1

Focus Scripture: Mark 1:9-15

“At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” – NIV Mark 1:9-11

One of the most valuable lessons I have learned in my life comes from the recesses of my teenage years. In the midst of some teenage angst and rebellion, I quite vividly remember my mother saying to me:

“I will always love you, but I might not always like you.”

Over the years that saying has played constantly in the recesses of my memory. It is often a comforting reminder of the enduring and lasting quality of love.

“I will always love you, but I might not always like you.”

As we move into the season of Lent, I am reminded of another journey between parent and child that we will watch unfold in the days ahead. The journey is fraught with missteps and parallels that we can see coming, and yet are powerless to change.

Despite this knowledge, we return year after year to walk these steps together. In the darkness, we wait for the light that we surely know is coming.

“I will always love you, but I might not always like you.”

As we begin our walk towards the cross together this year, I urge you to remember that you are never far from the love which you seek. We all make missteps from time to time: say things we wish we could take back, do things we wish we hadn't done, or don't things that we wish we had.

Despite the missteps ahead and the crosses to bear, go forward into this season of waiting knowing that you are not alone. As a parent never really leaves a child, so too are you not alone in this wilderness.

Despite the missteps behind you or ahead of you, step forward know that you are unequivocally loved and cherished, even in the darkest of times:

“And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

Prayer

Loving God, thank you for the knowledge and comfort that you love us and see us, even when we fail to love and see ourselves. May that love and comfort continue to baptize our hearts and minds and carry us through even our darkest times. Amen.

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Lent 2018 – Week 1
Reflection on Psalm 25:1-10

There are times when scripture just seems so far away, so distant from who I am, or where I live. And then there's Psalm 25. This prayer leaps across the centuries into my heart—pulling on my needs and hopes for God to lead me, as I wait, all day long. (I'm not good at waiting.) The psalmist confesses a need for mercy and love, a hope that God will forgive and forget past sins, prayers which all of us can understand, I think.

But the psalmist also speaks to some real frustration with other people, asking God to “not let my enemies exult over me.” The psalm talks about those who are “wantonly treacherous”, and hopes they too will come to sufficient self-awareness as to be “ashamed”.

The Christian call to love is strong—love our enemies, love our neighbors as ourselves, love one another. Especially as a pastor, I'm supposed to love everyone and always see the image of God in them, right? Beautiful as that rhetoric may be, the reality is so...much...harder. Enemies do exult over us, whether it's in church politics, sports rivalries, all the way up through vicious abusers and oppressors. That exultation is real, and it hurts. And there are people who are wantonly treacherous, putting their own selfish desires ahead of their responsibilities to others, sometimes causing incredible harm.

So, what are we to do? Sometimes the only thing we can do—pray for them, like the psalmist. We can pray for God to stop their exultation, to let them be ashamed, not as schadenfreude, but so that they too might someday truly know the awesome, humbling power of God's steadfast love.