

Finding a Firm Footing
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1st Sunday of Lent
Mark 1:9-15
“And the Spirit immediately drove him...”

Movement 1 – The Overwhelming Monolith before Us

Fear is a powerful thing. In the song, *Devils and Dust* by the Boss himself (Bruce Springsteen) the chorus intones the words:

Fear’s a powerful thing
It can turn your heart black you can trust
It’ll take your God filled soul
And fill it with devils and dust

These poetic and powerful lyrics speak to the powerful effect fear can have on us. Fear can be overwhelming, it can be suffocating, it can be paralyzing, and it can fill your motives and actions with devils and dust. Fear is a powerful thing.

We know this because we live with fear every day. We live with the large, inordinate fears of natural disasters, terrorist attacks, or any other large tragedy. Yet we also live with a fear that comes with the normal responsibilities, concerns, and tasks that demand our attention in life. Think of a mother who is taking care of her aging parents, who is trying to keep her youngest child from failing high school, who is trying to hold down a job, and who is trying to have some kind of life with her husband. The fear of failure, the fear of collapsing, or the fear of falling behind can overwhelm that woman, can paralyze that woman and can fill her with devils and dust. This is a fear of the ordinary, it is a fear of the mundane, but it is a fear of life becoming overwhelming and drowning us as we struggle to stay afloat. Fear is a powerful thing.

Do you see the difference between this kind of fear and fear of the magnitude? The fear of the ordinary is linked to anxiety, leads to despair, and is tangible. Think of the early Christians trying to follow Christ, trying to understand themselves in relation with their Jewish brothers and sisters, and trying to remain innocuous in the eyes of their Roman oppressors. Can you imagine one of those believers placing his hands on his head, collapsing in exhaustion and crying out, “Lord I don’t think I can do this?” This fear that the doubt is right is the fear I am speaking about. It is a fear that comes from challenges, a fear that emerges when we don’t think we can make it to tomorrow, and a fear when we consider all that is wrong, all that needs attention, and all that is complicated in our lives. It is like we come upon a monolith of challenges that loom before us, and our reaction is to cower in fear. Fear is a powerful thing.

Movement 2 – Enter Jesus

Jesus is the one that we often look to for help with our fear. Jesus is our silver bullet. He is seen as that promised child, that golden boy who will bring us to glory. Are your fears overwhelming? Then turn to Jesus, and he will shatter that monolith looming over you in a haunting manner. Like a losing team signing a new quarterback, or a dying church calling a new pastor, we look to Jesus as the one who will help us with our fear.

Why not? It seems right to turn to Jesus. After all, in this passage, which we read today,

we receive an introduction of Jesus that suggests he might be that Messiah, that Superman we so desire. That is one of the reasons for this passage, to introduce Jesus to the community. It is as if the author of Mark is saying, “Let me give you a foundation for who Jesus is before we go any further and see what Jesus does.” We see Jesus immersed in the baptismal waters and we hear God calling out that this Jesus is special. Then Jesus goes into the wilderness and endures forty days of temptations and trials. Not only is this Jesus special, but this Jesus is also strong physically and spirituality. Then Jesus goes into the village and shares a message of a new time, of a new hope. You can imagine the early Christians, feeling the weight of despair, the fear of failure which is so heavy on their shoulders, lifting through reading the Gospel of Mark, and finding hope in this description of Jesus. He is a spiritual champion, God’s chosen one. Jesus is the one who will be the hope we all so desperately need and desire, just based on his reputation and the stories that precede him.

This is similar to the story *A Shark’s Tale*. In that movie, a town that lives in fear of sharks hears of one fish that beat a shark, and hold him up as their golden boy. They don’t need to see him do it. They don’t need any real proof, all they need is the story and the reputation, and the fear will be beaten. In a similar way, we hear this opening introduction of Jesus, one that carries a lot of depth and meaning, and we grasp onto the hope of this person Jesus. This Jesus is the one who will save us, who will shatter our fears and give us to courage to live free. Jesus is our silver bullet; he is the one who will help us with our fear.

Movement 3 – Different Views of the Same Passage

There are different ways to see Jesus acting in our lives. After all, someone could read this passage, think about this idea of fear that is so prevalent and strong, and ask, “How is Jesus the one who will help us?” Yes, Jesus is called by God but will the reputation be enough? Does the story offer enough hope? Someone could consider such a question, such skepticism in response to the hope. So we maybe we respond, with different options. Maybe this passage is like a road with at least three different paths upon which to walk, and we can go down the one that fits our situation best. Scholars like Hans Frei argue that there is not one correct interpretation of the Bible, but interpretations that fit the narrative of the text and of the reader, so there very well may be a number of different understandings.

Maybe we can see ourselves in the Baptismal waters with Jesus. Maybe we can see the Holy Spirit falling upon us, washing us, and bringing us into God’s divine favor. Some of us need to know that we are loved. Some of us are struggling with temptations, with our fallen lives, and with a feeling that we are not worthy, so it is good to know that we are loved, that we have the Holy Spirit, and that we are in God’s holy favor.

Or maybe we can see ourselves in the wilderness with Christ. Maybe we can imagine the temptations and the wild beasts surrounding us, and we look to Christ’s example for hope. Think of the Russian Baptist in the time of the Soviet Union, a time when religion was considered illegal and how they struggled with their faith. They may have felt the temptation to leave the church for the sake of comfort and safety. They may have seen the wolves of the government always threatening them. They may have looked to Christ in the wilderness for hope and guidance in the wilderness of their own lives.

Or maybe we look to the hope of Christ’s proclamation. Maybe things are difficult right now, but we hear Christ calling, “the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near.” We hear these words and look for the hope and the promise of something better. Like the family in the beginning of the *Grapes of Wrath* looking forward to the hope of California, and holding onto that hope which carries them through the long and arduous journey.

These are at least three different ways to understand this passage, to find some hope in this passage. Yet even as I say them, and think about them, something seems to be missing. It is like going to a foreign country and eating all of the tourist food. It is good, but you know there is something out there, something more authentic, something more fulfilling. The baptism, the

temptation, and the initial hope that Jesus offers are all worthwhile, but especially on this first Sunday of Lent, but I feel as if there is something more something deeper that we can find in this passage and that can truly give us the firm foundation we need as we face our fears and move into Lent. There are a number of different ways to see Jesus acting in our lives from this passage, but there must be something more.

Movement 4 – Yet another View

Take a step back in this passage, and instead of looking at what Jesus is doing, look at what God is doing. What is God doing in this passage? I believe that is the deeper level of meaning that we can consider as we look for our foundation for Lent. It is like that deeper magic in the *Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*. The witch thought she had Aslan because of a deep magic, but Aslan knew of a deeper magic, a magic of love and compassion that underwrote all the other stories of Narnia. It is that same way with this passage. What is God doing in this passage? God is baptizing Jesus; God is calling Jesus. God is sending Jesus in the wilderness, and as Jesus is tempted, God is caring for Jesus. God is sending Jesus into Galilee with the message that the Kingdom is near. God is the actor in this passage; that is the deeper understanding and the deeper story.

So we take a step back from the trees of this passage and see the woods of the larger story – the actions of God. The commentator Fred Craddock suggests that this isn't the first time we have seen these actions. This isn't the first time that God has acted with the waters as a source of liberation. Remember the Israelites crossing the Red Sea? Just as God parted those waters, God parts the waters of Baptism to make room for the Holy Spirit, and we are liberated. This isn't the first time God has led someone into the wilderness. Remember where God led the Israelites after they crossed the Red Sea? The Israelites went into the wilderness, were tempted and were in danger, and were guided by God for forty years. Just as God led the Israelites, God leads Jesus into the wilderness for forty days to be tempted and to be protected. Finally, this isn't the first time God has promised a new land, a new Kingdom and a new hope. The Land of Canaan was promised to the Israelites, and that promise is fulfilled through Christ. Do you see what is going on here, in this passage? Do you see what that deeper food, what that authentic food that is true and indigenous to the land tastes like? It is a story of hope against our fears. It is a story of freedom over anything that oppresses us, but it is not necessarily the story of Jesus, but the story of God.

It is only through the Son; through that holy, divine relationship that we can know the depth of what God is doing for the people. This is the redemption of Christ; that the God that delivered the people from Egypt, continues to deliver from all oppression, from all fears, and from even Death. What firm a foundation to know that God has saved, God is saving and God will save! What hope and surety we find in God's actions. Step back from the passage, and see what God is doing.

Movement 5 – Walking into God's Call

How can our lives be shaped by God? Here is where the example of Christ comes into our story. Do you notice what Christ does in this passage? Christ follows God's actions, God's leading, and God's guidance. Christ is letting God tell the story! This is such a difficult step for us to take, to let God lead us. It is so scary to let our eyes be covered to the world, and to be led by God. Yet that is what Christ does. He follows God into the waters, he accepts God's Holy Spirit, and then he goes out into the wilderness, led by the Spirit. What if that is where God leads us? What if God leads us into the wilderness this Lent? Can we trust God enough to journey to the place of angry beasts? Can we have enough hope in God that angels will take care of us as we live through the scorching heat? Do you see that God is always calling us, wooing us, guiding and leading us? It is what the theologians Cobb and Griffin call God's divine lure. When we are surrounded by our fears and our concerns, when that monolith of fear looms above us, God does

not always smash it with a silver bullet, but hooks us, woos us and lures us away towards God's divine will. Think about the small, struggling church. What is the fear but finances? We worry that we may not have enough to make ends meet. Yet God lures us, calls us and woos us into another wilderness – the wilderness that desires the gospel. God calls us to let go of our concerns for money, God calls us to let go of the fear of the Egyptians, and rest in the real wilderness where people are crying for justice, crying for hope, and crying for the salvation that we find in Jesus Christ. There is a story called *The Servant*. In that story a man who was considered a guru in the business world one day disappeared and joined a monastery. In the story he describes the fears of making ends meet, of watching the bottom line, and of always looking out for one's self began to sap his strength. Yet when he followed God's lure and lived into God's story he was more worried about his own salvation and the salvation of others. So he took the risk, joined a monastery, and began to teach others what he had learned. This is what we are called and challenged to do; we are challenged to live into God's story. Accept the baptism, follow God into the wilderness, and proclaim to all that the time is fulfilled and the kingdom is at hand. Let yourself be blind to the troubles of the world. Be done with the troubles, and live, go and live with God. Our lives will be shaped by God.

Movement 6 – Give it up for Lent

With the story written on our hearts we go into Lent. We are being pulled into the wilderness, for forty days. We are going but with Jesus all the way. We are going to be tempted, tested and tried, but our Jesus will always be at our side. Christ is our savior, Christ is our hope, and Christ is the one who will offer to us the care we need. The foundation is that the God that has saved, is saving, and will continue to save is leading us. The foundation is that Christ has already set the path before us; we are called to trust, obey and follow him into God's story. You need this foundation to get through Lent. You need this hope to carry through. You need this meal, this sustenance. Grab it hold onto it, and then take that step of faith with God. Follow God's will into the wilderness, into the unknown lands and into glory.

AMEN