

Coming Up Out of the Murky Deep

Mark 1:9-15

Sunday, February 18, 2024

Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

Starting my ministry at Woodlawn Chapel on Valentine's Day in 1999 has always held tremendous meaning for me, and I am genuinely touched by the expressions of love and blessings that you have offered through the years and especially today. For our family, it became not only a day of remembering those special persons whom we cherish and love, but also the love of God which has brought us together in community. A few of you, including my family, were present in the sanctuary for my first sermon at Woodlawn Chapel. It was not on Valentines, but a month or so earlier when I was presented to the congregation by the pastor nominating committee.

Those are always auspicious occasions – nerve wracking for both the candidate and the search committee, but also joyful and exciting. It sounds terrifying but it does not happen until a lot of ground has been covered by the search committee, the pastor and the Presbytery. All three must feel as if a call to serve that church is emerging.

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You might think the service would have stopped. But amazingly, surprisingly, it did not. The children's choir continued singing, appropriately enough, "Here I Am Lord." Then as the interim pastor got up and made some announcements, a few nurses in the congregation ran to Carol's side and did a quick assessment, which included having someone call 911. Carol's Sunday continued in the back of an ambulance on the way to St. Luke's Hospital.

Meanwhile, our daughters' eyes widened, anxiously wondering what sort of universe they had been thrust into. What was happening? They were experiencing the sort of hospitality that has always defined Woodlawn. The worship continued, the sermon went

fine, and I even included a joke about health benefits. Long before the vote was taken, I knew that God was indeed calling this pastor and this church along with this family to a remarkable journey. As Mark might say, “And immediately, the Spirit brought us together.”

The church rose up. In that moment, we each experienced the call of God.

This is what I value about our life together, but it is also what I believe is the essence of God’s call to us in Lent. We begin this season with the uncanny feeling that God is about to do something astonishing.

We begin Lent every year with a retelling of Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness. Matthew and Luke tell a much longer story, while Mark strips it of most details. We do not get the back-and-forth banter between Satan and Jesus, we do not see the special effects of Jesus being whisked to the top of the pinnacle, nor do we hear the false enticements of power and status. Mark reduces the 40 days to less than a paragraph. He tells us Jesus was in the wilderness “with the wild beasts,” and that “the angels waited on him.”

Mark is direct and to the point: it is a place of danger, but also a place of provision. It is a place filled with testing and temptation, but also a place where God’s is present. It is a reminder that God, in Jesus Christ, has been plunged out of the cold, murky depths of the Jordan and into the chaos and struggles of human existence.

John has plunged Jesus into those muddy waters, and then raised him to a moment of unparalleled grace. Jesus “comes up” to see the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending. Jesus “comes up” a new moment. Baptism is both an act of going down into death and coming up in rebirth.

Jesus comes up—immersed into the waters that wash away the sin and sickness of those who are baptized, he comes up to hear the message of God’s love. It is the same message we hear, a watchword that shapes our lives and grounds us in hope.

It is our invitation to come up out of the waters with Jesus.

In an amazing new book, Andrew Root and Blair Bertrand reflect on the many struggles faced by contemporary churches. These realities include the reminder that churches no longer set the agenda for society, that there is a greater divide than ever between the secular and the sacred, and that the ways people believe in God have changed drastically in the last forty or so years. The upshot of these realities has declining membership, budget shortfalls, and dwindling interest in religion among all denominations.

Root and Bertrand say that too often the response of churches has been the overfocus on doing more things. We have often responded to this crisis by believing that the only answer is more: more money, more program, more innovation, when the reality is that these will not save us. The reality, they note is that the only thing we need more of are deeper connections to God and to each other.

In response, Root and Bertrand suggest that the church stop for a minute to take a breath. Instead of rushing to the next new thing, they suggest churches find ways of encountering each other and God. They suggest adopting a watchword that expresses how a congregation encounters God.

A watchword is not a formal mission statement, or a statement word smithed by a committee. It is rather just that: a word that describes the way a church has encountered God.

Lent begins with this sort of watchword. As Jesus rises above the waters, the heavens are ripped open and the Spirit descends on him like a dove with God's voice booming, "You are my beloved." There is our watchword for Lent: God calls us to come up out of the waters, and to remember we are beloved.

Imagine how you might respond if the dove envisioned by that stained glass window behind me would suddenly leap out of its glass, shattering its frame, descending on us. And as it does, a voice offers us this watchword: "You are beloved."

You are beloved as you serve each other in the perplexing moments of life. You are beloved as you free yourself from the compulsions of our frantic, anxiety-driven world. You are beloved as you offer yourself to those in need. "To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul," cries the Psalmist. In the words of one commentator, "our act of 'coming up' is also an offering to God. It is the first part of how we give ourselves to the one who loves us, and who created us."

Jesus comes up into a world that is chaotic and turbulent, filled with great joys and but also dotted with intense pain. His feet are pushed down into the river bottom, where the mud and muck mix between his toes, almost forcing him into the murky, sticky chaos of the river. But then the Spirit raises him above the water, where he hears the promise, "you are my beloved."

I invite you to consider the balloons on the tables today. As you look at them, consider picking up one and adopting it as your watchword for Lent. Consider how it invites you to live into the promise that you are beloved by God and allow it to shape your prayer and

action in these days leading up to Easter. Allow it to help joy emerge in your life and in the lives of others as you come up out of the waters, and rediscover God's presence once more.

I found this tremendous quote by Daneen Akers, who is the author of an illustrated children's book, "Holy Troublemakers and Unconventional Saints. Akers writes, "We are made of stories and stardust. We tell the stories of holy troublemakers and unconventional saints, people of faith who have worked for love, justice, and compassion, to inspire us, make us bold, and connect us to each other and the Love that makes us one." Amen.

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