

Mark 1:9-15

Preached for Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Samantha Evans

February 21, 2021

## **Again and Again**

This week I came across a beautiful little dinosaur comic. Four squares. Two dinos. One says, I'm sad. And the other says, well there are a lot of people who have it worse than you. To which the sad one says...I know, that makes me sad too.

This rings so true to me. We are all experiencing some kind of sadness. Something is always happening in our lives to make us sad. But sometimes we've got it together. We had a good day. We ate a balanced meal. We took a walk. We accomplished something hard at work. Or we had a hard but good conversation with our kids. And we feel good. We feel happy. And then we remember something that's happening in the world, or in our family, or in our church, and it makes us sad again.

I'm thinking about just in the past week, we witnessed our beloved, longtime member, Carol Blodgett-Mercer go to her final place. Some of us knew her and some didn't. But because we belong to one another, whether it's our own grief or the grief of our friends, we hold that sadness.

I am thinking about the winter storms that have wrecked 70% of the continental US. Especially those in Texas and Oklahoma who do not have the infrastructure to handle these kinds of storms. I'm from NW Pennsylvania, so I can commiserate, snow and cold are horrible. But, in all those years, the power very, very rarely went out. And if it did it was back up in an hour.

And so as I enjoy the beautiful sunny California winter. The sun which is making me warm and energized and happy. Then I am reminded of the people without power. The people who are dying on the streets. And I am sad again.

I am thinking about this global pandemic, which has been a source of deep suffering and despair for over a year now. And I think that despite everything, some days, I feel grounded and grateful. I find myself through my emails and zoom meetings. Pulling weeds while I catch up with folks on the phone. And finishing my day with a delicious meal that I was able to prepare throughout the day.

And I feel good. I feel happy. And then I remember all the folks out of work. The people living in encampments. The people who don't know how they are going to feed their children. And I am immediately sad again.

Sometimes I'm sad. Sometimes it's because of my own stuff. And other times it's because of all the stuff in the world. But the feeling is the same. The feeling that I have when I am suffering is pretty much the feeling you have when you are suffering.

And it may not be as intense or as overwhelming, but there is a shared sense, a shared feeling of suffering, when we are holding another in their suffering. So often we are tempted to try and downplay what we are feeling because someone else has it worse. I think that instead of putting the feelings of suffering on some kind of hierarchy, we are instead invited to let our own experiences lead us to have compassion and solidarity with our sisters, brothers, and siblings, who are also suffering.

This week, when I read this Genesis text, the one that Matt read for us, the thing that stood out the most was the refrain of "all flesh," which God means, "every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark."

With all flesh, God makes this covenant to never cut them off again. To stop at nothing to bring wholeness and healing, harmony and connection, to every single living being. All flesh on earth. All flesh is included in this covenant.

I am moved by this because this covenant is the foundation upon which Jesus of Nazareth built his entire earthly ministry. Jesus enacts and embodies this covenant. He reveals the terms of the relationship between God and Creation: which is that God will stop at nothing to make all things new. All things. All flesh. All creatures. All people. All the earth.

Oftentimes I experience deep sorrow and grief because I long for covenant to be fulfilled or completed. I long for the lion to lie down with lamb. For nations to put down their swords. For all beings to know their worth, and for all beings to know the worth of one another. I long for the end to this sadness that I feel for myself and for the whole darn world.

This a covenant that has been around for quite some time now. The longevity and continuity of it, the reframing and reimagining that has taken place over the millennia covenant brings a sense awe. And also, a little bit of despair or disbelief because it has yet to be fully realized, and sometimes it really feels like a nice dream that will never really come to be.

Ultimately, though, there is another way to look at it, and that is that, as the Sanctified Art team says, again & again<sup>1</sup>, God chooses us. Again & again, we fall short of the call God has given us. We hurt one another, our earth, ourselves, but again & again, God forgives us, extends to us patience and compassion. Again & again God shows up, reveals something profound, and again & again invites us back on the path which leads to the fulfillment of this covenant.

I've been thinking a lot about how cruel it is that we have to prepare to enter into another Lent, when the last one never ended. And at the same time, I am feeling drawn to pay attention to and consider how this particular Lent is different because of our experience in the last one, however long we understand it to have lasted.

You see, Lent is a time to peel away all that stands to separate us from God and from who and what God calls us to. It is wilderness wandering, where we are invited to take stock of what really matters. Of what or who is essential. Of where we should invest our energy and what should be our priorities. Lent is a time to be still and to tune out all the static so that we might again hear the whisper of God inviting us down a path, that leads to the cross, but does not end in death.

In Mark's account of the beginning of Jesus' ministry, we get to see the story without all the extraneous details that might get in the way of seeing what's going on here. Mark says in a verse what it takes Matthew, for instance, to say in a chapter.

The grace in Mark's brevity is that we get to see how one major event leads to the next. In six short verses, we are told that Jesus was baptized by John. The Holy Spirit came upon him and named him Beloved. And then that same Spirit drove him into the wilderness to be tempted, to encounter wild beasts, and to be tended to by the angels. And after his Lenten journey, he emerges to news of John's arrest, but still decides that it's worth it to follow the same path, to proclaim the nearness of the kingdom of God, and to invite any and all who would listen to follow that path with him.

He knew that this path would lead to arrest and ultimately his death, but he was able to walk it because he himself had experienced, had lived the promises of God. The promise of daily bread, even in the desolate wilderness. The promise of protection, even while surrounded by predators. The gift, before any of the work even begins, of being first and foremost named Beloved.

The Spirit, which descended upon Jesus in his baptism, naming him Beloved, is the same which chased him into the wilderness to be tempted, to encounter wild beasts,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://sanctifiedart.org/again-and-again-lent-bundle-year-b>

and to be cared for. So that he could emerge ready to find his place in a movement, a covenant, which is about bring wholeness and deliverance, naming every single being, creature, all things flesh Beloved.

Jesus loved those he encountered because he was himself first loved. He had compassion and solidarity with those who suffered, because he himself first suffered. He established a movement that relied on giving more than you take, trusting in the hospitality of strangers, and healing anyone and everyone simply because.

Because all of us. All of Creation. Even those wild beasts he encountered in the wilderness, are God's Beloveds.

That same Spirit rested upon each of us in our baptisms, naming us Beloved. And it will also chase us into Lent, even if we felt like we were already there. And we will continue to be tempted to forget the truth, to forget what really matters, to forget the path that leads to God, and healing, and wholeness.

But that's okay, but again & again, God tends to us. Feeds and sustains us. Invites us back into the fold. Again & again, God calls us Beloved. And because of that we can take whatever the wilderness throws at us.

I am going to end with a blessing from Jan Richardson to really drive the point home that we can do hard things. We can be sad for ourselves and for one another. We can stand in solidarity with those who are suffering. We can be sad and we can have compassion for ourselves and for those we care for.

We can navigate this wilderness and come through it whole, trusting in the eternal promises of God and God's covenant with all flesh.

We can do all this because, as Jan's blessing is titled: Beloved Is Where We Begin. Receive this blessing now:

*If you would enter  
into the wilderness,  
do not begin  
without a blessing.*

*Do not leave  
without hearing  
who you are:  
Beloved,*

*named by the One  
who has traveled this path  
before you.*

*Do not go  
without letting it echo  
in your ears,  
and if you find  
it is hard  
to let it into your heart,  
do not despair.  
That is what  
this journey is for.*

*I cannot promise  
this blessing will free you  
from danger,  
from fear,  
from hunger  
or thirst,  
from the scorching  
of sun  
or the fall  
of the night.*

*But I can tell you  
that on this path  
there will be help.*

*I can tell you  
that on this way  
there will be rest.*

*I can tell you  
that you will know  
the strange graces  
that come to our aid  
only on a road  
such as this,  
that fly to meet us  
bearing comfort  
and strength,*

*that come alongside us  
for no other cause  
than to lean themselves  
toward our ear  
and with their  
curious insistence  
whisper our name:*

*Beloved.*

*Beloved.*

*Beloved.*

—Jan Richardson  
from *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons*

