



Westminster Presbyterian Church

Knoxville, TN

Dec. 10, 2023

The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Sermon: "Love is Born of Restiveness"

Mark 1:1-8 (NRSV)

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

"Love is Born of Restiveness"

Theological educator Dorothy Bass tells a story of her daughter when she was 14 years old. The daughter had just come from one of those mountain-top mission trip experiences. You know the kind.

Think of your own mountain-top teenage experiences.

Think: Ghost Ranch, Montreat, Camp John Knox.

The type of experience where the presence of God is palpable, and you know you are exactly where God is calling you to be. The right place. The right time. Around the right people.

But then, eventually, you have to come off the mountain, back to the flatlands. And you look around. And you find yourself wishing you had never come down.

After the trip,

*One Sunday night late that September, writes Dorothy Bass, my daughter came into the kitchen and sat down at the small oak table where I was reading the newspaper. Her eyes were full of tears, and when she spoke her voice was shaky. 'We have to move,' she said. 'I hate this house. We have so much stuff, and most people in the world hardly have any. I hate this town. I want to live where you don't have to use cars to get places, where people care about pollution and all the other things that are wrong in the world. I hate school. All anyone cares about is clothes and boys and having fun. I really want to live a faithful life, but I just don't think that can be done in this town.'*¹

There's something about teenage angst that just lights up my 40-year-old heart. I read that this week, and just kept underlining it. Yes, yes, to this longing, for how things should be, for something different.

I could feel her pain, because, my family moved here just last summer, and I spent all last summer with an 8-year-old who, if he asked me once he asked me a hundred times, "Why do we have to move?" And he's better now, but every once in a while, he'll still come up to me, and say, "I miss Asheville."

And I miss it too. I spoke by phone on Thursday with a woman from my last congregation. We were actually talking about a Sunday school class that we are developing together. But in the conversation, we also talked about her late mother, her co-workers, her relationships, all these things I knew well, because I have known this person for years, because I knew that congregation that I left like the back of my hand. I miss knowing my congregation that well.

That's not the case here, yet. I look out and I know most but not all, certainly not all of you. And your stories. I know some, but honestly, it feels like we are just starting to scratch the surface. It will take time. Time to really feel a part of this place.

And if it's hard for me, I can only imagine what it is like for you. Hearing this new voice, week after week. I've listened to my own voice. I don't know how you do it! And it's got to be disruptive to have this new pastor, who always seems to have

¹ Dorothy C. Bass, "Ways of Life Abundant," in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, eds. Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 25.

more questions than answers. Okay, now where does the Advent wreath go again? What exactly is Christmas craft night?

It's called doing ministry in a new place. It's a new place for me; it's a new place for you, even if you've been here for years. And there's beauty in that. And there's also uncertainty. Let's be honest. There's also, uncertainty. And discomfort.

And church is just a microcosm of something much bigger – the unfamiliar in each of your own lives. Even when you stay in one place, that place changes out from under you.

- Children grow up.
- Parents grow older.
- People change.
- Relationships change.
- Our own bodies change.

What relationships feel different for you today than they did last December?

What worry is looming on the horizon?

Or perhaps it's the other direction: What has you longing for days gone by?

Uncertainty. Discomfort. If we are being honest, you have to say, they are a part of this life of faith.

I wonder if that is what the crowds were feeling, as they went out to the desert.

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance.

The Gospel of Matthew, when it repeats that same verse, it adds, "John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea." Matthew adds "Of Judea," just to give the reader some foothold, on where in the world we are.

Not Mark. In Mark, all you get is wilderness and repentance. Go out to the desert, and change everything there is about your life.

And if the crowds must have been feeling dazed, the same can be said of the reader.

In the Gospel of Luke, we get a whole chapter with John's backstory, about his parents Elizabeth and Zachariah, the miracle of John's birth. Luke gives us a foothold.

The Gospel of John does the same. With its poetic prologue, the Baptist gets a proper introduction:

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light...and on and on it goes.

Not so with Mark. Mark throws you onto the scene with disorienting haste. John the baptizer just appears and tells us to repent. We are supposed to be disoriented.

But that's how it, isn't it, when you try to live the life of faith. Most of the time, you don't get a thorough introduction. You don't have time to prepare. You just live it, as best you can, one day at a time. So, when Mark brings us into the story at this uncomfortable pace, the Gospel is being honest with us, in the way it describes the whiplash that is this life of faith.

Last Wednesday night, I helped lead the worship service for UKirk, the Presbyterian campus ministry of the University of Tennessee. The preaching was, ok. I was a bit off my game. I've never preached to a room full of 20 college students before. They nodded along politely. Only a couple of them checked their phones during the sermon.

The most beautiful part of the service was at the Table. It was communion.

The Rev. Rachel Penmore, the campus minister, had purchased a huge and delicious loaf of challah bread for communion. And, communion was done by intinction. We were invited to tear some of the bread off (the Bread of life) and dunk it into the juice (the Cup of Salvation).

I noticed, as the college students came up to receive the bread, they weren't taking small bits. They were getting huge hunks of bread, fistfuls of the bread of life.

When it was my turn. I hadn't eaten dinner. I did the same. I tore off this large piece. And as I did, the young man, serving the bread, exclaimed, with quite a bit of joy, 'yea'! As if I were doing something right, which really made me smile.

After communion, we had the Prayers of the People, which at UKirk, is done collectively, everyone shares their Prayers of the Thanksgiving and their Prayers of Intercession. It gave me a beautiful window into the lives of these young adults.

Many had just achieved internships for the next year.
Some had finally finished very difficult courses.
One couple was celebrating their 2-year dating anniversary.

And then there were the concerns.

- One had lost a classmate, who passed just a month short of graduation.
- Another was getting ready to have a difficult conversation with her mother over winter break.
- Yet another thought they may fail out of school.
- On and on they went. I was astonished, by the collective weight, carried in the room on those young shoulders.

I prayed. And as I prayed, I thought back, to those huge chunks of the Bread of Life. And I realized, this why they did that. Not just from physical hunger. But from a Spiritual hunger. A longing. They grabbed for huge portions of the Bread of Life, because, I realized, they wanted a foothold. I realized that service, those people, that bread, that music, the prayer itself were footholds. They were the means through which God speaks to us, and holds us up, and carries us, in the uncertainties of this life of faith.

The Gospel of Mark is abrupt. It flies through John the Baptist at disorienting speed. But if you look, you see, he leaves footholds too.²

Like the opening quote from the prophet Isaiah: *‘See I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord.’*

There is actually more than just Isaiah in that passage. Mark splashes in a bit of Exodus and Malachi too. In that section of Exodus, that Mark quotes, the Israelites were in the wilderness, having just escaped from Egypt. Likewise, the quotes from Malachi and Isaiah speak to the people’s time in exile during the Babylonian captivity. What Mark is saying, in quoting these passages, is that the reader needs

² I’m grateful to the insights I found in C. Clifton Black, *Mark* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 45-48.

to remember how God has been there for the people in their wilderness journeys of the past.

There's more: John's wild dress and his nomadic diet (locusts and wild honey) are meant to conjure images of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. It's meant to remind us how God has spoken before in unexpected ways, and so God will do it again.

And then there's the promise of the Holy Spirit. A Spirit who will not leave our side

Footholds. Mark gives the reader footholds, but they aren't meant to ease our discomfort. We're still going with John out into the desert to repent.

These footholds, are to remind us, that God travels with us in this wilderness. Our ancestors of the faith weathered times of uncertainty before. And in fact, it was in those wilderness experiences, with God right by their side, that they found a way forward, and found grace and even salvation along the way.

In other words, in its opening verses, the Gospel of Mark invites us to look forward, and to look back, at the same time.

Look forward into a life of faith filled with ambiguity and uncertainty. Yes, God calls us into the wilderness of our lives, because the days gone by are gone by, and yet, no matter how much stronger we once were, God is not done with us, not done with you, or with me, or with this community. God is not done with us yet. Rather, God calls us to live faithfully in the here and now with all its pain and promise, all its uncertainty and opportunity.

God calls us forward, and also God calls us back. Not backwards in a nostalgic 'days gone by,' 'glory days' sort of way, but back to God's promises, written in the Scriptures and even more, written on our hearts. God calls us back to where these promises are proclaimed, at the Font and Table. And even more, God calls us back to community, this community or others like it, that tell you and me over and over again, that we are not alone. No matter what you are going through, you are not alone. And you are loved for who you are.

God calls us back, to steady ourselves with these footholds, so that we can face the perils and the beauty of this life of faith, this life right now, leading us into God's good future.

[There's a] voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'

But we do not do it alone. And for that we say, thanks be to God.