



The Westminster Pulpit

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“Believe the Good News” **Sermon on Mark 1:9-15**

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First Sunday of Lent

After we passed the peace, there was no organ fanfare, just an awkward silence followed by, “You all can have a seat. Here are the announcements.” Welcome to Lent.

Lent is a journey in the wilderness. It’s fasting. It’s 40 days on the road to the cross accompanied in B flat minor.

The people who invented Lent knew to place it in a time when the weather is abusive; sunny and warm turns and in a moment is replaced with ice and cold the next.

It is a tough season. In years past, I’ve embraced Lent by reading a Russian novel. Nothing like a Siberian prison camp and “It was a good day for Ivan, he found a potato in his broth.” There you go, the Lenten discipline of awareness.

This year I prepared for Lent by getting an updated Shingles shot, the one that comes in two doses. As many of you know, I had Shingles about ten years ago. I’ve been putting it off and putting it off. So, I arrived at the counter this week and the woman said, “You’re here for your “shingle shot.” I said, “No, make mine a double,” which I thought was pretty funny. But the woman behind the counter gave up humor for Lent.

Well, I had the Shingle shot and spent most of the next day in bed. It knocked me down. I got out of bed only to keep my appointment with my dermatologist, I mean, why not? It’s Lent, just go for it.

There I was, sitting on a table in a cold room in a paper gown. The door opens, “Are you having a good day?” said my doctor. “I’m at the pinnacle of my life,” I replied. “Oh,” she said, “Let’s see if we can bring you down.” This is the kind of give-and-take I have with my dermatologist.

"Have you been applying sunscreen like I told you?" "Every night before I go to bed," I said. That's what I do.

It never fails that she finds a spot or two that she'll want to fry off. "Can I get a second opinion?" "NO!" She then proceeded to fry stuff off my face. For a really long time. "You enjoyed that didn't you?" I said. "No!" she replied, and then left the room laughing maniacally.

This is Lent! The turn toward the wilderness. The wild beasts. The laugh of the devil. It all goes well with a minor key. You'll hear it in our text, but you'll also hear the major key of the Good News! Listen for it.

Mark 9: 9-14

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

"Repent! And believe in the good news." Here I've been thinking of Lent as taking an inventory of sinfulness. Repent! Turn! And embrace the Good News.

The challenge these days is finding it. But when we do find it, we know how to embrace it. Believing the Good News is easy.

The cover of the bulletin features the faces of a few folks who have been served by Westminster Home Connection. It's the nonprofit we have down the hall, but they live more out in the world. Those faces may have just received the gift of grab bars in a tub. Or maybe a rotted floor in the kitchen is no more. Or maybe they received a wheelchair ramp that gives them some freedom. I have, on occasion, met a number of Home Connection clients, and I have never had the challenge of making them believe the Good News – they give me the Good News. They know salvation when they see it. JOY! PRAYER! PRAISE! It's all in a major key!

No one has problems believing in the Good News! We know it when we see it. No one has problems believing in bad news. We know it when we see it. And when we don't see it, we believe in bad news.

Since the beginning of time, we have been wired to be on the defensive, to believe that bad news is just around the corner. There was a day when our DNA sat around in a cave, and we called it home. Our cave was our fortress. Our DNA sat around the fire with a spear, taking turns in the night watching the open door. After a while, we domesticated the dog so we could get some sleep. The dog would sound the alarm of any bump or thump in the night, and we

were quick to grab the torch and spear. Whatever is out there, it is out to get us. We have the DNA for fear.

After the dog, we domesticated the cat. We did this... so... to... well, there must have been a reason.

Anyway! We have lived fearfully ever after. We have honed our defenses with better weapons. We have guarded our health, home, and auto. We have guarded stubbornly our standard of living. We fear that which comes to take it away. It's in our DNA. We believe the Bad News! Embrace it. Buy into it. Sell our souls to it.

Where in your life have you bought into fear? Can you count the ways?

Is it any wonder when the survey asks, "How are you feeling?," the results come in as "depressed, afraid, lonely."

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.' The woman on the cover of the bulletin is so believing in the Good News; she offers her praise. Good news - you believe it when you see it.

Some say the Good News is scarce these days.

It's not scarce. I have a friend who was a Presbyterian Pastor. He got burned out. So, he taught school for a good number of years, and later retired. He then became an Episcopal Priest. So, you see his life has just gone from bad to worse. I'm joking.

I like to be in his presence because he believes in Good News. He sees it even in the dark. He visits his wife in the memory unit every day. She knows when he walks in, but she doesn't know him. There's a sadness there, but he finds in his visit the Good News. He talks about the people that care for her, and for him.

He's a man of prayer, which means God works. God listens. God is active. He carries rosary beads, so prayer could be as simple as saying, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Just working your way around the rosary beads. And when you get to the end, somehow or other, you believe the Good News. You're not afraid. I shall not be anxious anymore. I shall not want to be mean anymore. He says, "At the end, you see Good News!"

No one needs to teach you how to believe the Good News. You know it when you see it. It just bubbles out of you.

Chad Folk told me that he doesn't look forward to Lent. "I have never looked forward to Lent. I always want to take that airplane ride from Ash Wednesday straight through to the Resurrection. However, this year, I have spent some time in the wilderness. During our last 40 days, I have experienced events I never could have created." Many of you know that his mom was murdered, killed. He said, "I have gone through this time where I had my mom go missing, I have searched for signs of her life under great deception from my stepfather, crawled through dumpsters, discovered where she was buried, and had to tell my family..." He went on and on.

"However, it is clear to me why Jesus was ready to tell the world, 'Believe the Good News.' One thing I have learned in my wilderness is that when you are forced to be vulnerable with your heart, your soul, your mind, you can receive nourishment far greater than any

casserole or drink can satisfy. This has allowed God to provide his people, the Body of Christ, to share the Spirit. In our wilderness, the angels ministered to us countless expressions of hospitality and love. By trusting Christ, I can receive my daily bread from unexpected sources.”

And those unexpected sources – they’re you.

Repent and believe the Good News. It’s not a rare thing. We live in a wild world. Our DNA says, “Be afraid.” The world knows how to sell fear. But we know that Good News is what people thirst and hunger for... and you can’t sell it. You can only give it away!

Friends, the Kingdom of God is at hand, repent! And believe Good News!

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