

“Holy Despair”

February 21, 2021

Mark 1:9-1

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 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.”

(Joy) Here what the Spirit is saying to God’s People.

Life seemed promising last year to Phyllis Lachaux, a 22-year-old business student in France who dreamed of striking out on her own in the live music industry. But the onset of the pandemic, leading to the loss of her part-time job as a waitress, sent her back to live at her family home.

Now, struggling to envision a future after months of restrictions, Phyllis says that loneliness and despair seep in at night. “I look at the ceiling, I feel a lump in my throat,” she said. “I’ve never had so many suicidal thoughts.”

“The pandemic feels like a big stop in our lives,” she added. “One that puts us so low that I wonder, ‘What’s the point?’”

Despair. A deadly illness. That’s what this sermon is about. See what your think.

John the Baptist is the Doberman pinscher of the Gospel. Every single Gospel writer introduces Jesus by first talking about John. What this means in some way or another – the Doberman is God’s idea. John is the

watchdog who tests all of those **who think** they want to enter into God's new creation.

John's business is about repentance. But probably not the way you are thinking. First it was not about becoming a Christian, because John was not a Christian and had his own followers.

John was speaking to those who were ready to give up. And he begged his followers to not despair. If that didn't work, he scared them half to death, trying to wake them up and make them see that they were confusing their own ways with God's ways. And John offered to pour water all over them.

All they had to do was repent, return to the Lord, and then they could start their lives all over again.

And the past would lose its power over them. What they had done, what they had said, what they had made happen and what had happened to them would no longer run their lives.

They would no longer hear **those nagging voices** in their heads telling them how bad they were, how ruined, how hopeless – and they would be free to begin again, listening to God's voice this time, telling them how blessed they were, how beloved.

It was a great offer and people walked for days to get to him – **just to hear over and over –** *repent for the Kingdom of heaven is near. In other words, do not despair God is coming soon.*

I know many people who stopped coming to church – because of those exact words:–Repent! Confess! Quickly because the end is around the corner!

That sounds like a threat to us – but for those who sought John, **it was a promise. We hear guilt – they heard forgiveness. What's up with that?**

Part of it, is our resistance to the whole **idea about repentance.** Some churches drop the confession of sin from the Sunday worship in order not to offend newcomers. I completely get that.

The problem is that most of us are taught that repentance of our sin means admitting how rotten you are. It means saying out loud, or in our own soul, that you are a selfish, sinful, deeply defective human being who makes God very sad and mad – **and you are very, very, very sorry about it.**

It means dumping all your pride out on the ground and stomping on it.

Since, we are taught that pride – as in ego, arrogance, vain-glory – is the root of so much evil.

Try this – what if pride isn't the problem at all – but its opposite?

Repent actually means “to around – look in a new direction – start over.

I wonder if the main thing most of us need to repent is not our pride – *but our utter despair* – meaning that things will never change for us, that we will never change, and no matter what we say or do – we are stuck forever in the mess we have made of our lives – or the mess someone else has made. There is no hope, no beginning again, no chance of new life.

Now that is a problem.

I cannot tell you how many people I know who are all but dead – **with despair.**

My friend's husband lost his job; she went back to work and he took care of the children. They agreed to change places again as soon as he found something else to do. Only he does not know what to do next. For a while he met his goal to interview once a week, but after three months of rejections his energy snapped – and then one afternoon, my friend found him playing video games with a glass of scotch.

I know a moody teenager and he does not know what is wrong with him, but he can't find anyone to talk to about it. His father is never home, his mother turns every conversation into a sermon, and he doesn't want anyone to see him coming out of the counselor's office at school, so he starts hanging out with some kids who are even moodier and that makes him feel better.

When he was arrested for shoplifting, no one was surprised. His mother picked him up at the police station, she told him he has been nothing but trouble since the day he was born. And then something inside of him died on the spot. He promises not to let her down – and find more trouble to get into.

A young woman came to see me. Her Grandfather had abused her as a little girl. Even though he is dead, she still feels his hands touching her. She has not married.

She will not let anyone close to her. And will not let go of her 40-year promise to not let anyone hurt her like that again.

Do you see what I mean – despair is a much more a serious problem than pride will ever be. We even have a baptismal vow for it. “Do you renounce the ways of sin that separate you from the love of God?” The answer is “I will with God's help”. That is the message of John the Baptist – it is not

about keeping an eye on *our rottenness*. **It is about keeping an eye on our despair and never letting it get the best of us.**

Do you find that hard to believe? Well, that is why John yelled a lot and woke them up in a lake of very cold water. (Pause)

Those of us who commit to a life of **repentance and return** – will not give up, no matter how many times you have to repeat the process.

You have to keep telling the truth and turning around, every day if you need to.

We will never say – never (I'll never recover, I'll never get it, I'll never learn) – because we believe in God's goodness more than we believe in our own badness.

How you ever noticed – the kind of repentance we recoil – is all about us – **It is all about me, me, me, me** – the miserable sinner. **But the other kind of repentance – the healing kind – is more about God than us.** It has more faith in God's power to make new – than in our own power to mess up.

That is what John the Baptism offered: a fresh start, a cold shower, and a cure for despair. He offered it as a beginning not an end.

One last story, Greta Thunberg, the eight-year-old child who woke us up about the realness of climate change. She reminds me of John the Baptist. She sat on street corners with warning signs, appeared on the news and NPR, marched in protests along with Parkland High School after the shooting.

She endured a lot criticism – even from the White House.

Here is the Baptism part. The girl who once slipped into despair is now a beacon of hope. One after another, veteran campaigners and grizzled scientists have described her as the best news for the climate movement in decades. She has been lauded at the UN, met the French president, shared a podium with the European commission president and has been endorsed by the German chancellor, Angela Merkel.

She said, if “people **are so desperate** for hope, that is not her or the other strikers' responsibility.

“I don't care if what I'm doing – **what we're doing – is hopeful.** We need to do it anyway. Even if there's no hope left and everything is hopeless, we must do what we can.”

And Lent is the perfect time to think about all of that; when we ponder God's amazing grace, God's love and patience, God's coming to us all the

way to the cross to bridge the gap, to offer forgiveness, to put back together what has come apart, to bring us back home where we belong.

Lent – is the time to reflect, a time to engage in self-examination and confession, (of our despair) to express gratitude. And to consider, that somehow, in midst of it all, there is mystery of God's love, in spite of ourselves.

There you go – the meaning of our Baptism.

That is what John the Baptism offered: a fresh start, a cold shower, and a cure for despair. He offered it as a beginning not an end.

And Jesus arose from the waters of the Jordan, and he heard the voice of God: "You are my beloved; with you I am well pleased."

You are my beloveds, sons and daughters and I am well pleased with you.