

The Beginning is Here

A sermon preached by the Reverend Casey W. FitzGerald on January 8, 2012—Baptism of the Lord Sunday—at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, VA.

Focus Text: Matthew 1:1-12

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.'

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.

Every church has its own, unique characteristics. Five and a half years ago, when I first met Larry to discuss the possibility of serving at Westminster, as he spoke about the congregation something stood out to me: Westminster, geographically located in the heart of the American political system—pews filled with something crazy like 50% JDs—Westminster is a place where we try hard not to get too political (at least not from the pulpit). We obviously believe faith and politics are connected, but we try to be respectful of the variety of opinions found within our context. Because of this, Westminster allows for theological and political diversity within its membership (which you don't often find in congregations). We are better for that diversity—better for the relationships that develop between people of different ideological backgrounds.

But, do not be fooled—try as we may—the spiritual cannot be separated from the political and economic in the gospels. And the spiritual, political, and economic *should not* be separated by Christians in how we live out our lives. But, theologian Richard Horsley claims, this separation is just what has happened in Western Christianity. He writes: "With the combination of powerful individualism and the increasing marginalization of religion in the modern West...

religion itself has been reduced to individual faith or belief.”ⁱ We have, in ways, absolved ourselves of interaction with the public sphere—with the political and economic realms. But, if we read the gospels as we should, if we read them as whole-stories...that separation cannot be maintained.

Horsley continues: “Not just in the Gospel sources but in ancient life in general, religion was inseparable from politics and economics. To allow the dimensions of reality to come back together, it may be necessary to use awkward hyphenated terms such as ‘political-economic-religious.’ Such a term is necessary to comprehend the institution of the temple-state in Jerusalem.” Consider this: “The Temple was the center of the Judean economy, where people sent a portion of their crops as tithes and offerings, as well as the sanctuary where sacrifices were offered to God/the Most High. The high priest was, in effect, the local ‘head of state,’ appointed by the Roman governor in the 1st century CE, and the priestly aristocracy was charged by the Romans with collection of the tribute paid to Rome. Caesar was not only the emperor, but the ‘son of god,’ who was honored in temples and shrines through the Greek cities as the Lord and Savior who had brought salvation and peace and security into the world.”ⁱⁱ

Still not convinced? Just look at the first part of our text from Mark: “beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” it reads. In this one sentence, Mark is reversing Roman claims. You see, “good news” was not just something they came up with for the gospels—when people in that time heard the phrase “good news,” it was often associated with the declarations of the emperor. You would hear of “good news” of the birth of an heir, or “good news” of triumph in war. So when Mark wrote, “this is the beginning of good news”—people’s ears would have perked up. And the second part—the part which claims that Jesus Christ was the “Son of God,” was also a bold statement against the emperor...because, of course, the emperor was understood to be (or, declared himself to be), the son of god. You can’t tell me that is not political.

I start by addressing this need for an adjustment in our Western way of viewing Jesus and the gospels because, in what follows, it may seem that I am getting “political.” The truth is, I still believe that God alone is the Lord of the conscience—that my job as preacher is to give you the tools through which to live out your faith. I entrust you to draw your own conclusions. But the other truth is: I believe that people of faith must live out their faith in the public sphere—must let their faith exercise power—even in what has been categorized as the political sphere. The good news affects all realms.

Let us pray:

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight on this day.

Amen.

Jesus came down to the river Jordan to be baptized by John. And when he came up out the water, he looked up and saw the heavens torn apart—saw heaven opened up to the earth—and the dove, the Holy Spirit, descended upon him.

And that was the day—the moment—that Jesus was *occupied*.

Or, to be more theologically appropriate: his baptism was a revelation of his occupation.

As I acknowledged, we are a diverse bunch. And so, when I say to you: “That was the day Jesus was occupied,” and then I say, “I am going to talk about the Occupy Movement,” I *know* that you all are thinking a lot of different things. Some of you are excited to finally bust out your protest paraphernalia and get out there. Others of you probably believe that lazy hippies and socialists are ruining our city parks and costing the taxpayers a lot of money. And...I love you all! Indeed, there are some who believe Jesus would be occupying city parks, and others who believe that Jesus was a free market guy who would have disassociated himself from the movement. And there are many opinions in between. And some of us, I suppose, who haven't paid much attention.

I will not be asking you to pick up protest signs on your way out the door, or even “agree” with the movement. But, the movement has become a significant part of our country's narrative for a number of months, and I believe it can be used to shed light on some of our own understandings of who we are as people of faith, and how we are to be in community. This is a movement that is having conversations and asking questions that are incredibly similar to those we've been having in the church for over 2,000 years. How they are enacted will look different, but the conversations themselves are very similar.

In churches across the United States, we are wondering what it is that will draw young (and older) people back to church—or, to the church for the first time. Many are wondering why the young people have lost their desire for faith (or they're *assuming* they've lost their desire for faith) and lost their sense of need for something greater than themselves. For me, the Occupy movement is further proof that this assumption is very far from the truth—it just isn't the case that they don't care. In the Occupy Movement, people are having conversations about what it means to be “our brother's keepers,” about how we share responsibility for the least of these, about how we increase morality among our citizens and leaders, and much more. They see the economic disparity in our nation; they see men, women, and children living on the streets; they perceive the corrupt use of power; and they want to know—what are we called to do about it? (And, I want to know: how do we connect them to church?)

One of the most incredible things that I believe has defined the movement is the shared leadership model. (Some would say it doesn't work, but I think that depends on what the purpose of it is.) You may have noticed that no one person has emerged as a leader of the movement...that is intentional. They share leadership. The occupiers share leadership, such that you will see a college-grad-preppy-kid engaging with (and trying to have meaningful and country-changing dialogue with) an elderly homeless person, and a middle aged business woman. Not an easy task for any one of them. And yet, they are committed to that shared leadership.

Some have been amazed by their determination, if not bewildered by a movement that seems not to move—or, in fact, seems to not *want* to move in some ways. *My* assumption has always been that we need leaders (individuals) to take things to the next level—it is the natural course of things. (This has been a source of great criticism of the Occupy Movement.) But, upon looking more closely, I think we can see that, in fact, *movement is happening*, but it is happening first amongst the occupiers themselves. And they hope it will be catching.

Here is what I have come to believe: the occupiers are the ones who have been occupied.

They have set their hearts and minds on a purpose that they believe is greater than themselves...and it is *moving* them...individually and as a community. I sent out a number of questions to someone in the Occupy Movement in preparation for this sermon. I was struck by many of the things he had to say, but mostly by these two sentences: he writes, “The end result, in my opinion, is an occupation of our government by our hearts. A man interviewed me once and asked me why I was protesting, and I told him mainly because I wanted more compassion in government and our world.” He has so clearly been moved and changed by his involvement with Occupy...by his engagement with questions of compassion.

The occupiers are now living as ones occupied.

Isn't that is what we desire in the church—to be occupied? To spread God's compassion and love to all the ends of the earth? To set our hearts and minds on that which is greater than ourselves: on God and God's purpose? This is a conversation and a transformation that we have been having (or, we were supposed to be having) for over 2,000 years. We want to be occupied by the Holy Spirit. And here is the connection—I think that is truly what happens in baptism—we are OCCUPIED. *Baptism is the mark of our occupation.*

First came Jesus' baptism. The Spirit of God descended like a dove upon Jesus. Heaven and earth were so close—they were touching. And the Spirit occupied Jesus and immediately drove him out into the wilderness—not to be comfortable or to make sure that he was safe. He was sent out into the wilderness—and what did he do there? He resisted temptation. This is the very next thing that happens in Mark's gospel—Satan tempts Jesus. Satan tempts him to make himself above all people and to give him the kind of power that all humans want to wield. But Jesus remembers that his power was greater—it was the power of the Holy Spirit. Remember that John said, “the one who is more powerful than I is coming...I baptize with water...but he baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” It is the Spirit that is the power.

So, he resisted temptation in the wilderness. He healed in the wilderness. He taught in the wilderness. He prayed in the wilderness—prayed that God's will would be done—that the Spirit would continue to occupy him all the days of his life.ⁱⁱⁱ He prayed for help in his occupation.

When we are baptized, God is setting God's own mark upon us. God says, “I occupy you. My Spirit is upon you. You too are my beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

If we lived into that promise—
if we made that promise true even before the final coming of God's kingdom—
if we lived, driven by the Holy Spirit, occupied by the Holy Spirit in EVERYTHING that we do,
EVERY aspect of our lives—
would our lives look different?
I know mine would.

Being occupied—being baptized—is a recognition, an acknowledgement, a REVELATION of the grace and love of God that has already given us. It is a commitment to take God's Spirit in—to be moved by it—to be OCCUPIED and SENT OUT.

It is an amazing gift and an AMAZING RESPONSIBILITY, which is why we must remember our baptisms—remember our occupation.

It is an amazing responsibility, which is why the congregation is asked to help those who are baptized and their families. They can't do it alone. They need God. They need God's community—they need US. They need you, such that they can be occupied all the days of their lives—driven out by the Holy Spirit out into the world to do God's will—that the least of these would be cared for, that the message of God's peace and justice would be heard throughout the world.

If we are all so occupied, it will affect everything. It will affect us when we look in the mirror. It will affect us in our homes. It will affect us with our neighbors. It will affect us with the least of these. It will affect us with our enemies. And, even though we don't preach "politics" at Westminster, it will affect us in our engagement with the political powers—whether we are republicans, democrats, or something else entirely. It will affect us.

If we are occupied by God's Spirit...we will not be able to contain it. We will go out and live as the faithful.

You see, I want these Occupiers, having these meaningful conversations, to be not just in Zuccotti Park, not just in McPherson Square, but to be HERE too...in Christ's church. I want for them to understand that the conversations that *they* are having are ones that *we* are committed to engaging with too. (Not that we we will all draw the same conclusions (or draw conclusions at all). When making room for diversity, when proclaiming that God alone is the Lord of the conscience, coming to consensus about the "how" of things is sometimes an impossibility).

But, I want them to know that these are conversations we care about having. And so, part of my wondering over the last few weeks has been this: I wonder if we too need to be out in the public sphere more—evangelizing—being driven out by God's spirit into the wilderness and witnessing in the world to what God is doing in our lives—and being a part of what God is doing in the world.

Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (This is the very last piece of Matthew's gospel.) He said to the ones occupied, "Go therefore, and occupy...that God's kingdom might grow over all the earth."

Every New Year, people make resolutions. What if, that was your intention for this year—to be Spirit-driven?

What if, it was your intention this year to invite God into your lives...to be occupied and claim that occupation?

What if you began to look around and notice—what wildernesses needs God's spirit?

Ask yourselves: what occupies me now?

And then, consider and remember your baptism—the day the Lord tore open the heavens for you,

that you might glimpse the divine.
The day you were then sent out into the world—
to bear good news,
to *be* good news,
to all the world.
That all would know—
with God,
there is always a new beginning,
there is always new life,
and it is here.
That with God,
no one needs be excluded.
That with God,
every act that we do
can be something that builds up God's kingdom:
that brings peace,
that brings comfort,
that brings joy,
that brings hope.
That with God,
even when we are in the pit,
even when we are in the darkness,
even and especially when we are in the wilderness,
God's sustaining Spirit is always upon us, guiding us.

Friends, remember your baptism—your occupation—*reclaim it*.
Remember the occupation of those sitting beside you—*support it*.
And, if you have not been baptized yet—*consider it*.
Maybe now is the time to acknowledge you are ALREADY God's beloved.
Let us make promises to support you—to be your community—
even as you make promises to be driven out of here into the wilderness,
guided and sustain by God's Spirit.

This New Year, I thank God for all of you—wherever you are in your politics, in your theology,
in your lives. And I pray, that we at Westminster be a church always occupied by the Spirit—
bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to all the world.

Amen.

ⁱ Horsley, Richard A. *Jesus and the Powers: Conflict, Covenant, and the Hope of the Poor*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press (2011), 4.

ⁱⁱ Horsley, 7.

ⁱⁱⁱ My understanding here is that, in fact...all is wilderness.