

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Scott Kenefake, Interim Senior Pastor
“Moving from Secondhand to Firsthand Religious Experience - Part 2”
Mark 1:12-15
1st Sunday in Lent
February 18, 2018

¹²And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God **has come near**; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Popular progressive Christian writer, Brian McLaren, was sitting in an airport waiting area and a gregarious young mom was sitting across from him. Her little boy was asleep in a stroller, and she, noticing how intensely McLaren was pecking away on his laptop asked him what he was writing about. He did his best to summarize the main idea of his latest book, and she said, “*Oh, I get it--you’re saying that Christianity isn’t very Christian anymore. You want Christianity to become more Christian. Is that it?*”

When McLaren said “yes,” she responded, “*Good luck with that! By the look of things, it won’t be easy. Try to get it worked out in time for my little boy, okay?*”¹

Last week, in Part 1 of this two-part sermon series, I argued that many people are leaving organized religion because they experience *too great a distance* between old structures and their experience of God. In other words, people still believe, but they believe differently than they once did. *Why?* Because of the demise of the **vertical** metaphor of the “*three-tiered universe*” in which the church played a “mediating role” between a distant heaven—where the supernatural, theistic God lived—and earth—where we live. The demise of the three-tiered universe metaphor was largely the result of the cataclysms of the 20th and early 21st centuries, which begged the question, “*Where is God?*” But we are now living in a time of *transition*—we are living in a more **horizontal**, “*flattened-out*” theological world in which increasing numbers of people are answering the question, “*Where is God?*” differently. They are answering the question with the language of *relationship and spiritual connection*: God is with us, near to us, intimate, incarnate, numinous presence, ground of all being, centered presence of the divine; in short, *the whole world is drenched with the divine*.

An illustration may help us to understand this better:

Commenting on her spiritual and theological struggles with the contemporary church, one theologian recently said:

*“I have found it increasingly difficult to sing hymns that celebrate a hierarchical heavenly realm, to recite creeds that feel disconnected from life, to pray liturgies that emphasize salvation through blood, to listen to sermons that preach an exclusive way to God, to participate in sacraments that exclude others, and to find myself confined to a hard pew in a building with no windows to the outside world. This has not happened because I am angry at the church or God. Rather it has happened because I was moving around in the world and began to realize how beautifully God was everywhere: in nature and in my neighborhood, in considering the stars and by seeking my roots ... the church is not the only sacred space; the world is profoundly sacred as well. And thus, I fell into a **gap**—the theological ravine between a church still proclaiming conventional theism with its three-tiered universe and the spiritual revolution of God-with-us”²*

Which brings us to our Gospel reading for today, a story about Jesus in the wilderness—the one we call, “*Immanuel*,” which means *God-with-us*.

You see, *immediately* following the *vision* of the descent of the Spirit at Jesus’ baptism, he has another *visionary experience*—or sequence of experiences. According to both Mark—and the tradition behind Matthew and Luke—the Spirit “drove” or “led” Jesus out into the wilderness. Mark’s account is very brief:

¹²And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”

¹ Brian D. McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration*, Convergent, New York, 2016, p. 19

² Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded*, Harper One, New York, 2015, pp. 21, 22

Matthew and Luke agree that he spent a forty-day solitude in the wilderness, where he was tested by the lord of evil spirits and nourished by beneficent spirits. They add that Jesus fasted and had a series of closely related visions. In the first, Jesus was tempted by Satan to use his powers to change stones into bread. In the second and third, Jesus and Satan traveled together in the spirit world. The devil took Jesus to the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem, and then “took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time.” Throughout, Satan tempted Jesus to use his charismatic powers in **self-serving ways** and to give his allegiance to him in exchange for all the kingdoms of the world.

Note, too, that both the *setting and content* of the visions are noteworthy—and a *tip-off* that they are not to be taken literally, but rather symbolically:

Like Moses and Elijah—and other Jewish holy men, Jesus journeyed into the wilderness, alone, beyond the domestication of reality provided by culture and human interchange. There, in a desolate desert area near the Dead Sea, he underwent a period of extended solitude and fasting, practices which produce changes in consciousness and perception, typical of what other traditions call a “*vision quest*.”³

“Why?”—you may ask. Was Jesus some sort of masochist? Someone who enjoyed inflicting pain and humiliation on himself?

No. *Fasting* is an ancient spiritual discipline (still widely) practiced today cross-culturally) as a preparation to perceive God’s will in dreams and visions. Combined with *prayer*—which we are told Jesus did for hours at a time, *not* because his prayer list had gotten exceptionally long, but rather because he practiced a form of contemplation or meditation not dissimilar to what we might call *contemplative prayer or mindfulness*.

The practice of wordless meditation is not simply an Eastern tradition, but is central to the Jewish-Christian tradition as well—and highly commended during Lent and other times. It’s a wonderful *horizontal* way of experiencing *God-with-us in the world*.⁴

And it was through the practice of these spiritual disciplines that Jesus was able to gain a sense of clarity about what God was calling him to do in the launching of his public ministry. As verse 14 in our text says:

¹⁴... after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God **has come near**; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Or, as a wonderful new, earthy translation of the New Testament by David Bentley Hart, puts it:

“And after John was handed over Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the good tidings of God: That the proper time has been fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has drawn **near**; change your hearts and have faith in the good tidings.”⁵

God has drawn near.

Ask yourself: “Are we—as people of faith, people of institutional religion, helping people to discover and deepen their *relationship, understanding and experience* of the God who has come *near* or have we offered people something else? What I’m calling a *secondhand* as opposed to a *firsthand* religious experience.

Think of it this way:

For millions—maybe billions--of people, Christianity is mostly about having *correct beliefs*. (This is less true, of course, in congregations like ours where open inquiry and honest questioning are encouraged and even celebrated, but I’m speaking in general terms about how our larger culture has come to view Christianity today).

Based on the priorities of many Christian leaders and institutions, we might conclude that Jesus said, “*By their beliefs you shall know them,*” or “*This is my command, that you believe right doctrines.*”

Or that Paul said, “*Though I speak in the tongues of men and women and of angels, but have not the right theory of atonement, I am a noisy gong or clanging symbol.*”⁶

But the Jesus we encounter in the Gospels wasn’t at all impressed by people who said the correct words or engaged in impressive religious behaviors, but failed to act on them and live in an ethical manner. As Jesus said in the Gospel of Matthew:

“*Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom, but only the one who does the **will** of my God ... On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, ...and do many deeds of power in your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you, ...’*” (Matt. 7:21-23).⁷

³ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, Harper, San Francisco, 1987, pp. 42, 43

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 35

⁵ David Bentley Hart, *The New Testament: A Translation*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2017, p. 64

⁶ Brian D. McLaren, *The Great Migration*, Convergent, New York, p. 20

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21

Doing the will of God; taking concrete **action**; **living out** the ethical implications of what we say we believe **in the world** (*both individually and collectively*) always took precedence for Jesus over orthodoxy—or “right belief” alone—which is why the religious “gatekeepers” of his time were so highly critical of him.

Now, don’t get me wrong—I’m **not** saying that beliefs are unimportant (I secretly really love Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics!*). Rather, I’m suggesting that a need for balance—a sense of proportion, and even a sense of humility—about what we believe (*ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda—the church reformed, always [willing to be] reformed*) is what is needed today.

For example, if you believe that Jesus is coming soon to beam you and your friends “up” to heaven, you’ll find plenty of reasons *not* to protect the environment or address deep-seated structural racism (bad “belief-oriented” theology underlies much bad public policy—from reproductive rights, to gender inequality, to LGBTQ rights, to environmental degradation, to immigration policy, to education policy, to race relations, to income inequality, and more!).⁸

If you believe that nineteen-year-olds with a history of mental instability should be able to buy military-style assault rifles—even if they are able to pass an inadequate and incomplete criminal background check in less than 15 minutes—even with the knowledge that Justice Scalia in *Columbia v. Heller*, writing for the majority, declared that there are “limits” to our 2nd Amendment right to bear arms, *then* your belief will lead to action, significant and tragic. Conversely, if you believe that every human being matters and bears the holy image of God, from those who suffer with mental illness to the many who are at some point on the autism spectrum, from the panhandler whom I passed on my way to work every day in New York City, to the boys and girls who are being conscripted as child soldiers in Africa, *then* your belief can be significant indeed, a beautiful belief for you and for others, *if it leads you to action.*

Action—in the world—to make the world better.

You know, more than seven billion people currently inhabit the planet, many of them in huge urban areas, now connected to one another through economics, science, and technology. Neither nature nor humanity has ever been in this situation before. Philosophers, theologians, historians, and social scientists have begun to describe the twenty-first-century world as “*cosmopolitan*,” meaning that all human beings are citizens of the world, that is, “citizens of the cosmos.”

Boundaries have thinned between nations and cultures, and we participate in multiple worlds in our lives simultaneously local and global—and this has impacted our understanding of God.⁹

It is an understanding and experience of God that goes over *boundaries*: the boundary that once divided Creator from creation, the boundary that divided nature from the human community, the boundaries that divided human communities, (the boundaries between “knowledge silos,” like science and religion), and finally the boundary that divided God from humankind.

The fearful have reacted to all of this by retreating to various forms of fundamentalism—both religious and political—to shore up the crumbling boundaries, but the majority (around the world) continue to cherish the distinctiveness of our (particular) traditions and cultures while embracing the universal aspects of human community and the larger quest for God and meaning.¹⁰

This is that “middle ground” revolution, between secularism and fundamentalism, that most people in the world today are trying to navigate (consciously and unconsciously) and where I think the contemporary church can most fruitfully place itself. It’s what enables us to see “the forest for the trees” in our contemporary world and where the Spirit is already leading us into the future. *Amen.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31

⁹ Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded*, Harper One, New York, 2015, p. 270

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 271, 272