



**"HOME BY ANOTHER WAY"**

**SCRIPTURE: MARK 1:9-15**

**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**

**Sunday, February 18, 2024 Lent #1**

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

**Mark 1:9-15**

1:9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

1:10 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.

1:11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

1:12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.

1:13 He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

1:14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,

1:15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

The Word of the LORD.

**Thanks be to God.**

---

This week in Bible Study we sensed into the jarring quality of this passage. These 6 verses hold some existential jolts.

Jesus, baptized in the Jordan by John and the heavens are torn open.

The voice of God speaks to Jesus—gives him a major, major pep talk.

There is barely time to even soak in the blessings when Spirit IMMEDIATELY drives Jesus out to the wilderness. Some translations say "forced" him out to the wilderness.

Out in the wilderness—that's 40 days—with beasts all around, with Satan tempting him, with angels attending to him.

And then instead of coming back to some normalcy when he makes it through the wilderness, he comes back to John the Baptist being arrested for challenging the powers and principalities, for challenging the status quo and those who would uphold it at the expense of others.

And then Jesus launches right into calling people to repent—since John was out of commission, Jesus had to step up.

We decided in Bible Study that we recognize the kind of jostling back and forth between smooth sailing and stormy seas. When you have a mountain top experience, then you have to go down to the valley of the shadow. You can feel like things are falling into place, and then in the blink of an eye things that can start to unravel.

Hard things don't stop happening because you are faithful. In fact, when we are faithful, we are sometimes called to willingly go into hardship because we are called there to speak truth, to find truth, and to embody the truth of God's transforming love.

And in it all, we are on a journey to find home—to find a place within ourselves where we are at peace with who we are, with where we are, and with God's presence in the twists and turns of life.

The journey toward belonging to God, being at home with oneself, being well with our own soul—the journey of finding true homeplace in the world—it's a journey that requires periodic stints in the wilderness, it requires some confrontation with ourselves in order to find our place in community.

Stanley Spencer, an Australian artist who fought in the desolation of WWI was yearning to come back home to himself as WWII began and his second marriage was crumbling and he found himself homeless and in exile from all that had been familiar. He was confronted with deep despair and his shadows.

He began a series of paintings called "Christ in the Wilderness." His goal was to paint 40 images, one for every day that Christ was in the Wilderness. He would only complete 8 before he died of cancer at age 68.

These paintings are haunting, with desolate backgrounds. They blend scriptural references with an imaginary exploration of what Christ's 40 days in the wilderness were really like.

Spencer said this series was his journey back home to himself after losing everything. And his inspiration was taken with the spare language in Mark 1, our passage today.

The paintings appear in an arrangement like tiles, not in the chronological order that he painted them but as he arranged them thematically.

(1)

### **Driven by the Spirit into the Wilderness (1943)**

Jesus fills the space—even though these paintings were done across several years, there is a consistency to Jesus' bulk and simplicity. And the surroundings are bleak and at times punishing, dangerous. There is a determination here, even as Spirit is driving Jesus to this place, he is going with resolve.

(2)

### **He Departed into a Mountain to Pray (1939)**

What do you notice? Jesus on his knees, gazing up, in a posture of petition, of asking God for something, wide eyed, taxed.

### **Consider the Lilies (1939)**

Here Jesus is like a kid crawling in the grass—gazing not at the lilies of the field, but at ordinary daisies. There is grass, there is beauty, there is innocence. Almost a look of contentment and solace. This is about where God calls us to take our worries in the wilderness.

Matthew 6: 28-33: “And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will God not much more clothe you—you of little faith? 31 Therefore do not worry... But seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

### **Eagles (1943)**

Here there is brutality, death, Jesus lounging, turned toward it, in proximity to it, but looking beyond it. Vultures at the corpse. Matthew 24 and Luke 17—wherever the corpse is the vultures will gather.

### **The Hen (1954)**

Here Jesus is gazing at a mother hen with her chicks. God's love is as tender as a mother gathering her chicks. Here Jesus' embrace is more all-encompassing and attentive. Something about home, about divine love and care.

Luke 13:34: "...The city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

This is the last image in the series he painted before he died in 1958.

### **The Scorpion (1939)**

"If a child asks for an egg, who would give a scorpion," Jesus says in Luke 11. What do you see here? There is a sadness, a weight to this. Jesus' hand opened to the danger, the pain. His hand looks red and swollen, maybe from the scorpion's sting, but he still holds it. Another scorpion is near his foot. Jesus is actually holding this dangerous creature in the palm of his hand. The whole world in God's hands.

### **Foxes Have Holes (1939)**

In Matthew 8, Jesus says foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head. Jesus has a look of exhaustion here—mouth gaping, tongue lolled, like he's thirsty. Multiple fox holes surround him and he is sort of caught in some vines and fatigued repose.

### **Rising from Sleep (1940)**

What do you notice here? It's almost like he is rising from a volcano, a billowing cloud on a crater in the desert. Not just rising from sleep, but contemplating some kind of dive into the atmosphere.

---

The life of faith enmeshed in the created world—in the beauty and the brutality—that is the Lenten journey— who are we in relationship to God and to each other and to the rhythms of life and death. Lent encompasses the whole of human experience—and we remember that Jesus was fully engaged in the cruelty and the courage of what it is to be human, in the shadows that can vex and torture us, and in the spirit that rises again in the morning.

And this home we are traversing toward is a complicated imaginary. Can we ever really be at home with ourselves and each other in a world so at odds with itself?

To find God's home for us, parts of us have to shed, parts have to die, parts have to be revealed and healed. The Lenten journey is deep self-reflection and mindful questioning of ourselves. How are we moving? How are we living? And what is the impact of our living on others? What needs to change? What needs to take hold in us for our faith to be healthier?

Jesus' wilderness was not just the 40 days, it was the rhythm of his life because his life was purposeful, his life was faithful. He called people to loosen their grip on judgment to make room for the truth, not to silence the truth.

Jesus is our model—his humanity is our model. Christians can get lost in a learned helplessness when we focus so much on Jesus saving us from ourselves with his death and resurrection. His very human life is medicine that we need. Jesus shows us that the way home to ourselves requires the truth about the ways we participate in the delusions and distortions that tear at our humanity.

---

These last several days have been difficult and painful at GCPC. Many of you received the letter from the Session this week. This letter was necessitated by the crossing of healthy boundaries, the intentional spread of disinformation, and inappropriate behavior—all things that did not just happen these last several days, but things that have been happening for a while now among some in our church. Because of the disinformation being spread, the letter named a person, but these erosive patterns of behavior do not just involve one person. It is bigger than one person.

Churches are famous for such hurtful and divisive behavior. And Grace Covenant is working to be a different kind of church. We have had these gut checks together before. And many of you have leaned in and done the hard work of learning and relearning about healthy boundaries and healthy communication.

In the Session's letter they invited us to practice inquiry rather than accusation. Judgment in the form of accusation is one of the most tempting habits church people can get hooked on.

Judgment is tempting because it relieves pressure and anxiety and tension temporarily and it can make us feel comforted by confirmation bias. But it does not create the conditions for repair and for right relationship.

The alternative to judgment is not tolerance, it is not apathy, it is not dismissal. The healthy alternative to judgment is inquiry, it is curiosity, it is seeking understanding and repair.

So while this week was intense and painful, it is the culmination of several years of a few people sowing seeds of discontent, spreading disinformation, and some people accepting the disinformation with no inquiry, no curiosity. It's also the result of many of us not setting healthy boundaries around our proximity and our participation in these destructive patterns.

It is important for me to acknowledge that some of the disinformation and judgment and accusation is a direct attempt to make me not feel at home here, to make me want to leave Grace Covenant. We've had this conversation in worship a couple of other times during my 8 years here when these patterns have surfaced in overt ways like someone putting a prayer card in the offering plate that tells me I am dividing the church and that I need to leave.

Or another prayer card message during worship back in 2017 that told me to stop talking about justice issues, they have had enough. Those who have found pleasure in turning people against me and against the church are not feeding our health, our vitality, our faithfulness. It is not about me at all, it is about this faith community. Leadership matters AND we are doing this liberation work together—and the more we lean in, the healthier we become.

Judgment, accusation, and false information does not build community.

Accountability is different from judgment. Tending healthy boundaries is different from judgment.

Judgment is not a practice; it is a state of mind and it is a quick way to release pressure but it is not transformative. It does not restore or create right relationship.

Inquiry, curiosity is a practice, and it is a path to right relationship.

Inquiry means coming into conflict or confusion with genuine curiosity and humility.

A few people have sent responses to the Session letter, many of them were expressions of judgment, and did not honor the Session's invitation to engage with inquiry instead of accusation.

Judgment comes in the form of accusations, it comes in the form of jumping to conclusions, it comes in the form of mistrust, in immediate second guessing, in an assumption of moral superiority.

Inquiry comes with self-knowledge and with humility.

Instead of here's what you did wrong, inquiry says can you help me understand

Instead of how dare you, inquiry says this must have been a very difficult situation for you to have to do something like this, may I ask a few questions so that I can understand better.

Instead of you're wrong, inquiry is an admission that this hurts and it is hard to understand.

Instead of starting with accusations, inquiry starts with some recognition that the Session is honoring the work and role you, this congregation, called them to in God's name. You can't only trust the Session when you agree with them. That's not trust, that's the definition of distrust.

And that issue among a few in our congregation did not begin today. GCPC is the vital community that we are because of strong and courageous Sessions willing to lead us in the difficult circumstances, Sessions who have leaned into hard work in all the jostling around we have experienced.

Our presbyterian polity has its flaws, but one of its strengths is the invitation to discernment, and trusting our leaders to the Spirit's guidance when we discern the mind of Christ together. It's ok to ask questions, but faith requires trust and the centering of right relationship. And that means accountability and healthy boundaries must be a part of any healthy community.

This tending of boundaries can be especially difficult for people in white bodies because we are socialized with a sense of entitlement to get our way, that the rules don't apply to us, that we should have access to anything we want, that we should be able to use our financial resources to buy influence and power, and that we should not have to be uncomfortable or deal with conflict.

But if we want the world to change these habits of whiteness, this way we have been socialized with entitlement and individualism and being above the norms of community—these habits have to change. If we want the world to change—and we can all agree that it needs to change, then it starts here.

So, we will stop talking about justice when there is justice.

We will stop inviting each other into new ways of being human, when being human stops hurting so much because of how poorly we take care of each other.

We will stop talking about white supremacy, when we stop defaulting to it when something is going on that we don't like or that we don't understand.

We will stop talking about decolonizing worship, when Christians stop propping up the capitalist militaristic institutions of the world.

Our work is not done, so we will not stop. We can't stop following Jesus until we've all come home to ourselves—that's what Jesus wanted for us.

And we won't get home by the same old pathways. They are gone. They are washed out.

There is no map. There is no GPS. There is no shortcut.

The wise ones in scripture who followed their hearts and dreams to meet Jesus went another way home after meeting Jesus because they were warned in a dream that they were being hunted by King Herod—the one who sent them there in the first place.

They figured out, with God's help, that they were pawns and that they couldn't trust the powers and principalities. Instead of sticking to the plan and obeying Herod, they went home by another way. That decision, that choice to take a different path, to change plans, to adapt—that kept Jesus alive.

How do we keep Jesus alive when we choose a different path—when we take a risk, when we get honest about how dangerous the status quo really is for most people on the planet.

Our freedom as a human family means we are warned, called, led to go home by another way.

**Audre Lorde picture (show picture on split screen on YouTube, full screen in sanctuary)**

Today would have been Audre Lorde's 90th birthday. Audre Lorde's book "Sister Outsider" was published in 1984. Reading her work during graduate school was inspiring and galvanizing for my sense of call to the work of liberation and freedom for all people.

She described herself as “a black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet.” She spent her life and creativity confronting racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia.<sup>1</sup> Lorde died in 1992 at age 58 of cancer. Her voice, her poetry and her prose, her voice and witness continue to galvanize people committed to the work of mutual liberation.

And she speaks to us today about the necessity of “home by another way” with her powerful words that are evoked often in the movement for mutual liberation.

### **Audre Lorde Slide**

**For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. Racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in this place and time. I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives here. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices. ~Audre Lorde**

Home by another way means having new tools and it means leaving behind old ways, too. It means we aren’t surprised when challenges come—they are not a sign of judgment, but a part of the journey.

May this Lenten journey give us all space to practice the art of self-discovery for the healing of the world.

Thanks be to God.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/audre-lorde>