



Some Things Never Change ... Until They Do

TEXT
Mark 1:9–15

February 28, 2016 — 9:30, 11:00 a.m. — Sermon by Rev. Len T. Carrell

In my second year of seminary, I took my very first preaching class. It was called an Intro to Preaching. But the seniors assisting the class called it “baby preaching”; and trust me, when you’re new to preaching, you take baby steps.

My professor was the Reverend KC Ptomey, and he was a favorite among the students and faculty, but he was also someone I called my friend. He gave me some of the best advice I’ve ever heard. He said, “Preaching is no casual business. But Len, someday you’re gonna have to get out of your own way.” Even today, I still struggle with this.

After the Christmas break, KC came back from Tennessee, and he told us all that he had been diagnosed with cancer and that he would be taking a long sabbatical. On May 9 of that year, KC died at his home in Nashville. It sent shockwaves across the seminary community and heartbreak across the entire denomination. The next month, in early June, I began a 12-week Clinical Pastoral Educational, where I interned as a hospital chaplain at Roosevelt hospital in New York City.

My first week, I told my supervisor about my friend and

teacher KC. I told her how I was having a hard time processing my grief — that I had no idea how to handle what I was feeling, or what I would even say to someone who next told me they had cancer. My supervisor looked me in the eyes and said, “I’m going to assign you to the oncology floor, and we’re going to figure it out together.”

On day one, standing at the threshold of my very first visit to see Terri, who had an untreatable brain tumor, I found myself stuck. Those 12 weeks were frightening. They were some of the most terrifying moments in ministry. I have no idea how I ever walked into the darkness of those rooms, but I’m certain that God was holding me up and nudging me in.

Mark’s gospel says, “The time is fulfilled.” John was arrested and Jesus came to Galilee. Mark is doing more than just making chronological notes of events. He is sharing something about those dark places where ministry happens. As I wrote on the front of the bulletin, these details are not just road signs in the story, but they are lampposts to the truth of doing ministry.

Mark’s gospel is known for getting right to the point. *This is the good news of Jesus Christ,*

the Son of God. And from the very beginning, he wants us to know what the prophet Isaiah says about this *Son of God.*

First, he says, there will be a messenger that will come before him, and that messenger is John. He will be the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. So let us start there with John the baptizer. John is out in the wilderness, wherever that may be, preaching good news and repentance, teaching the way of forgiveness and baptizing people in the Jordan. He is out there, wading in the water — the same water the people of Israel crossed when entering the Promised Land.

Isaiah says John is the one who will prepare the way of the Lord. The Lord is the One who will come after him; he will be the incarnate One of God, the Messiah; he will be our salvation. He will be the One who brings justice and peace, and then finally heaven and earth will be joined together. But how will anyone know?

Well, Mark is no novice to testimony. He urges us to see the imagery of Isaiah in his writing. Isaiah writes, “The earth is utterly broken, the earth is torn asunder.” And at Jesus’ baptism, Mark writes that God literally breaks into the world and the

heavens are torn apart. Even at his crucifixion, Mark uses this same word to describe the tearing of the temple curtain and darkness will cover the whole land. And then, like a dove, God's Spirit will rest on Jesus, just as Isaiah had promised. *The Spirit of the Lord shall rest on him.*

You see, everything in God's peaceable kingdom is falling into place. The wolf, the lion and the lamb are all lying down together. Mark says the wild beast and angels attended Jesus. They are all there, in the wilderness, with the Lamb of God, if you will. Time is fulfilled, and everything is in order. The promised day has arrived, and it is just as it should be. Heaven and earth are full of God's glory; peace and justice have come at last; God has come near ... and then John is arrested. Some things never change ... until they do.

John is arrested. What is going on here? John is arrested. And for Mark, this is not another detail in the plot line, but rather it's a condition of our predicament. This treasure we hold in clay jars is the truth that even good news is spoken in the wilderness. We find ourselves in wild places in life — standing outside the door of a hospital room. Mark called them the wilderness; I call them frightening. But the truth of the treasure is that we all need to hear good news in places like this, in those wild places of life.

These clay jar moments have a deep darkness — a deep darkness that sweeps over and covers us up. These clay jar moments are anyplace that reminds us we are fragile and broken; anyplace

that feels uncertain and unsteady; anyplace where crisis hits unexpectedly or without warning, perhaps even with warning.

And the treasure, I hope — these treasures, I hope for all of us — is that when we find ourselves in such wild uninhabited places, where the beasts are sometimes untamable, God will find us there, and feed us there, and send angels.

We are all called into ministry. It is the central vocation of our baptism. And it is an important part of who we say we are as a Christian community. But the truth is, ministry doesn't always happen in community like it should. Sometimes our ministry can be a lonely place. It's not meant to be, but it can feel that way.

Oftentimes ministry happens in dangerously dark places, where fear and anxiety is all we know; when the only feeling we have is a feeling of inadequacy, or that we are unprepared or underqualified; when we feel less than enough. And in times like these, ministry happens in spite of us. Sometimes it happens when all we can do is just show up, because we trust that God already has. And sometimes when that is all the faith we have, then it will have to do. Won't it?

I do not believe ministry is a solo act, but sometimes all we are left with is a bad situation, God's silence and a heart broken enough to care. And believe it or not, I think Christ knew about these clay jar moments all too well.

Mark tells us that after Jesus' baptism, the Spirit drove

him out into the wilderness. But Jesus was already in the wilderness, wasn't he? We heard that. So the Spirit must have driven him even deeper into the wilderness — a place where there is only things to test him; a place where he finds himself completely absent from any human contact; a place where wild beasts and angels are the only companions he knows. It is a place of isolation, a place that appears to be peaceful, but isn't so much. I think many of us have been driven to places like that.

And then John is arrested, and Jesus comes to Galilee. But not before he sits in this place of isolation — a place where there is only a bad situation, God's divine messengers and a heart vulnerable enough to meet us all there.

Ministry can drive us into dangerous places — places we are not always ready for or equipped to handle. But it is a place where God meets us, and feeds us, and sends angels. It is a place that God knows all too well.

I have been with you now for eight months. And I couldn't be more thrilled and blessed to have received such an amazing first call. This is an exciting time in the life of Village Church. And I am humbled to come to work every day with such an amazing team of gifted and talented people, all of them ... pastors and musicians and staff.

But when I interviewed with them, I told them "Look, I don't know anything about pastoral care. But I believe in it fully."

You see, I believe there is no part of our ministry together, as a pastor or as a human being, that doesn't involve caring pastorally. If you are leading Young Adults or Youth or Children's ministries, you are doing pastoral care. If you are organizing a thriving Christian Education program, you are doing pastoral care. Whether you are singing in the choir or conducting them or playing music or playing bells, in time and in measure, you are doing pastoral care.

If you are managing the building and grounds or the finances that help us keep the lights on and the doors open, you are doing pastoral care. If you are ushering, serving bread and juice, greeting visitors, helping with memorials and receptions, working at the food pantry or with mission sewing or building with Habitat for Humanity, you are doing pastoral care. If you are caring for our children or the aging and ailing, you are doing pastoral care.

Even when we preach, and we step into this hallowed place called a pulpit, we don't do so casually — because we bring all of you with us, as well as so many others before us. So as preachers, we do so with a presence of pastoral care because we bring our hearts and our minds, and we open them to you. A caring ministry of compassion is what we are all called to be as ministers of Christ. And it is a caring ministry of presence, of vulnerability and of listening with love.

And today we get to celebrate our Stephen Ministers. They are

a wonderful group because they give so much of themselves to this ministry. They give their presences and their prayers to a ministry of compassion, empathy and listening. And I am so proud to get to learn from them every day. And they are a very supportive group.

But why I am so proud of these good and faithful servants is this: When all of the training is finished, they still have the courage and the faith to drive up into that driveway for the first time; to turn off the car and take a deep breath and make that long walk to the patio and ring the doorbell. Many times they know very little about what they will find on the other side of that door.

Like many of us ministers, Stephen Ministers show up when crisis hits. Like many of us ministers, Stephen Ministers show up with no plan, no judgment, no words, no questions, no quick fixes and no interruptions. Like many of us ministers, Stephen Ministers show up because they trust God already has.

John is always being arrested. Jesus will always say, "Believe in the good news."

In these clay jar moments of doing ministry, we rarely have any answers. Oftentimes we are left speechless with only enough words to say, "I'm glad you are talking to me." Life can become rather arresting at times. But the treasure we find in these clay jar moments is that light shines in broken places. In the wilderness, God comes near.

Francis Bacon, the English philosopher, once said, "In order

for the light to shine so brightly, the darkness must be present."

In ministry, darkness will cover us at times, especially when we care for those who are hurting, grieving or feeling isolated. In those clay jar moments, we will be asked to stand at the edge of many a grave matter in life. And no doubt we will feel danger and fear and a loss for words, but if we trust that God has already shown up to listen and to be present, then how can we not?

And the treasure, I hope — these treasures, I hope for all of us — is that when we find ourselves in such wild uninhabited places, where the beasts are sometimes untamable, God will find us there, and feed us there, and send us angels to help.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.