

Sermon
St. Mary Nanoose Bay
February 18, 2018
First Sunday in Lent / AVM
Mark 1:9-15

Our God is a descending God. By this I mean, that Jesus came to earth to show us that our God comes to us; that our God is not high and mighty and aloft, but someone who embraced his humanity, and let go of all that would set him apart from our experience.

Our nature is to ascend; to be lifted up, to rise above all that is base, to rise above the lowest common denominator, to become more like the One we were made in the image of.

In today's gospel, Mark tell us that as Jesus "was coming up out of the water" while being baptized by John in the Jordan, he saw the heavens torn apart and "the Spirit descending like a dove on him." Here we have the ascending and descending dynamics. In relationship with God, we are met where we are, lifted up, and called to rise to new life. Baptism symbolizes and enacts this movement into new life.

If our God is a descending God, we look for evidence of that. In our short passage from Mark today. We see how it plays out. God has descended to the human plane in the person of Jesus. Jesus is baptized, God affirms him "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Just as in Genesis, where we hear God's response to Creation, "And God saw that it was good," we understand that

God is satisfied with Jesus, as he is. There are no ifs, ands, or buts. Is this the unconditional nature of God's love for who and what he creates? Yes, it seems to be how God meets us.

And then in this newly baptized state, Jesus is sent by the Spirit into the wilderness, into the desert. Why? This was alone time for Jesus, perhaps to digest what had just happened; to take it in; to ponder and accept it. Because it is up to him to accept his full humanity.

And then he is tempted by the Satan. We don't hear how in Mark's version of this story. But Matthew tells us that Satan tempts him with power, success and ease. Satan is challenging him *not to* fully embrace his humanity. "C'mon, there are a few things you can do to make your life a bit, or a lot, easier. Just hang on to some divine power, use your special relationship with God, enjoy some power and prestige." I can well imagine Jesus was tempted, because being human is not easy, and Jesus must know, on some level, that he will be tested in ways that are difficult to imagine. Yes, Jesus was challenged to embrace his humanity. He chose the difficult way, he chose the way that would serve us. He let go of what would serve him. He fully embodied his humanity.

All the temptations were about ascending; using politics and power to advance oneself in the eyes of the world. About amassing more than one needs; about using power to one's advantage at the expense of others. This kind of earthly ascendance is not what God or Jesus are about. God, through Jesus, shows us a kind of leadership and power that are about taking what has been

given and serving, loving, sharing and surrendering. A very very different kind of use of power. This power distributes and shares. In a downward movement.

All of us are called to this kind of life. Instead of pulling up from those who have less, and, accumulating stuff and positioning ourselves for power and public esteem, we are called to serve, love, share and surrender as well. The movement we are called to is downward as well. To use the talents and resources we have to care for those who have less than we do, to care about those on the fringes, the 'orphans and widows' of Jesus' day.

In this way, we know we will be lifted up; we will become closer to God. We will be co-operating with God's plan – we will be engaged with God in the forgiveness and redemption of all people.

But we will be tempted to do otherwise. This much is clear. If we do not believe the voice that calls us beloved, we will be open to the other voices that tell us that need to claim a special relationship with God; we need to do things to earn God's respect and love; and other people's respect and love. Instead of being inwardly centred, we become outwardly seeking. We become off balance. Instead of receiving all that is freely given to us, we will set about making plans to get the things we think will make us happy. We will work ourselves to the bone for success and wealth. We will do and say things that compromise our integrity, just to be liked and accepted. We will make decisions that do not serve ourselves and others. We will get trapped in a web of situations that confuse and burden us. We will forget who we are and whose we are.

The wild beasts of our day are many. The voices Satan uses to make us doubt, fear and hate are many.

And the only cure I know for all that plagues us, is to spend time with God, and with people on the path who are receiving and claiming their belovedness. And out of that bounty, letting themselves be lifted out of the quagmire of materialism, greed, violence and the lust for power, that seem to be the norm these days in much of the world.

When we believe and accept our belovedness, the strength of that received love closes our ears to the voices that would deter us from sharing all we are given to get a hold of us. Out of our realized belovedness, we are kind, grateful not grasping and empty. We are able to do what we've been called to do this Lent – pray, fast, and be generous with our time, energy and money.

Each of us is unique; each one of us is special. Each of us is beloved. Each one of us was created by a Creator who was pleased with everyone and everything they created.

I remember telling my life story to a spiritual director some 30 years ago. I played up the difficult parts, expecting and wanting concern and sympathy. Doreen said, "Welcome to the human race – Everyone suffers. Everyone has a story. But there's only one story that's going to change your life and the world. Let's focus on that." Initially I was stunned and hurt by her response. But after sometime I realized the truth in what she said, and could finally see a way out of my drama and suffering. As they say, the truth can hurt.

And as it's also said, "Don't shoot the messenger."

Our sons have been messengers to me all through our life together. They speak truth often without realizing it. I think I've told you before that when they were teenagers and I would get grouchy and mean, they would encourage me, "Why don't you go and do something to do something nice for myself?" Because they knew if I was happier, their lives would be more pleasant. And what a nice way to say it!

So I treasure that in our relationship because often they tell me what no one else will. And sometimes that's really upsetting. But I've learned to keep my mouth shut. And consider what it is they are saying. Almost without exception, there is a grain of truth in what they say. And that's worth it to me.

Their voices are not that of Satan. Those disturbing voices generally come from within - when I'm not taking the time with God. When I feel the weight of the world on me; when I feel sorry for myself; when I feel judgmental of myself and others. When I don't believe I'm beloved, I don't act beloved. When I don't see others as the beloveds of God, I don't treat them that way.

Isn't it true that we say and do the worst things when we're hurting? When we feel alone, hurt, and betrayed? When we aren't taking care to get enough sleep, or good food, or spending time with people who care for us?

These are the times when the voices in our head tell us that we're not loved, that no one cares, that we should show people what's what. The voices that tell us, "Don't worry about anyone

else; no one cares about you”, and “Go for what you want, who cares about anyone else!” and, “You deserve this, it’s no one else’s business.” We’re ready to put others down and lift ourselves up. We’re positioning ourselves above and apart from others.

When it’s “us against them” - this is the subtle voice of Satan. We are vulnerable to this voice when we’re not grounded in the knowledge that we are beloved of God; and so is everyone else.

Life is the time we get to learn about, and experiment with, the two ways of ascending and descending.

Are we elevating ourselves at others’ expense – to be self-sufficient; in order to feel superior, secure, special? Or are we allowing ourselves to be lifted by God’s love in order to let go of our specialness and share what we have with the others, with the body of Christ?

Are we descending, or spiralling down into a negative view of ourselves and others and into behaviours that don’t serve anyone? Or are we releasing and fully embracing our humanity so that we can serve and love as Jesus did?

There is always movement in life. We are called to be flexible and responsive to life, and to adjust course as we go. And our best path is one that deepens as we go. Our best guide is the One who promises to lift us up. And our best model is the person of Jesus, who is always near, helping us hear and proclaim the good news. Amen.

Our belovedness lifts us and our humanity grounds us.