

2 18 24 1st Sunday in Lent Our Words and Our Ways Mark 1:9-19

**Theme from Fasting and Feasting:
Fast from words that pollute; feast on phrases that purify.**

One of the occupational hazards of being Presbyterian clergy is that we were required to learn both Hebrew and Greek in seminary – this was so we could return to read the scriptures in the original language. Original language is, of course, an illusion. As soon as any words are read or heard or seen, as in sign language, there is an interpretation that is engaged. We filter words all the time in our hearing and speaking – and often we misunderstand each other, lose the nuances, or assume we get it when we don't.

Last Sunday was Transfiguration Sunday – Peter James and John saw Jesus in an elightened state with Moses and Elijah. (This was in Mark chapter 9). The voice from the heavens said, *THIS is my son; listen to him*. Today's reading is from Mark chapter 1, in which the voice from the heavens says, *YOU are my son; with **you** I am well pleased*. This is my son; You are my son. The voice of God is specific, and the words invite us to be curious about why it matters that Jesus know he is beloved, and why it matters that God wants US to know Jesus' words are worth listening to. The word choice makes us wonder.

In some of the gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism and 40 days in the wilderness, there are lots of details, dialogue and challenge. In Mark's account, the angels looked out for Jesus, but we don't hear about what happened. What we do read is what Holy Spirit did differently: The Spirit **DROVE** Jesus into the wilderness. The gospel writer, Matthew, chose different words. In his account he wrote – the dove alit on Jesus (gentle as a dove, no doubt) and **LED** him into the wilderness. These word choices inform how we perceive Jesus' wilderness

experience was going to go. In Matthew, there was an invitation, a guide and a sense of purpose implied. In Mark, it doesn't sound like there was much choice going on! Jesus was driven or forced into a wilderness not of his own volition.

I hear from some of you that we as a congregation are in a wilderness right now, not of our own choosing. Some are thinking and feeling that this period of time is something that is happening TO us as a community of faith. How might our perception change if we were to think of our current processing of issues of trust, hope, distress, pain and promise as something that is happening WITH us? Does that word choice change how we engage together? It's happening with us... or, This is something happening AROUND us... or This is something happening BETWEEN us... IN SPITE OF.... BECAUSE OF...

The words we choose to describe our engagement together matter. It can shape the manner in which we approach our work in the moment, and our willingness to be more mindful of our words and our ways in the months and years ahead.

I'm going to sneak in another scripture lesson here from the book of James. This is in chapter 3.

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set

ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire... With it we bless the Lord, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.

You and I all know people – usually in our own families – whose tongues are never bridled or controlled, and who cause great fires. In my family there was someone who shall remain nameless, but who I called Aunt Barbara, who had NO filters whatsoever. Every cutting remark, criticism and disparaging thing she ever thought came out of her mouth. She attended a voice recital I gave once. Afterward she said, *That second piece was way too high for you, it really flopped.* My Aunt Mary, on the other hand, was a little more subtle in her critique, *So... that second song (she's wrinkling her nose now)... did you pick that or did your teacher pick that?* So then, of course, I braced myself for my mom's comments (I can feel some of you tensing up from here), but she said brightly, giving me a hug, *How do you think it all went?*

When our facilitators with 3 Stories Consulting suggested a group covenant that includes “wondering” this is what they are talking about. Rather than jumping in at a committee meeting with comments such as *You need to do this*, or at a church work day: *What do you think you're doing?* Or in a discussion group: *THAT can't be right, you're wrong!* Instead we wonder; we pause to be curious. We take that extra step to ask ourselves **internally**, I wonder what might be contributing to that person's anger? I wonder why they are choosing this instead of that? I wonder how my words can help this person or situation rather than exacerbate it? This is similar to the idea of responding to people and situations around you rather than reacting to them.

Author Ed Schein recently released a book titled, “Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling.” His thesis is that when we ask each other questions rather than tell each other what to do, we build trusting

relationships. And this is part of what we are about in our current season of facilitation, discussions and taking action – building trusting relationships, beginning with the words we choose to express ourselves, and the words of our questions to each other. Schein gives his reasoning behind using Humble Inquiry this way: *Because in an increasingly complex, interdependent, and culturally diverse world, we cannot hope to understand and work with people from different occupational, professional, national [and I will add denominational] cultures if we do not know how to ask questions and build relationships that are based on mutual respect and the recognition that others know things that we may need to know in order to get a job done.”*

Stephanie Phibbs has shared with us her involvement in seeking to understand the conflict in the Middle East, and advocating for the end of the war. I heard her describe a shift in the focus of the Mennonites for Action group. Rather than praying for peace in Israel and Gaza, they are calling for us to pray for LOVE. I believe this word choice of LOVE will go far in getting the job done to navigate hopeful actions.

Friends, we have a job to get done. I don't mean our job of building relationships or our job of taking action toward mending and healing here in this place. The job we have to get done is sharing the Good News of God beyond these walls. As followers of Jesus, this is our ultimate and mutual calling. The Gospel says that after his time in the wilderness, *Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."*

Allow me to wonder: What does the Good News mean to you? How have you shared the Good News in the past? What do you think is an effective way to bring that news to others? I wonder what questions you have... Amen.

Mark 1:9-15

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

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