

LENT 2021
The Journey to Jerusalem
“Fixing Our Eyes on Jesus”
Hebrews 12:1-3 and Mark 1:9-15
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I don't know if this is true for you, but the COVID pandemic has completely skewed my sense of timing. Holidays have looked very different and they seem to sneak up on me and pass more quickly than normal; high school, college and professional sports season schedules have been altered, and, my school age children have had unusual school schedules. Changes in schedules that usually provide a sense of rhythm for me, have made it difficult to keep track of time. And so, as the calendar turned and we rolled into 2021, I was surprised to realize Lent was just over 6 weeks away and Easter would be upon us before I knew it.

This past Wednesday was Ash Wednesday, the start of Lent—40 days prior to Easter, not counting Sundays—during which the Church has historically focused on the sacrifice and suffering of Jesus. Some Lenten practices that have traditionally assisted followers of Jesus to focus on our Lord's suffering include: having ashes placed on our foreheads, fasting a meal a day, giving up certain kinds of food, drink, caffeine or certain activities, devoting more time to Bible study or perhaps reading a certain book each year. Some of these practices may be unfamiliar to us and some of them may seem contrived or legalistic, but behind all of them lies the attempt to focus on Jesus. And whatever means we use to try and help us focus, being mindful of Jesus in the days and weeks leading up to Easter is a worthwhile goal. If you haven't done so already, I encourage you to spend time today thinking, praying and planning how you'll focus on Jesus during Lent 2021.

As I thought about today being the 1st Sunday of Lent, Hebrews chapter 12 verses 1-3 seemed a fitting place for us to start.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, **fixing our eyes on Jesus**, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. **Consider him** who endured such opposition from sinners, **so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.** Hebrews 12:1-3

We're encouraged to fix our eyes on Jesus, so we won't grow weary and lose heart. Many of us have experienced weariness and loss of heart (or discouragement) over the past year. The author of Hebrews tells us that the remedy for weariness and discouragement is *fixing our eyes* on Jesus, and that's my hope for us during Lent.

I titled our sermon series, "The Journey to Jerusalem," because as I read through the lectionary scriptures for the Sundays of Lent I noticed that throughout his 3 and ½ year ministry, Jesus' teaching and actions continually pointed to the cross. The cross was in the background—and at times the foreground—of all Jesus said and did. That may seem kind of morbid to us, because most of us don't like to think about death, but for Jesus, death was never far from his mind. Jesus' focus on death shaped his life, leading Him to a posture of surrender and providing Him with healthy perspective. I'm convinced that surrender and perspective are essential for us and the reason we need to "*fix our eyes on Jesus.*"

Let's explore these words *surrender* and *perspective*. Jesus embodied **surrender** to his Heavenly Father. Surrender is walking through life with open hands, giving everything that happens to us to God in the belief that He is able to work out his purposes in and through our lives and that He is able to use whatever happens to us for our good. I want to say that again. When we surrender ourselves and our loved ones and all that happens to us to God, we're placing our trust in Him. We're saying, "*God, I trust you to take me and what is happening to me, to use it for your purposes and ultimately for my good.*"

Perspective was also critical for Jesus. Perspective allows us to see our lives and everything we encounter in life in the context of God and his purposes and eternity. A simple way of emphasizing the importance of our perspective is to consider the difference between worry and worship. When we embrace worry in the midst of tough circumstances, we become self-absorbed—consumed with our circumstances and our problem grows larger. When we embrace worship in a hard situation, we focus on Jesus and his provisions and our problem shrinks in comparison to God and the resources at his disposal. In the context of Lent, think about the practice of having ashes placed on our forehead in the sign of the cross on Ash Wednesday. A common statement made by the priest/pastor as the ashes are traced in the sign of the cross is, "*Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*" Ashes on our

foreheads are intended to create perspective by reminding us of the temporal nature of our life and it places our time on earth in the context of eternity.

My introduction this morning was a bit longer than usual because I wanted to provide background for our Lenten series and for this morning's Gospel text: Mark chapter 1 verses 9-15. Of the 4 Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—Mark is known as the fast-paced Gospel. It moves quickly, bouncing from event to event without smooth transitions and doesn't have as many details and events as the other Gospels. Mark starts his Gospel with a prophecy from Isaiah about John the Baptist; he introduces John the Baptist to us; and, then we read these words beginning with verse 9...

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" Mark 1:9-15

Jesus' baptism was the prelude to his public ministry. For the first thirty years of his life Jesus lived in obscurity as a carpenter in a small, out of the way town called Nazareth. Then John the Baptist came on the scene. Preaching a message of repentance, baptizing for the forgiveness of sins and prophesying the coming of the long-awaited Messiah, John made quite a splash (pun intended).

Your immediate question might be, "*If John baptized people for repentance from their sins, why did Jesus—the sinless Son of God—need to be baptized?*" That's a great question, but with his bare bones account Mark doesn't give us much to go on. Fortunately, Matthew's Gospel provides some details. Matthew tells us that John tried to resist baptizing Jesus, by telling Him that it actually should be the other way around—Jesus should baptize John. But Jesus responded, "*Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.*" Then John consented and baptized Jesus. Jesus' answer about fulfilling all righteousness through

being baptized is kind of vague, but we're given understanding when we see what happens when Jesus is baptized.

As Jesus rose out of the water, the Holy Spirit descended on Him in the form of a dove and a voice from heaven said, *"You are my Son whom I love; with you I am well pleased."* Jesus' baptism was a powerful moment. One of the realities that points to the significance of this event is that it's one of the few places in the New Testament where the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit are mentioned together—Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended like a dove and the Father spoke.

The words of blessing God the Father spoke over his Son, Jesus, after his baptism became the foundation for Jesus' public ministry, but first, Jesus was sent into the wilderness where He fasted for 40 days and was tempted by Satan. Jesus' security in his identity as God's Son, with whom his Father was pleased, enabled Him to withstand the assault from Satan. In his temptations Satan tried to entice Jesus to by-pass the difficult way of the cross and achieve God's purposes through shortcuts. Jesus was able to resist Satan, by surrendering his life to God and embracing God's perspective.

Another significant aspect of the timing of Jesus' baptism relates to the symbolism of baptism. The ritual of baptism symbolizes death and resurrection. As we go under the water, we die to our sin. As we are lifted up from the water, we are raised to life in Christ, washed of our sin. The Apostle Paul explains this in Romans chapter 6 when he writes,

Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. Romans 6: 3 & 4

What I want to share with you next is complicated, but I know you're all smart people and assuming I can explain it well, I'm confident you'll see the connection. Keeping Jesus' baptism in mind, I want to read our Old Testament lectionary text from Genesis 9 and our New Testament Epistle text from 1 Peter 3. Are you ready? First, Genesis chapter 9 verses 8-16:

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. I establish

my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.” Genesis 9:8-16

As we think about the familiar story of Noah and the Ark and the flood, I want us to pay attention to the connection between water and God’s covenant of love with his people. God’s promise to remain faithful to his people is a primary theme of the flood story and the Apostle Peter refers to it in 1 Peter chapter 3 verses 18-22...

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits—to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him. 1 Peter 3:18-22

The account of the flood and the 1 Peter passage I just read both make a connection between water and baptism and God’s covenant of forgiveness and reconciliation with his people? These references to water and baptism find their culmination in Jesus’ baptism. Jesus wasn’t baptized to be cleansed from sin. he was sinless. **He was baptized as a human to demonstrate for us the covenant we have with God as we choose to surrender ourselves to Him in baptism and experience the forgiveness of our sins and reconciliation and new life with Him.** I love the continuity of the Scriptures and the thread that runs from Noah and the Flood, to John the Baptist’s ministry and his baptism of Jesus, to you and I being baptized as symbol of the covenant we have in our relationship with God through Jesus.

Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem, where He was crucified on the cross on Good Friday, wasn’t a terrible event that quickly materialized after Palm Sunday, catching God or Jesus by surprise. Jesus’ three and a half years of ministry, beginning with his baptism, foreshadowed his coming

death on the cross. And it was Jesus' surrender and perspective that allowed Him to walk that difficult journey well.

I'd like to return to the words from Hebrews chapter 12 I shared at the beginning of the sermon, because these are words I encourage us to embrace at the start of Lent.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, **fixing our eyes on Jesus**, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. **Consider him** who endured such opposition from sinners, **so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.** Hebrews 12:1-3

Fixing our eyes on Jesus, embracing surrender and God's perspective as Jesus did, allows us to walk through life well...even amidst difficulty and challenge. **As I conclude this message and as we begin our journey through lent together, I encourage you to reflect on your weariness and any discouragement you've encountered over the past year. How will you fix your eyes on Jesus this Lenten season as Easter approaches? How do you need Jesus to minister to you today?**