

“Calling and Temptation”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus  
concerning Mark 1:9-15  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco  
on February 18, 2018

As soon as Jesus came up from the baptismal waters and was blessed by God the Father—or God the Mother, as I prefer to call Her—right away he was tempted. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark’s Gospel does not go into detail. The whole thing is over so fast you could blink and miss it, but these two things—the blessing of Jesus and the temptation of Jesus—mark the beginning of his public ministry and they leave their mark on who he becomes.

I tend to think of Jesus popping out of the womb all Messiah-like, but that is not how the Scriptures tell it. They say that boy had to grow in stature and wisdom, and if Jesus had to grow, there’s no use thinking you and I have arrived. Like Jesus we’ve got to be formed. Like Jesus, we are still finding out who we are and to what we have been called.

I often think if I just knew for sure that I was called, I could make it through any wilderness. If God would just tell me in clear and certain terms what I am supposed to do on this earth, I would do it. But the truth is, I often don’t know. I don’t know which cause to fight for or how to fight it. I don’t know where to put my time and energy on a given day. I am pulled in a hundred directions and am intermittently passionate about some of them. Sometimes I feel called to preach and sometimes I feel like, oh boy, I’ve got to come up with yet another thing to say. Sometimes I feel inspired and sometimes I just feel tired.

I’ve made it clear to God that I would do better with some detailed instructions and a weekly pep talk letting me know I’m on the right track. God hasn’t really responded to these demands, so I went to my spiritual director and tried to weasel the clarity and affirmation I wanted out of her instead. I told her I could do just about anything if God gave me a clear sign, but that the signs are too subtle, short, absent even.

She reminded me that over time, the authority of my spiritual journey has shifted from being something outside me to something within me. I listen to my own gut, my own intuition, my own experience nowadays. I have discovered a Spirit alive and well within me. But when I am feeling insecure, afraid, or unclear, it turns out that I revert back to wanting God to be a big guy in the sky who can steer me clear of any mistakes and tell me exactly what to do and think. I want to bypass the muddle within and reach out for a clarity that transcends this mess that is me.

The problem is, I don’t relate to God in that way anymore. God is less above and outside and more around and within. God partners with me rather than ordering me around. God offers more freedom, less designated lane. This God is a bit messier than the God I first knew, and I am messier too. I have these big feelings and even bigger questions.

I feel like being confused means I must be doing something wrong. Like, if I feel lost, I probably am lost. But I've learned that sometimes when you feel lost, you're being carried. That when you have little to go on, you somehow end up exactly where you need to be.

I am struck that at the moment of Jesus' baptism, this rising up from the waters, this new birth, God simply said, "This is my son, the Beloved, in whom I am pleased," without a word of direction about what Jesus was to do. And so the newly minted Messiah headed out into the dry desert land with nothing to go on but the knowledge that God loved him. Imagine facing all the challenges of a life with so little coaching . . .

Perhaps Jesus' journey is not so different from our own. I think of Jesus as knowing exactly what he was called to—as if the path before him were clear. As if he always knew which way to go. As if he always knew who to heal and how not to feel guilty about the ones he didn't heal. As if he never wrestled with decisions or wondered what to do or agonized over the sorry state of affairs around him. As if he never wrung his hands: so much to do, so little time.

But if the baptism scene is any sort of depiction of what Jesus' journey was like, he wasn't given a roadmap. Not a guidebook, not a role model, not a mission statement. Just a sense of who he was and then he was booted off into the wilderness to face his demons.

In fact, I think it was the temptation more than the baptism that taught him who he was. I mean, sure, the voice from heaven had said, "You are my son," but how would he know what that meant until it had been tested? Calling is not a moment that happens to you when the heavens part and God's voice descends. That might be the beginning of it, but calling is a path that happens to you as you go, a way that opens as you walk. Who you are meant to become unravels one step at a time, one temptation at a time. Even Jesus had to grow. Your calling is what you do with your life one choice at a time.

God has already told you what you need to know—you are God's beloved child, you bring God pleasure, and so does your neighbor. Now what will you do with that knowing?

Some of you will use that love knowledge to build great things. Some of you will create art and some of you will write songs and some of you will feed hot soup to the hungry. Some of you will use that love knowledge to raise a son with emotional intelligence, who can express a wide range of emotions and not just anger. Some of you will raise daughters who are strong and brave, capable of using their voice and their intellect. Some of you will use that love knowledge to care for aging parents and some of you will use it to organize marches. Some of you will imagine whole new ways of being and forge the path; some of you will be faithful to the next step without knowing where it takes you. Some of you will go far; some of you will stay planted and let your roots grow deep.

Rarely will any of you feel certain that you are doing it right or that you've found the path that is unique to you. Mostly the calling will be made up of ordinary rather than spectacular moments: i.e. do I work on my relationship with my mother? Do I show up for my kid's soccer game? Do I show up for the black community when they're scared of law enforcement? Do I show up for the immigrant? Do I show up for friends? Do I pay attention when my spouse is talking to me? Do I

listen to my kids? Do I listen to the oppressed? Do I listen to my body when it tells me I need sleep? Am I being kind to the person who irritates me to pieces? Am I practicing honesty?

In other words, we work out our callings not in some magical baptismal moment but in the daily-ness of our lives, one small decision after the other. Even Jesus had to go one step at a time, could not rush ahead to a resurrection, had to heal the person right in front of him before he could heal the next one.

The temptation of Jesus reveals that even for Jesus, it wasn't easy. If the path had been simple, they would have called the devil's arrival a nuisance, but not a temptation. Temptation implies he really was pushed. Jesus had to wrestle to find his way. He had to think, he had to pray, he had to reach deep down inside himself and discover what it meant to him that God had said, "You are my son."

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus' baptism is a mere three verses long. Then v.12, "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness." Immediately. A few minutes in the river. Forty *days* in the wilderness. What a metaphor for the faith. That immersion into love has got to last you a while. Enjoy water where you can because the dry thirsty patches can go on and on and on.

It is the desert more than the water that will make a disciple out of you. Lots of people get baptized and never follow Christ when the following gets hard. Baptism is only the beginning. Calling happens in the desert when you feel lost and thirsty but you keep moving anyway. Calling happens when you face your demons and learn what tempts you. Calling happens not in a moment but in the days that stretch before you. Calling happens as you journey, as you morph and change with each new discovery. Calling happens in the flexibility of your faithfulness not in the rigidity of your dreams. Calling happens as you respond to life's events.

When Jesus finally emerged from the desert, the timing was such that he started preaching the good news right after John's arrest. John, who had baptized him. John, his cousin, in prison. Jesus didn't develop the guts to preach good news in the face of such bad news while splashing around with John in the Jordan. Jesus got those guts by facing his demons in the desert and coming out the other side. He came out ready to face a world that would hate him, despise him, question him, ridicule him, a world that would imprison family and behead his cousin. When Jesus emerged from the desert he started preaching good news in the face of really bad news.

We have bad news of our own to contend with—more kids have been shot, for example. I don't know how to get past that. I don't think you do get past it. I think there's an eternal grief that resides in our bones. I think the grief means it's time to start preaching. I don't say it's time to preach because I feel certain that I'm called. I say that it's time to start preaching because clearly the temptations in front of us are silence, complacency, denial, and numbness. Sometimes we don't know how to find our work until the temptation points the way. The temptations of our time are preserving the status quo and refusing to listen. The temptation is to go back to sleep. The temptation is to ignore one another.

We often talk about the season of Lent as a journey with Jesus—a journey through the wilderness or a journey to the cross. We observe Lent with private acts of devotion—we fast

from chocolate or we practice centering prayer. I've observed Lent in this way many times myself. But this year I am struck by the fact that Jesus' walk to the cross wasn't marked by a bunch of private conversations with God. Jesus' walk to the cross was marked by preaching good news in the face of bad news—feeding the hungry, healing the sick, befriending the outcast. It was public work. His solitude in the desert wasn't preparing him to feel at peace with the universe but to work for justice in a peace-less world. It was grueling, soul-searching, temptation-resisting work.

There is a spiritual disease that I believe is only contagious among white people. It is the disease of thinking our spirituality can be personal and private. I say it's a white people disease because people of color have no choice—spirituality and activism are intrinsically connected. Only white people have the luxury of a spirituality that lets them escape life's problems rather than helps them face life's problems with courage. Only white people can feel at one with the world without feeling the brutality that plagues it. Only white people can feel pious and holy for fasting from chocolate.

Layla Saad, a poet, writer, and spiritual guide says that if white people say yes to being an ally, we need to understand that means we are saying yes “to seeing [our] spirituality as a way to engage deeper into this work rather than as a way to bypass this work, and to recognizing that being devoted to Spirit means being devoted to social justice.”<sup>i</sup> As a woman of color, Layla says this to white people, “As a white person, you have the privilege of being able to say . . . ‘I don't follow the news because it's too political’ and ‘I just want to focus on love and light.’” She critiques white women who focus on the empowerment of the individual rather than the collective, who “devote themselves to doing deep spiritual work for themselves and their clients, and yet remain absolutely silent on anything to do with politics and justice.”<sup>ii</sup>

What keeps rolling around in my head is that if the desert is a shock to your system, if you didn't expect the world to be this hard . . . it probably means you grew up privileged because for lots of people, desert is the every day stuff of life. And so for us I pray:

Dearly beloved children of God . . . may your Lent be difficult, *especially* if you are white or privileged in some way. May your Lent be difficult because the times are difficult, and if things are going easy for you right now, you must be asleep. If you are struggling right now, you are probably right where you need to be. So may you continue to wrestle with who it is you are called to be in this time and in this place. May you face your demons and learn your temptations. May the confusion and pain of the desert receive your welcome. You are here to learn, and you are here to grow. And it doesn't matter that you don't know what to do or what your calling is. It matters that you do something. It matters that you are here, that you are God's beloved, that there's a temptation of complacency to beat. It matters that we're in this together. It matters that in the face of so much bad news, we are being called to preach the good.

---

<sup>i</sup> Layla Saad, “I Need to Talk to Spiritual White Women about White Supremacy (Part Two),” <http://www.wildmysticwoman.com/poetry-prose/white-women-white-supremacy-2>

<sup>ii</sup> Layla Saad, “I Need to Talk to Spiritual White Women about White Supremacy (Part One),” <http://www.wildmysticwoman.com/poetry-prose/white-women-white-supremacy-1>