

The Liberating Passion of Christ

Sermon by Wendell Wiebe-Powell

Scripture texts Psalm 19, Exodus 20:1-17, John 2:13-22

So many thoughts swirling around my head ... thoughts clamoring to be proclaimed but seemingly still far from any coherent message. I step out into the night and behold the moon gleaming in the chilly night sky....clouds wisping past.... Obscuring, revealing and then like a gauzy veil... Words fail.

"Day to day pours forth speech, night to night declares knowledge" the psalmist proclaims.

As my hiking buddies and I stand on the craggy ridge speechless at vistas that seem to go on forever. Anything can happen in the wilderness. It's unpredictable, untamed, far from security of familiar walls... wide open, we're vulnerable. We hold on the icy tent pole in the middle of the night to keep the howling wind from blowing our tent with us in it off the precipice. The storm dies down. The clouds clear. I step out to take a leak. Under billions of stars blanketing the night sky; the snow capped peak aglow in the moonlight ... waiting for tomorrow's ascent... My mouth is agape. I am infinitesimal. And yet... and yet I am blessed with senses to savor, to behold, to wonder. I am part of it.

Ah yes...wilderness. Seems like it keeps popping up in the biblical story at pivotal moments. Moses encounters the burning bush with his flock three days out into the wilderness. The Hebrew people wander for 40 years in the Sinai desert. Jesus driven by the spirit into the wilderness; tempted by the devil, ministered to by angels. Is the wilderness just an inconsequential backdrop for these stories or is there some significance?

If we allow untamed places to be further diminished from the earth, we will have correspondingly diminished that which pours forth speech, that which declares knowledge. Our soul will atrophy not to mention the carrying capacity for life on earth.

Lent is a time where we re-member Jesus driven into the wilderness and what happened there AND how that image can "drive" us into the wilderness of introspection. To look at where we are tempted, where we are enslaved and to seek deliverance and the tender mercies of God.

The stereotypical image might be for lent to be a time to enter into a peaceful quiet space. But, as Jesus' time in the wilderness demonstrates, that quiet space can confront us with some hard things. That's why we might like to keep busy. We sometimes don't want to stop because we

unconsciously realize that things that bind us up as individuals and as social groupings raise their ugly heads when we pause our frenetic activity. In the words of Cornel West, It takes tremendous discipline, takes tremendous courage, to think for yourself, to examine yourself. *And another quite from West, There is a price to pay for speaking the truth. There is a bigger price for living a lie. And I would add, that there's a price to pay for telling lies to ourselves as well as to others.*

One of the conditions of being human is there is often a "woundedness" we have experienced personally and in the social groups with which we identify. Pitfalls of unattended to woundedness and loss is that we can start to feel it's all about us as individuals and we as communities of people. We become blind to other's with suspicion and lack of trust of individuals and groups unfamiliar to us. One of the ways we humans get ensnared is what's called in the world of therapy, the "Victim, Persecuter, Rescuer, Victim Drama Cycle.

We identify with or are familiar with groups formed in the cauldron of persecution: Mennonites, Jewish people,... Horror stories are written into the fabric of our identities.

When victimization is the focus of our identity, we sometimes get trapped in the Victim, Persecutor, Rescuer, Victim Drama Cycle. Our sense of victimization may blind us to how we have been complicit in colonization; how our positions of privilege depend on the subjugation and exploitation of others. Another response might be to operate out of guilt; a drivenness to do enough good to be acceptable to God and others – the "rescuer." The "persecutor" is probably less of an issue among Mennonites. That is, the stereotype brash overt type we are all too familiar with these days. On the other hand, destructive aggressiveness can be expressed passively as polite disregard. Dismissiveness, avoidance and condescension may be cloaked behind civility and quiet respectability.

So, in our time of wilderness introspection, if we come to the realization that we are caught in some part of that victim, persecutor, rescuer cycle, how do we get off of that marry-go-round?

I think there's a key in the opening lines of our text from Exodus 20 for today. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery..." Too often the ten commandments are waved about without the opening lines declaring prior relationship and saving work of God out of which they flow and thus they are more easily used as a club over our heads.

The underlying reality is that God is in relationship with us, God delivered the Israelites out of slavery. It is out of prevenient deliverance, grace

and love of God that guideposts for healthy life-giving relationships flows. You were once slaves...I rescued you but you cannot kill, covet, oppress, etc. But Jesus sums up the spirit and intent when he calls us to "...love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, with all our strength, with all our mind; and our neighbor as ourself." So we can ask ourselves in life situations and choices, "what does it take to do that?"

When we know within our whole being that God loves us, desires to be in relationship, to save us from being trapped...IF we will only let go and let God...THEN I trust we will find ourselves being freed from life depleting treadmills. We will realize it's not all about us. We are no longer the main character in the story, God is.

So then does that mean we just pack it up and go home? No longer living out of a victim identity so we just forget about and deny the wounds of our individual and collective past? No longer rescuer so no need to help anyone anymore right? No longer persecutor so that means we should avoid confronting injustice because that makes people feel uncomfortable right? Here's how the story goes right?: Jesus resisted temptations of great power and doing miracles so he settled in to a quiet life of prayer and working in his dad's workshop because sticking his neck out and doing miracles would draw attention to himself and that would be prideful right? Obviously the story takes a quite different turn. **Right after Jesus' time in the wilderness resisting temptations of miracles and power... the very next thing he is healing people. Multitudes are flocking to to his proclamation about the kingdom of God among them. He speaks with authority. They are fed by him in body and spirit. Something powerful is going on. But is Jesus a codependent rescuer? No, his compassion is overflowing out of knowing he is beloved.**

Those with vested interests in the domination system of Jesus' day were trying to trip him up, out to get him, but did Jesus cower and withdraw as a victim or lead a rebellion to destroy his persecutors? No, his compassion was overflowing so much in God's beloved-ness that he could walk through the dark valley of fear, that he could stand up to the withering winds of hatred and violence and confront duplicity, oppression of the poor. It wasn't that he had serenely transcended fear, anger and sorrow. He knew these feelings as well as joy...intimately. But he was not consumed by them, not held in bondage by them. How can this be? Jesus gave up temptations of miracles and power but now he's doing miracles and having a powerful influence among multitudes?! The difference now is that the power and influence of Jesus is not out of his need to be great himself, or to make Israel great again... but out of a place of deep relationship with the one who delivered a band of slaves out oppression in Egypt; One who saw him through his own dark valley in the wilderness, one who said to him, "you are my beloved son in whom I am

well pleased.”

For Jesus who yielded to God's way in the wilderness, it wasn't about being all gentle or all bold, it was what ever medicine the doctor ordered for what ever the situation was for the liberating, healing work of the Spirit and the weaving of the kin-dom of God. One thing seems to hold true throughout however. There was passion in Jesus this one who embodied the Word of God, who proclaimed the arrival of jubilee, who said the kingdom is among us, this One who wept over Jerusalem and flipped tables in the temple. Jesus had passion but not passion alone. Jesus had love but not alone. Without love, passion looses its mooring. Without passion, love becomes feckless. Together they are com-passion.

So now, as followers of this passionate one we are able to be freed from being victims with suspicion and hatred toward others, our healed inner wounds now reflecting the light of love and healing to others; places of empathy with the victimization of others rather than separation from them. Now we are freed from being persecutors whether overt or subtly, freed from needing to earn acceptance by doing good / rescuing others but now reaching out as whole persons...beloved...with God as the main character in our story. Now we can do or simply be what ever the doctor orders for the healing of what ever situation we find ourselves in. And as the life of Jesus shows us, that can take many forms. It most certainly will require prayer and times of sabbath, times of service and healing words and touch AND... with forces of greed and control sucking the life out of the earth, it will sometimes require flipping a few tables to turn the tables death to ways that give life. Delivered from enslaving cycles, we can rest in the knowledge that neither are we the ones responsible for rescuing and saving it all nor are we to simply wash our hands of it and say its all up to God. God's at the center now but we are part of the body. God's the captain of the team but we are part of the team.

We have the opportunity, the invitation to join those who are standing up and turning the tables of death to life in our day like the survivor of the mass shooting at Parkland High School, Emma Gonzalez who said, “We should be home grieving the loss of our friends but we're here because if all our government and president can do is send their thoughts and prayers, this is the time for victims to be the change that we need to seek!”

And, in the face of all that's going on, these words from

The Rev. Kaji Douša, Senior Minister of

Park Avenue Christian Church seem fitting.

Here's an excerpt from her the sermon, **Be a Servant**

"Rosa Parks became known as the mother of the Civil Rights Movement when she strategically refused to give up her seat on a bus in her home of Montgomery. When asked why she did it all, she famously said*: "My cup of endurance runneth over."

Me too, Rosa Parks. Me too.

My cup ran over the day my eyes were opened to the many layers between me and the justice my own body has never received.

My cup ran over on the days I chanted with my city, my country: "I can't breathe."

My cup ran over when I read defenses of Harvey Weinstein and the many assaulters whose stories have been famously surfacing these days.

My cup ran over when I walked into that church in Sandy Hook and tried to figure out how to comfort grieving families who had lost their children.

My cup has run over for years.

And you know what? God did that. Not the violence. But hear me now: I fully believe that God filled my cup to overflowing. If you're unfamiliar with the scripture Mrs. Parks was quoting, it's from the 23rd Psalm. It begins with important words to remember: "The Lord is my shepherd."

And here's where it gets tricky: it says, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Well: I want. I want all of this to stop. I need it to stop. But listen on. Because the Psalm continues: "Thou anointest my head with oil. My cup runneth over."

Maybe you, like me, have thought that a cup that runneth over is filled with dollars and wealth. But God does not, will not, has never anointed with money. God anoints with something completely different: power. Oh no, not the power to destroy. But the power to love into repair, into wholeness, into righteousness.

Rosa Parks' cup ran over not with fame, recognition, or wealth. Rosa Parks' cup ran over with the power of God to bring empire to its knees in the hotbed of the Confederacy."

Jesus acts of compassion, healing and confronting of injustice require the

“first part” “the wilderness”, that which pours forth speech without words... letting go, being ministered to, wrestling,... and the “passion of the Christ” weeping over Jerusalem, turning tables in the temple,... By losing one's life (wilderness, cross,...) one gains the world. Whether praying alone on a windswept hill or feeding a multitude, whether chasing out money lenders or standing silent before accusing authority of empire, the responses are now from a place that has let go of self serving and now flow from a deep place of com-PASSION for the common good, no longer afraid to challenge systems of domination, no longer afraid of losing one's life.?: for one's friends....and in the context of nature that pours forth speech... the “friends” one is willing to die for and LIVE for are... ALL of creation.