

## Growing into Personal Change for Lent

The Rev. Mark Sherwindt, Pastor  
Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church  
The First Sunday of Lent: March 1, 2009

Theologians call it a *theophany*, the presence of God made visibly, or audibly, viscerally and remarkably manifest here in our world of time and space among mere mortal and ordinary sinners. In two successive weeks, we have come face-to-face with the two theophanies that occur in the Gospel of Mark. Last week, it was God on the mountain top revealing His glory in the Transfiguration of our Lord, turning Jesus a dazzling white, and speaking from the cloud that covered and enveloped them, “This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.” This week, it’s Jesus in the Jordan with John the Baptist; and there’s that voice: “You are my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” God’s voice, booming from the heavens, serves as resonating confirmation of the meaning and significance of the ministry that awaits him, summarized in a single verse: “The time is fulfilled; the kingdom is at hand; repent and believe the gospel.” (1:15)

It certainly seems crystal clear. Who could fail to get it? Jesus is the One. God confirms it: “This is my Son.” Peter will say the magic words next week in yet another text where it seems that we are pretty much on track. Jesus is the Christ, God’s Son, our Savior. Next Sunday makes three successive weeks focusing on three uniquely revealing texts, all of which are lifting up the name, the title, the divinely-mandated mission and divinely-bestowed identity of Jesus. And yet, however clear the language, we are still worlds away from understanding what the name means, what the mission is, what we’re in for. That’s what each of these texts are trying to tell us. That’s what today’s text is trying to tell us with the connection between Jesus’ baptism and his being driven out into the wilderness to contend with wild beasts and Satan’s army of demons.

Baptism isn’t our ticket to ride straight to heavenly glory, our guarantee of smooth sailing all the way to the pearly gates. Baptism is just the beginning of a life-long struggle to learn what it means that Jesus is the Christ, God’s Son, and to learn what it means to follow him. That’s what Mark’s Gospel is trying to tell us. Three times in Mark’s Gospel we are told directly that Jesus is the One, the Christ, God’s Son. (1:11, 9:7, 8:29) Three times Jesus will tell his disciples what that means, with the Cross figuring prominently in his story. (8:31, 9:31, 10:33) Three times the disciples fail to understand the point. (8:32, 9:32, 10:35) As clear as it is that God is telling us who Jesus is, it is just as clear that the disciples fail to understand what the Cross has to do with Jesus’ mission, God’s mandate, our destiny. They become afraid as the reality of the Cross grows closer; and they turn in fear and flee when the shadow of the Cross falls upon them. Knowing the meaning of the magic word is not as easy as mouthing the name. Learning what it means to believe will take longer. Learning what it means to follow will take a lifetime of struggling with the demons that would distract us from seeing the connection between Christ and the Cross, from seeing the connection between God’s will to save and our call to serve.

This is what Jesus is saying in the Gospel of Mark. He tells Peter in chapter 8 that being the Christ is not about the glory, but the Cross. In chapter 9, he tells the Twelve that his mission is not about being the greatest in the eyes of others, but the willingness to join in seeking out the lost, reaching out to the lowly, locating ourselves among the least. That's the message again in chapter 10, where James and John seek to become Jesus' right hand and left hand men, symbols of great power. But Jesus speaks out clearly against this idea. "The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, not to receive glowing accolades but to give his life as a ransom for many." (10:45) Understanding what this means and how to live it doesn't happen over night, in an instant. It takes time, and struggle, involving failure combined with forgiveness, and more forgiveness, as much forgiveness as we need to finally understand how gracious God is.

You all know that my life has been consumed with putting together our *Daily Devotional Guide* for Lent. I thought it all began with my announcing it; but in actuality, in looking back at how it came to be, it all began with Steve Dague's inspiration. He wrote a meditation that required thirty-nine more; and, with Carol Rossbach's help, members responded. I handed out the first week's worth of meditations on Ash Wednesday, with Steve Dague's meditation finally right there in black and white for all to read. Today I've prepared the second installment, Week #2 of our daily devotions for Lent. I've got to admit that I have been humbled with astonishment at the many meditations that our members have offered. It's certainly true that not all are as powerful as Steve Dague's, but they are all gems, every one. This morning I'd like to read from the meditation that is scheduled for Saturday, March 7. It is Mel Lindberg's, who asked that I schedule it there in honor of his birthday on March 8. (We don't have daily devotions for Sundays for two reasons: first, Sundays are not officially counted with the forty days of Lent, and second, we expect our congregational family to share their devotions here in the Sanctuary as we gather for worship together. For your information, since I refer to Pastor Lindberg's meditation, I have included it in its entirety at the end of this sermon.)

Mel's meditation is about the process of learning to grow with Lent. He writes, "I've been reading a fascinating book called *The Power of Focus*. The first chapter is entitled "Your habits will determine your future" – a bit of overstatement, but interesting. "The challenge is, if you want to change your future, you've got to change your habits." That is clearly right on the mark, and changing habits doesn't happen over night. It takes time. Mel decided to start small. "I decided to make a change – to clean and keep clean the top of the dresser." He said that he wanted to take on his desk, but that was just too much at once. I can relate to that. Most of you have seen my desk, or, more precisely, most of you have not seen my desk, and have watched as its clutter has spread to the adjoining hallway shelves, and all the way into the Church Secretary's office, when I'm just too busy to fight the demons that love me to organize my disorganization into piles! Mel writes, "I plan to keep my dresser neat until it's a habit. We'll see how it works in a few months." Again, change takes time.

Mel continues, “I was just reading about Jesus walking by the Sea of Galilee – in the verses that follow this morning’s Gospel. He called four fishermen, ‘Come, follow me, and I will make you fishermen into fishers of men.’ Peter, Andrew, James and John immediately, in that moment, left their nets, their boats, their relatives, their business associates, and followed Jesus. It was ‘immediate’, but it was also a commitment of years, involving their total lives.” The kind of change we are talking about takes time. In this regard, Mel writes, “I accepted Christ as my Lord and Savior shortly before my nineteenth birthday. I felt thoroughly forgiven of all my sins. I felt like I was a new person. The odd thing was that very few people noticed the change in my life. God changed me ‘inside’, and eventually it worked its way to my ‘outside’ and was observed by others – but not immediately. That change has continued to change me in other ways during the course of the succeeding sixty years. Apparently, God’s not finished with me yet.”

I loved it when Steve Dague used that line back in December to talk about the changes that have occurred since his fall, with the recovery that has followed, and the growth that has occurred with his faith in God’s presence and trust in God’s plan and purpose for what is yet to come. Here’s how Steve said it in December: “I have no idea where I find the strength to push myself ... because rehab is not without pain! It sure would be easy to give that up. These words of Scripture have helped: ‘I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.’ (Philippians 4:13) How many times have we heard these words of encouragement, but how true they are, and how important these words have become in my life. Where will it all lead? I am reminded of the bumper sticker, *Be patient. God isn’t finished with me yet.*” I love it that Steve, while in the middle of his life, and Mel, while getting ready to turn 79 next Sunday, can both claim that line are right for them. It’s true. God isn’t finished with any of us yet; and what is more, we’re not finished growing into a more faithful, more vibrant, and maturing understanding of what it means to lay hold of the grace that God gives and the love that is ours ... in Jesus’ name. Amen

### **Zion’s Daily Devotional Guide for Lent: Our Meditation for Saturday, March 7**

The Rev. Dr. Melvin Lindberg, Methodist Pastor, Retired

**Scripture, Mark 1.16-20:** “*As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.*”

As we walk these forty days of Lent toward Easter, its first day reminds us that we leave ashes, which is what the fire leaves behind. We leave dust, which is what wind, rain and decomposition leave behind. There is a bigger question hidden in these ashes and dust. So, I ask you, what can you and I leave behind on our journey to the Cross?

I've been reading a fascinating book called *The Power of Focus*. The first chapter is entitled *Your Habits Will Determine Your Future*. The challenge is stated this way: "If you want to change your future, change your habits." This has made me think of what I do by habit, and it's a lot. You do, too, whether you call it acting by habit or not. If we try to change everything at once, we usually fail; but if we take one specific habit that we want to change and zero in on it for a lengthy period of time, change will happen. If we make it a goal to change one thing in our lives during all the days of Lent, then we can continue to make changes in the weeks and months that follow.

You and I have some *good habits* and some *not so pretty good habits*, otherwise known as *bad habits*, that we do all the time, whether we know it or not. I decided to make a change in one of mine, like cleaning and keeping clean the top of my bedroom dresser. I would really like to do that with my computer desk and files, but that's just too much all at once. So, I plan to keep my dresser neat until keeping it neat is a habit. Sounds simple enough, but we'll see how it works in a few months.

If we have sin in our lives, that will take some drastic action – more like major surgery than clipping fingernails; but as we get used to the habit of confessing our sin to God AND accepting his forgiveness, we can change our inner and outer lives. It's even better if we can do something to make amends for our sin. For instance, if we have harmed others, in addition to offering confession and seeking forgiveness, doing something to make amends offers the hope that we can become better in our spiritual lives, as well as making our world better, too.

In text we read today, Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee and called four fishermen, "Come, follow me and I will make you fishermen into fishers of men." Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John immediately left their nets, their boats, their relatives, their business associates and everyone else, and they followed Jesus. It was immediate; but it was also a commitment of years, a commitment of their total lives. The change that came their way happened one step at a time.

I accepted Christ as my Lord and Savior shortly before my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday. I felt thoroughly forgiven of all my sins, and I felt I was a new person. The odd thing was that very few people noticed the change in my life. God changed me inside, and eventually that change worked its way to my outside, and was observed by others, too – but not immediately. I have changed in other ways in the succeeding sixty years, and I can say with complete confidence that God is still working on me.

In *Cure for the Common Life*, Max Lucado writes, "DaVinci painted his *Mona Lisa*, Beethoven created one *Fifth Symphony*, and God made one version of you! You're the only version of you.... You are uniquely made." Yes, I believe you and I can be everything that God wants us to be.