

I. Introduction

Hi everyone. I'm Pastor Neil, welcoming you not only to Waterford but to the first Sunday of Lent. I want to tell you about a young doctor I heard of, who you might say "found herself and her truest calling" over the course of several years.

After a solid supportive Christian childhood, she left her hometown to go to college, took the advice of some close friends and faculty advisors who knew her well, and then enrolled in medical school even farther away from home.

On the opening weekend, with her new cohort of fellow students at med school, they had a special "white coat" ceremony recognizing their achievements so far and giving them their first white lab coat as members of the medical profession. This symbolized a new identity and sense of belonging for them. On the cusp of a new career, it was a high point in her life up to then.

Her studies and clinical rotations over the next 4 years were hard, but nothing like one of her residencies in a hospital emergency room. There, the stresses of insanely long working hours, relentless demands, life-and-death decisions and very little sleep all combined to make her think about quitting this residency, quitting medicine altogether, even quitting her faith.

By the grace of God and the encouragement of peers, she somehow made it through that time and eventually returned to practice medicine in her home state, in a community with a shortage of doctors. As she got involved locally, she gave time to a clinic providing free and low-cost services to people suffering the effects of poverty. She also became a vocal advocate for better housing and employment conditions in hard-hit neighborhoods of the city. She became respected by those neighbors and by social service agencies, but not very appreciated by the landlords and corporate officials who kept unjust conditions in place. Despite these challenges, she was feeling the fulfillment of living out her deepest callings in her relationships with God, within the supportive local church she found, and within the community she served.

The story of this young doctor may resemble that of someone you know, but it is simply made up. However, it's kind of a metaphor for what I see in our Scripture text today from Mark ch. 1, which is a little different from how I've usually approached this text.

II. (Examining text from angle of deepening relationships)

A. In reading through this passage, there are two "W words" that stood out to me: *Water* and *Wilderness*

1. These tangibly symbolize how this story is usually remembered
2. In Matthew Mark & Luke, the baptism & temptation stories are how the grown man, Jesus of Nazareth, first appears.

a) Baptism & temptation are how we first see the adult Jesus in 3 of the 4 Gospels. Water & Wilderness are very prominent in Matt., Mark & Luke

- b) The Gospel of John recalls Jesus' ministry with different details and in a different sequence

B. This pair of stories, "Water and Wilderness", are usually seen as how Jesus prepares for his active ministry of preaching and healing

1. Water & wilderness are the precursors to his main ministry ... you might consider them Jesus' launching points into ministry
2. But today I'm taking a different angle with this familiar passage:
 - a) We enter this season of Lent aiming to go deeper in multiple ways
 - b) Today we're focusing on God's call to deep relationships, so I invite us to look at this passage through THAT lens
3. As today's theme draws us to a call to deepening relationships, I can't help but notice a very obvious link for our congregation:
 - a) Perhaps you may recognize this? It's the logo that goes with our church's current directional statement
 - b) It shows expanding ripples of water from a large drop in the middle. The summary of our Directional Statement says,



We believe that God has created us to be in relationships with God, others in our faith community, our neighbors in our local settings, and in God's beloved world. During the next five years we will seek to actively and joyfully engage in ongoing faith formation in each of these realms.

- c) Friends, when this is our own church Directional Statement, what a fitting way for us to begin Lent, with a call to deep relationship!

C. How does Jesus deepen His own relationships?

III. As I studied the passage, I could see it happening in three movements w/in the story (In the interest of time, I'll skip over the journey Jesus makes and jump straight to the scene at the river.)

A. (1st Jesus deepens relationships by) Soaking in the affirmation of belovedness

1. One of most beautiful scenes in all of Scripture is Mark 1:10-11, where Jesus gets to soak in the supernatural message of his own belovedness
 - a) With the water still dripping off him, there's this amazing timeless moment for Jesus, with the heavens parting, the dovelike presence of the Holy Spirit coming down, and this sublime heavenly voice saying, "You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy!"
 - b) When it comes to deepening his relationship with God, this part is easy for Jesus

This is pure receiving ... There's no action required of Jesus other than eyes to see the opening skies, and ears to hear the divine voice

This is pure grace ... the expression of the deepest essence of love: THIS is why we speak these words directly to every person we baptize here at Waterford

c) It's not hard to see why in this way Jesus deepens his relationship with God who sent him:

This is about having the inner grounding against the resistance that his mission will foster ...

this is about being anchored when the seas get stormy

2. Now soaking in the affirmation of belovedness is not valuable only to Jesus. It's just as necessary a step for you and I to deepen our relationship with God!

a) In fact, it is probably the most crucial of the 3 movements I'm naming. This is the rock-bottom basis for everything else ... Why?

Because without this soaking, without this receiving of our belovedness by God, everything else we try to do in search of deeper relationships will inevitably disappoint us

b) I wish I could say that we could somehow soak up all the depth of God's great love, so much that it would stick with us the rest of our lives!

But sadly that's not the reality. This solid reassurance of belovedness within us tends to disappear. It melts away ...

(a) when we let our own selfish wants and our shortcomings cast doubts in our minds about our own worthiness

(b) When we screw up & hurt others, taking on shame in return

The reality is we ALL need to soak in our own belovedness!

c) That is why it's important this Lent to find ways to disrupt your daily grind or your destructive thought patterns. Maybe you need to:

Try one of the contemplative practices in the excellent Lenten Guide to Prayer resource we've recommended

Let go of a performance mentality just long enough to receive from God, with no strings attached, just how beloved you are

B. (Another way Jesus deepens relationships is by) Obedient entry into spiritual battle

1. For Jesus, there is no lengthy basking in the glow of that divine affirmation he received ... Jesus hits the preaching trail pretty quickly

a) This next way of deepening his relationship with God is not simply about stepping into action. It's about stepping into testing.

For Jesus it means entering into battle with the Evil One ...

And finding out how strong his spiritual reserves really are

- b) Long ago, and still today, there is no relationship of any great depth that has not encountered pain and trials and found a way through them
- c) As in Jesus' day, an easy and superficial life usually translates to superficial relationships. So we should not be surprised that Jesus experiences real temptations, as he wants to grow closer with God.

2. The same is true for us regarding testing and temptation, even though our whole society seems built around avoiding suffering

- a) For many of us in North America, this can lead to a lot of superficial relationships and not many deep personal relationships
- b) The obedient entry into spiritual battle is also part of our calling, for we who identify as followers of the One who said, *Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me.* (Matt. 10:38)

We deepen our own relationships with God when we summon the courage to move from just feeling beloved, to taking that feeling out into the world where we know it will be tested

Seeking depth in our relationship with God means that God wants every part of us to be offered up in love back to God ...

What Jesus modeled in his time of testing is later borne out in these pertinent words from James 1:2-4:

My brothers and sisters,^[b] whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy,³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance;⁴ and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing. (NRSV)

- c) None of us wishes for trials and temptation, but still they come, invited or not. So let us use the times of testing as opportunities for our faith to be more durable, and our relationship with God – deeper.

C. (the 3rd way Jesus deepens relationships is by) Returning back home with a bold new message & a call to action

1. After recovering from his time of testing, Jesus now goes back to his home country. What he's learned and what he's been given from God has to be shared!

- a) Jesus reaches out beyond himself & engages others, many others ...

His outreach goes well past just a few people in his hometown, where he's actually not very well-received

At this point, Jesus has a strong identity, anchored in belovedness and tested beyond superficiality ... out of this identity he turns his general love for God's people into specific concrete action

- b) And it's not just any message from God he brings – he preaches a bold, hope-infused call for people to change and join what God is doing!

Jesus loves people too much to just leave them in their sin ... he calls for repentance, & then points them in a positive direction!

In reaching out to others on God's behalf, he is not only growing

closer to God, but he's seeking to deepen relationships with his neighbors, so that "they may have life & have it abundantly"

Deepening relationships through outreach is not without its risks for Jesus – Most of the crowds of people love him, but those in places of power resent him, and they eventually plot against him!

2. Like Jesus our model and mentor, deeper relationships for us mean we cannot just stay isolated minding our own business with the Good News Jesus brought!

a) *"The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the Good News!"*

Familiar to most of us, these words are still relevant today

God desires for us as followers of Jesus to step beyond ourselves, to live our faith in ways that positively impact others

b) The physical isolation brought on by COVID does not have to mean no outreach is possible

At this point, all of the relationships in the concentric circles of our church directional statement come into play



(a) In your contacts with church friends and Sunday School members, are you inquiring how they're really doing ... & not just how they're getting along physically?

(b) In your emails, your texts, your social media posts, your phone calls outside of church, does any reflection or indication of your Christian faith appear at all, even in very subtle form?

(c) In the past 12 months we have witnessed gross injustices and alarming violations of law & basic human rights.

(i) Maybe it's time for the people of God to not be silent in the arenas where we have influence ...

(ii) Time to take some risks and tell the truth, when truth itself seems to be a non-essential commodity

(iii) Our relationships with God and others often do go deeper when we deliberately listen to those being hurt, and use our voices to demand change for those left out of the power systems of our day

IV. Conclusion

A. Throughout God's long & loving relationship with humans and the creation, **it has always been true that "deep calls to deep"**

1. Jesus of Nazareth was the truest and deepest expression of God's mission in the world, but not the only expression.

2. And as he launched his earthly ministry through water and

wilderness, Jesus sought deeper relationships by ...

- a) Soaking in the affirmation of belovedness
- b) Obedient entry into spiritual battle
- c) Going back with a bold message & call to action

3. I invite you to listen and look for ways God is calling you to deeper relationship

B. Ritual of response

Each week in Lent this year we will give opportunity for you at home to engage in a brief ritual of response. You were asked to gather together a bowl with 6 small stones for each member of your household. Please have that handy at this time, or find another simple small object.

On the screen you will find 2 simple questions for you to reflect on. You can simply hold your stone as you reflect on 1 or both of these questions. You may also want to write on the stone a word like "relationship" to remind you of today's Lenten call, or a short phrase that represents your response to the call. I invite you to keep that stone in a special place at home to remind you this week of how God is calling you.

Hear now these questions, as we take about a minute to reflect with our stone:

- God calls you "Beloved": Recall a time when you have soaked in that affirmation for yourself
- How is God calling you to deep relationship?