



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 9, 2025
DEUTERONOMY 26:1-11; PSALM 91: 1-2, 9-16; ROMANS 10:8b-13; LUKE 4:1-13

WHO ARE YOU REALLY?

Luke 4:1-13 *[After his baptism, Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time]*

As a college student educated at a small southern liberal arts school, a cohort of renowned southern writers figured prominently in our academics. William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, James Agee, and others. Several had ties to Sewanee, my alma mater, which made their writing all the more intriguing.

Last week I came across a long-forgotten short story by Eudora Welty, which she entitled "[A Visit of Charity](#)." Beyond painting scenes so vividly that you could almost step into them as the reader, Welty's great gift was situating her characters in strange settings where they must find their way without the usual landmarks of

familiarity. Their wilderness experiences were lent to readers as parables offering insight into our own journeys.

14-year-old Marian is a girl scout in search of a community-service act that will earn her a new badge. She goes to a nursing home and asks to see an old lady. The nurse delivers her to a room with two elderly women, and once there, Marian becomes so disoriented and tongue-tied that she struggles to engage the women. They do most of the talking, barraging her with questions and carrying on their own conversation between the two of them.

One of the women asks Marian: “Have you come to be our little girl for a while?” Marian is undone and doesn’t answer.

The other bleats a shrill unfiltered inquiry: “Who are you?” The problem is that Marian is so out of sorts she cannot even summon her name. After a few minutes she flees the room in horror, making her way down the hall with bulging linoleum that feels like she is walking on waves, past the nurse perusing a hunting magazine at the desk, and out into the sunshine where she waves the bus down in flight from this ordeal.

When we find ourselves in the unfamiliar territory of chaotic wilderness, it is easy to forget who we are. This is really the heart of the gospel story this morning: Jesus, out in the desert with the devil, risks losing himself. At their core, all of Satan’s questions are really asking: Who are you, Jesus, who are you really? But Jesus has just come out of the waters of baptism where he heard the voice from heaven proclaim his beloved nature as beautiful, good and true. It is enough to sustain Jesus on the famishing forty-day journey. Forty days being the biblical way of saying “a long time”—long enough to arrive at newfound wisdom about oneself.

This theme runs through all our scriptures this morning: Who are you really?

The ancient Israelites in Deuteronomy are instructed to tell the story of their salvation with enough courage and conviction that it gets down into their bones in a way they will remember who they really are, no matter how long they might wander in the desert, no matter how beleaguered they may become.

The psalmist invites us to sufficiently step into the scene of divine embrace to feel the embodied goodness that

surrounds us always, even when we lose our bearings, which we inevitably will because that is just a part of life.

Paul tells the church in Rome, and by extension us too, that we will lose our way every time if we do not ground ourselves in the story of Jesus Christ who becomes, for us, the Living and lifegiving Word by which everything makes sense; the Living and lifegiving Word which imbues our being with such grace that we cannot help but share his good news, not only with our lips, but in our lives. Words matter as we learn who we are and how to tell our story and let it guide us on the journey. This is how we find our way.

Which reminds me of another Southern writer, Wendell Berry, whose wisdom I did not stumble upon until years after I left college, but whose writings have a sort of timeless energy about them that I find uncannily applicable to our current crisis.

Berry wrote a heady essay forty years ago entitled *Standing by Words* in which he draws the connection between the fraught words used to spew disinformation into a public discourse of declining quality and the very real and tragic disintegration of our communities. We are at risk of losing a sense of who we are. I went

back and read his essay this week. It was sobering, to say the least, because it could have been written with our current plight precisely in mind.

For words to provide a pathway to truth and beauty and goodness and for those to be familiar attributes of our communities by which we find our way together, words must serve not only the one saying them, but also those who hear and receive them.

If we weaponize our words, Berry says, we degrade and do violence to the whole of humanity, including ourselves. We must be responsible in our wordsmithing—responsible not only to the convictions of our own hearts, but also with care and concern for the well-being of society. Just because someone else does not espouse that value doesn't give us license to degrade and do violence in return. Berry suggests, one would do well to make a promise to bind yourself to another's future. This is not a transactional endeavor, but rather one borne in unselfish hope for all humanity.

This is hard work, folks...the harder path...but I am convinced that we come to this church, not just for solace, but for strength, too. Strength to love in the face of enmity, as Martin Luther

King preached. Strength to stoke the fires of mercy when others are running roughshod over their victims, as Mariann Budde did six weeks ago. Strength to use our words for good, that humanity might just have a glimmer of hope to find our way through the wilderness of this season.

Who are we, really? This is the question for the Lenten journey.

Jesus has the words we need to find our way. Remember who you are. Speak your healing words into this broken world. Let the healing words light on your own heart, so you can remember

you are indeed beloved, beautiful, good and true. This is who you really are, Jesus tells us, time and again. It is enough to sustain you on the famishing forty-day journey. Forty days being the biblical way of saying “a long time”—long enough to arrive at newfound wisdom about oneself, and maybe salvage something of our common humanity along the way.



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