

Tough Room

Mark 1:9-15

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

¹² At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, ¹³ and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

¹⁴ After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ¹⁵ "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

There was significant period of my life when I thought that I was going to play the saxophone for a living. Sometimes, to be honest, I look back and think that that might have been an easier career path – you know, as a musician, when you see or experience trouble, tragedies: another marriage breaks up, someone falls into addiction, some one gets really sick, some terrible things happens to a beloved friend, and on and on, instead of jumping in and experiencing that pain along with the suffering ones... I could have just picked up my horn and played the blues. Easier.

On the other hand, I had enough of a taste of ‘the life’ to know that being a road musician really wasn’t my calling. There is something energizing about playing in a venue where the people are really with you – our college jazz band would play a ‘homecoming concert’ after our Spring Tours, and it was always jam packed, wall to wall people, who were loud and supportive. They got into the solos, and it brought out the best in us. I can still remember the energy.

But I can also remember the smell of the bus after 10 days on the road. And I can remember some places that I played while still in high school, where there were fights in the men’s room, and where the audience was so ‘appreciative’ that they threw pennies at the band (hint: they weren’t tips) I remember places where I was the only sober person in the room. There was nothing fun about any of that. I have a lot of respect for the sheer tenacity of performers who have the stamina and self-confidence to hang in there and build a career in these areas.

In the music business – probably in *any* vocation in which performing before ‘strangers’ is a requirement – there is a phrase that you sometimes hear that both sums up why you were not received well on a given night, or warns others what to expect: and having been there I can

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picture this quite well. We'd come off stage sometimes, shaking our heads and say, "Tough room!" It's a tough room out there... get ready!

Now, I know that in some ways I traded my horn for the pulpit. And one of the reasons why HY and I feel so blessed to be part of this faith community is because this is anything *but* a tough room. You are gracious and supportive, and your *expectation* of meeting God when you come to worship here is a huge factor in determining whether or not you actually *do*. It takes considerable pressure off of us.

I heard one of our United Methodist Bishops, Will Willimon, preaching at a Pastor's conference two weeks ago, talking about some of the churches he has served. His arrived at his first church assignment, (while still in seminary in Georgia) and discovered that the front door had a big padlock on it. He was told that it had been put there by the local sheriff about three weeks earlier, after an Ad Council meeting got out of hand. People were ripping out pews that had been given in memory of their daddy, and carting out candlesticks that had been giving in memory of their grandma. So someone called the sheriff, who padlocked the door... 'until the next pastor came along to sort it all out'. Tough room.

He said his 'year' there felt like forever, and included such memorable events as a bride slapping her future father-in-law *during* the wedding ceremony... and a fistfight in the church parking lot after the All Saints service. Willimon reported, "It was said of the Prophet Samuel that 'his words never fell to the ground'. He obviously never preached to some of the United Methodists that I did." Tough room.

At a meeting of the Elders of the GNJAC last Tuesday in Hazlet, I ran into an old friend during a break. He's been at his church for 16 years, and he has given his heart and soul to this church. They are – like many churches today (most)- dealing with the financial ripples of a bad economy; things are tough, but people are placing blame there and pointing fingers at each other over some decisions that were made as a church over the past few years. Anyway, I saw this guy on a break, and I said, "Hey, how's it going?" And he said, "I walked out of an Ad Council meeting last night. First time I've ever done that."

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I said, ‘What was that about?’ Well, his lay leader went off on him, again, in front of the whole council, calling him ‘Stupid’ among other things. He was really hurting. Tough Room.

Now, I’ve had my ups and downs in ministry, but never anything quite like that. (I did have a woman die at the end of one of my sermons... she actually put her head back to laugh at something and that was it) but I figured that was only fair, because I died in the pulpit enough times myself. There are tough rooms in ministry, for sure.

But you know what? This is not limited to jazz rooms, comedy clubs, concert halls or churches... the biggest stage of all is probably the toughest room as well: it’s the world we live in...

As followers of Jesus Christ we are all given a role to play. We are witnesses to the Good News of Jesus Christ. We are the bearers of a treasure that the world is going to resist – sometimes *ferociously* resist. But we are called to do things like ‘persevere’, to ‘turn the other cheek’, to ‘love our enemies’, to find joy even in the midst of darkness.

There are a lot of preachers and teachers in the Christian church who seem to assume that the sole purpose of Christ’s coming was to make life easier for his disciples. They talk about ‘rewards and blessings’ as if they were all material things, as if God is some kind of cosmic genie who grants wishes to his followers if they will just say, or do, or ‘believe’ the right things in the right way.

There have been many people whose faith has been shipwrecked because they have been taught that following Christ will make everything in your life better. Your bank account will grow, your relationships will prosper, your health will be perfect, your success in business assured... and then, inevitably comes that brick wall of reality: we’re not in heaven yet. (We just spent eight weeks talking about that. We see *hints* of heaven all around, but the real thing is yet to come.)

Now, I’ve often wondered how people fail to see this, if they are actually paying attention to what the Bible teaches us. I mean, you don’t need a degree in Theology to make a connection between the way the world received Jesus and the way it is going to receive his followers. Jesus

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came loving, giving, sacrificing, healing, teaching truth – always in love – he was gracious, kind, gentle, and faithful... and they killed him.

And just in case we might miss it he said plainly: “If the world hates *you*, keep in mind that it hated me first.¹” Last week I mentioned how unusual it is to find a story or teaching about Jesus in three of four Gospels. This one is found in all four: “Everyone will hate you because of me.” Tough room.

Nevertheless... he also says that we are to, “*Love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.*” Keep in character...don’t give up. We have a job to do. And it’s really important that we do it.

In this morning’s Scripture reading we see this pattern starting right from the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. Jesus goes to John who is baptizing out in the Jordan River wilderness area. He goes to be baptized.

¹⁰ *Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.* ¹¹ *And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”*

So, here’s a great moment for Jesus. In receiving the baptism of John he identifies with the plight of the people that he came to serve. He is announcing to the world – to history – ‘I am with you!’ “I have come *for you!*” And in this wonderful moment, God the Father affirms him, through the Spirit; affirms his action, his timing, his intentions, everything: “*You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.*”

Great! We’re off and running, right? God is very happy with Jesus. The very next thing we read:

¹² *At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness,* ¹³ *and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan.*

¹ John 15: 18, see also Matthew 10:22, Mark 13:13, Luke 21: 17

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So right after this height of ministry affirmation, Jesus spends 40 days, alone, in this barren, dry, nearly lifeless wilderness where he meets Satan face to face, who lays on him a series of attacks meant to strike at his most vulnerable points. And he is *sent* there. The NLV translates this “the Spirit *compelled* Jesus”... the Message: “The same Spirit *pushed* Jesus into the wilderness...”

If you ever get an opportunity to read the chapter on the Temptation in Philip Yancey’s The Jesus I Never Knew it gives a great perspective on just how piercing those temptations were. And how critical to Jesus’ future – and ours – that he would come out triumphant over them. This was a difficult time for Jesus.

But Jesus does resist- he wins, and Satan leaves him... and what is the *next* key marker for his ministry? Read on...

¹⁴ *After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.* ¹⁵

So, John’s role as the one who was to prepare the way of the Lord (a work that he performed faithfully) *also* ends badly, from a human perspective. He is put in prison, and later he is beheaded as a request (based on sheer personal vengeance) by King Herod’s wife. King Herod actually liked John, Mark reports, yet he ordered John’s execution to please his wife and daughter. Tough room!

Into this world comes Jesus, with his announcement:

“The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Friends, the room is still very tough today, but the news is still good. And we are the proclaimers. We, too, are going to experience the ups and downs of life in this world which is full of signs of heaven, but is not our ultimate goal. We are going to get hit – and hit hard – by disappointments, by grief, by pain, trials and challenges. We are going to aim high, and at times we are going to miss the mark badly. But it is very important that we remain in our role as witnesses to the light in the midst of darkness.

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We're going to find that at times our message is not going to be well received. We're going to have to turn the other cheek. We may be the only one in our circle of relationships who is even *trying* to practice forgiveness and grace, and that's hard to do.

There are an increasing number of people right now in this congregation who are experiencing moderate to severe economic stress. People have lost jobs due to the recession. People have lost income, and retirement savings...

How do we remain faithful in times like these? How do we demonstrate faith when the props are being kicked out from under us? For many, history is repeating itself from the days of the Hebrew prophet Habakkuk. Habakkuk lived through a time when his nation was being invaded, and one result of this invasion was that the economy was devastated.

But Habakkuk determined that he would remain faithful – he was determined that his priority was going to be to follow God, no matter what. In fact, he *decided* that he was going to remain *joyful* even in his pain, even in this time of testing, even through the political uncertainty that surrounded him, because he was convinced that things like joy and strength did not come from the world, they came from God. And so Habakkuk writes in chapter 3:

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights.

In the 'tough room' of the world, Habakkuk pressed on. Because he was convinced that the only one he was 'performing for' was God. As Jesus later would, Habakkuk chose to live out his reality in a world where it didn't always seem to fit. But he persevered, because he could see the 'bigger picture'.

Author Carol Kent, in her book [A New Kind of Normal](#) writes about making choices like these. The contents page is enlightening:

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*When despair tries to take me under...I choose life.
When I wonder what God could possibly be thinking...I choose trust.
When I desperately want relief from unrelenting reality...I choose perseverance.
When I feel oppressed by my disappointment and sorrow...I choose gratitude.
When I want to keep my feelings to myself...I choose vulnerability.
When nothing goes according to my plan...I choose relinquishment.
When I want to point the finger...I choose forgiveness.
When I want to give up...I choose purposeful action.²*

We're playing in a tough room. In our role as witnesses to the light we're going to be making daily tough choices.

What are you choosing?

² Carol Kent, [A New Kind of Normal](#) (Thomas Nelson, 2007), Table of Contents