

Offering Hope Amidst Dislocation

SCRIPTURE:

Mark 1:4-11—Listen for the word of God:

Mark 1:4-11 (NRSV) ^[4] John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ^[5] And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ^[6] Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ^[7] He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ^[8] I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." ^[9] In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ^[10] And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ^[11] And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Acts 19:1-7; Listen for the word of God:

Acts 19:1-7 (NRSV) ^[1] While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. ^[2] He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." ^[3] Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism." ^[4] Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." ^[5] On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ^[6] When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied—^[7] altogether there were about twelve of them.

I want to begin with something obvious. When Jesus is baptized, something new is revealed to those gathered at the Jordan River – Jesus is revealed to be God's beloved son.

But something else is revealed as well. Mark (and later both Matthew and Luke) tell us that the Holy Spirit descends like a dove from heaven, and rests upon Jesus. This revelation of the Spirit would become a cornerstone centuries later when Christians developed a Trinitarian understanding of God. But on the banks of the river Jordan, the descent of the Holy Spirit is something new. And while news of Jesus spread like wild fire, it seems like news of the Holy Spirit moved a lot more slowly. For example, we hear in this wonderful story from the Book of Acts that more than a decade after Jesus' baptism and years after his death, Paul is told by some disciples in Ephesus. "we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit!"

With that encounter in mind, let's turn to the 9th Chapter of Genesis—the passage your pastor alluded to in his Newsletter comments on covenant. Speaking to Noah, God says, ^[9] "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ^[10] and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. ^[11] I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." ^[12] God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ^[13] I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

Now, as your pastor Mark points out, God's declaration is rather clear: our covenant with God is an everlasting covenant. Not only does God covenant with us, but God covenants with all future generations and with all things alive today and into the future.

This covenant is such GOOD NEWS. But as you may recall, our response to this covenant – only two chapters later – sees humanity building a tower on the plains of Babel that would reach into the heavens so that we “could make a name for ourselves.” It's as if the builders of the tower of Babel were saying to God, “We didn't even know that there was a covenant with you and all living creatures for all future generations.” We thought we were the only ones who counted.

Building the tower of Babel is what we do when we think we're “on our own.” Later, our patient God begins again with Abraham, realizing that if the covenant is to work, it needs to go both ways... something must be required of humanity, and humanity must at least endeavor to be faithful. So beginning with Abraham, God chooses—and begins to shape—a people of whom much would be required.

How far we are today from that recognition! How distant we are from living into the everlasting covenant God made with Noah and his sons and all things alive now and forever. How resistant we are to any suggestion that something would be required of us as beneficiaries of the great gift of God's creation.

But unlike the disciples in Ephesus who had not even heard that there was a Holy Spirit, we know full well the destruction that only 7 generations of humans have wrought upon God's creation. Over the past 200 years, humans have burned about half of all the known carbon reserves that nature took 150 million years to create. As a result, over the past 100 years we have raised the surface temperature of the earth 9/10 of a degree Celsius. And by the end of the century, the temperature rise in America is likely to be 5 degrees Celsius¹. As Naomi Kline puts it, “Our economic model is at war with life on earth.”²

But let's focus for a moment on “the tower of Babel” we've already built. We've “made a name for ourselves” for all eternity by:

- Melting 40% of the summer sea ice in the Arctic;
- Making the ocean 30% more acidic;
- Making the atmosphere over 5% wetter;³
- Causing most of Miami and much of Boston to be under water before our grandchildren die;⁴
- Making 2014 almost certainly the warmest year on record.⁵
- Assuring that the pace of global warming is 10 times faster than any time over the last 65 million years.⁶
- And increasing the rate of species extinction by a thousand fold.⁷

I mean it when I say that we are all aware of this destruction. The science is settled. What is ongoing is the struggle that will forever define our generation:

- Will our generation be driven by greed, lust for power, selfishness and immediate short-term

benefits

- or will we recognize that it falls to our generation to reorient what we prize?

In keeping with the Covenant God made with Noah, I believe communities of faith have the greatest potential to succeed at reorienting our generation's values by instilling :

- resilience in place of growth;
- collaboration in place of consumption;⁸
- wisdom in place of material progress;
- vision in place of convenience;
- accountability in place of disregard; and
- balance in place of addiction.

This may sound like a very tall order. But all over the world, people driven by these values are providing solutions. Investment in renewable energy is surging. The cost of solar power has dropped 99% since 1977⁹. Last year (2014) Denmark got over 39% of its overall electricity from wind power¹⁰ – and Germany, England and Scotland are not far behind.

Here in the United States, the struggle that will forever define our generation is being played out in a number of ways:

- on the shores of Cape Cod;
- at our gas pumps;
- in kitchen water faucets where you can ignite the water;
- in North Dakota enjoying full employment;
- in the growing, drought stricken cities of Phoenix and Las Vegas;
- and in the Gulf of Mexico where a dead zone persists.

At the moment however, the grand stage of this struggle is occupied by the raging debate over the Keystone XL pipeline.

Here's the key point: The only reason virtually everyone in America has heard of the KXL pipeline—the only reason it became the first and foremost litmus test of congressional ideology—is that in August 2011 a small and diverse group of climate activists decided that this will be our symbolic struggle. Unlike legislative fights on policy, the President is the decider when it comes to a pipeline that crosses our international border. If we could create a campaign that resulted in Obama saying “No” – then humanity would have a toe-hold. People all over the world could point to a decision—made against all the odds—and celebrate: humanity does not have to keep conducting business as usual. We can do better. We can join hands – north and south – developed and developing – communist, socialist and capitalist – and we can include animals, forests, and unborn generations – as we make new decisions.

Well, even though everyone thought the KXL pipeline was a done deal,¹¹ in August 2011 1,253 of us decided to commit civil disobedience at the White House, and 63 of us spent 3 days and nights in jail. Our hope was to get the attention of the President... and of the nation – and did we ever succeed!

Proponents of the pipeline have unlimited funds to spend on:

- lobbying,
- falsely promoting the pipeline as a jobs creator,
- falsely suggesting that extracting and processing this sludge will bring America energy independence, and
- discrediting people like me¹².

But tens of thousands of people joined us in countless protests all over the country. And on Ash Wednesday in 2013 I was arrested again – this time with Robert F. Kennedy, Jr and his son, civil rights leader Julian Bond, actress Daryl Hannah, NASA climatologist James Hansen, Bill McKibben, and 40 others when we cuffed ourselves to the White House fence.

- Four days later 50,000 people marched past the White House;
- and a year and a half later 400,000 people marched in New York.

What has this movement accomplished? At a minimum, our efforts have successfully delayed the completion of the pipeline by more than 1,200 days, and thus has kept more than a billion barrels¹³ of Canadian Tar Sands from being processed and released into the atmosphere.

It also scared investors enough that they curtailed plans for three huge new tar-sands mines, taking off the table \$17 billion dollars in capital¹⁴ and millions of tons of potential emissions.

And this movement has inspired tens of thousands of people to fight every other pipeline, and coal port, and frack field, and coal mine. The Keystone actions helped spur a full-on fossil-fuel resistance that now mounts a powerful challenge to the entire fossil-fuel industry at every single turn.¹⁵

In this the struggle that will forever define our generation I believe we find ourselves in a moment for which the church was born. We all know from past examples how major culture-change unfolds:

- the abolition of slavery,
- the end of child labor,
- the winning of the civil rights act,
- the reconciliation of post-Apartheid South Africa,
- and the advancement of marriage equality and other GLBT concerns....

All of these cultural transformations were the result of religious leadership.

I believe that now is the time for religious leaders and people of faith to articulate a new moral trajectory. In responding to God's call, how will you – how will this congregation – advocate for and manifest:

- resilience in place of growth;
- collaboration in place of consumption¹⁶;
- wisdom in place of progress;
- vision in place of convenience;
- accountability in place of disregard; and

- balance in place of addiction.

Without a vision, the people perish. (Proverbs 29:18 KJV) The world needs leadership – faithful and faith-filled leadership. God is calling us to be the change we long to see. Amen.

1. see Joe Romm’s report on the IPCC September 2013 Report:
<http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2013/09/27/2691471/ipcc-report-warming-extreme-weather/> and you can download the report itself here: <http://www.climatechange2013.org/>
2. Naomi Kline, *This Changes Everything*. New York, Simon and Schuster, 2014.
3. These three statistics from McKibben, *Sojourners Magazine*, August 2012.
4. <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2014/05/23/2967411/coastal-property-values-crash-climate-science-deniers/> Sea level will rise more than half-again as much as scientists predicted it would in 2007 From the IPCC September 2013 Report: <http://www.climatechange2013.org/>
5. <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2014/12/03/3598698/2014-hottest-year-on-record/>
6. From the IPCC September 2013 Report: <http://www.climatechange2013.org/>
7. The May 2014 issue of Science magazine
<http://www.sciencemag.org/content/344/6187/1246752.abstract?sid=a4435a49-708d-44b5-9101-e5c5abf91eb0>
8. See Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers *What’s Mine Is Yours: How Collaborative Consumption is Changing the Way We Live*. The book documents the increasing popularity of the collaborative consumption model and the ways its growth will fundamentally change the workings of our economy. See also this 16 minute lecture on collaborative consumption: http://www.ted.com/talks/rachel_botsman_the_case_for_collaborative_consumption.html
9. <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2013/10/06/2717791/cost-pv-cells-solar-power-grid-parity/>
10. <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2015/01/07/3608898/denmark-sets-world-record-for-wind-power/>
11. from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/09/us/senate-panel-approves-keystone-pipeline-bill.html>
In 2009, the Obama administration approved a 986-mile pipeline to bring 400,000 barrels of oil sands petroleum a day from western Canada to the United States. Almost no one paid attention. Construction on the pipeline, called the Alberta Clipper, was quietly completed last year.
In that same period, the administration considered construction of a similar project, the Keystone XL. So far only in the blueprint stage, this pipeline has become an explosive political issue that Republicans are seizing as their first challenge to President Obama in the new Congress.
12. See WAPO blog, “Support for Keystone XL pipeline is almost universal” June 26, 2014:
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2014/06/26/support-for-keystone-xl-pipeline-is-almost-universal/>
13. If built and fully operational, the Keystone XL pipeline plans to transport 830,000 barrels of Canadian Tar Sands a day. Over 1,200 days have passed since the KXL pipeline was first delayed in October 2011. Had civil disobedience and other forms of protest not drawn large scale public attention to the extreme stakes associated with building the KXL pipeline, a billion barrels of tar sands sludge would have been processed.
14. <http://priceofoil.org/2014/10/29/material-risks-how-public-accountability-is-slowing-tar-sands-development/>

15. see also David Roberts column in Grist on symbolic importance of KXL:
<http://grist.org/climate-energy/the-point-of-the-keystone-fight/>

16. See Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers *What's Mine Is Yours: How Collaborative Consumption is Changing the Way We Live*. The book documents the increasing popularity of the collaborative consumption model and the ways its growth will fundamentally change the workings of our economy. See also this 16 minute lecture on collaborative consumption: http://www.ted.com/talks/rachel_botsman_the_case_for_collaborative_consumption.html