

“Defining moments”
Finding our way in a noisy world

January 11, 2009

Text: Job 42:1-6, Mark 1:4-11

I.

If we think about our lives, for each of us—to whatever extent—there are any number of KEY *defining moments* that hold our lives together. I mean *defining moments* of meaning and truth. Moments when things come together for us.

I always wonder what it was like when a Mozart or a Beethoven, or a Harry Conant, Jr., even ... when they first heard the sounds of music unfolding in their mind and spirit. What was it like ... a *defining moment* when they knew that the world of music held something special for them??

What made Emily Dickenson or Robert Frost, both homegrown Americans, know that the gift of the poet danced in their souls?

What was it like when Tiger Woods first began to swing a golf club; or when Roger Federer first picked up a tennis racquet and learned to move around the tennis court??

What were the *defining moments* when their connection to golf and tennis, respectively, overflowed with possible greatness ... and they said to themselves, *Hey, this is who I am!*

What *were* or *are* the *defining moments* for each of us—moments when we said, *Yes, this is what I need to do with my life.* A teacher ... a nurse ... an engineer or graphic designer ... a business person ... whatever it is. What were the *defining moments* on our vocational journey?

II.

Think about your life! Perhaps it was through a new relationship (a teacher, coach or mentor) ... or around a new idea or a new sense of identity ... **a defining moment!**

When we suddenly had a larger sense of *who* we are and *what* we can become ...

- a moment, perhaps, when the *holy* comes close and truth somehow rises up in our spirit.
- A moment that we don't fully understand, perhaps; we just know that it's important and that we need to hang in there, and stay with it, and let the moment take us where it will.

To whatever extent, this must have been **John the Baptist's** experience in the wilderness in Mark 1. Let's check it out!

III.

Right away, Mark cuts to the chase of gospel revelation. The preamble is brief and to the point: ***The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.***

Then, without delay, the prophet Isaiah sets the context. Reflecting on this, I can't imagine that *John the Baptist* himself was able to grasp the full meaning of what this was all about:

***See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD,
make his paths straight.***

Then, right away, John the Baptist appears in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin.

And soon, from all over, people were coming. Imagine how all of this must have struck John. Talk about a *defining moment*!

To begin with, the wilderness is itself a complex place, a place of mystery and uncertainty. The Israelites struggled for forty years in the wilderness. After Jesus' Baptism, immediately he goes into the wilderness for forty days of temptation and personal introspection and sorting out.

At the same time, the wilderness is important because we all need a time of sorting out—of figuring out who we are and where the spirit leads us. The wilderness is a time of maturation and growth. Without it, we're more uncertain—less defined and less confident.

Out of the wilderness, new beginnings are possible—new beginnings that are now better shaped and refined.

Certainly for John, baptizing people in the river Jordan wilderness, was a *defining moment* of his life. From all throughout Judea and Jerusalem, people came out—eager for a fresh word from the Lord, for a new reassurance of forgiveness and love.

IV.

Defining moments tell us who we are ... as they shock us to new realities, new awareness and new possibilities for tomorrow. The KEY for us is to be awake to these moments—moments that deepen our sense of God's calling in our lives; moments that connect us to

God and God's purposes; and moments that nudge us towards the fullest expression of who we are and what it means to be most fully alive.

These moments come and go and we have to make the most of them, as we are able.

Defining moments in the Bible are clearly about exalting LIFE:

- the giving of life,
- the deepening and sharing of life,
- and the preserving and saving of life.

What God delights in is *all of creation fully alive*.

If we go way back to **Genesis 1**, the first words of the Bible—*In the beginning ... a defining moment ... when God created the heavens and the earth ...and the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep.*

*And then God said, **Let there be light!** And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. And God called the light day, and the darkness night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.*

Wow! What a defining moment!

A moment when a new insight or awareness breaks through ... leaving us with an **ah-ha moment**. Do you know about **ah-ha** moments? Moments when something in us says, YES, or, *ah-ha! That's it. That's what it means. Or, Ah-ha! Yes! That's what I need to say or do.*

- Moments, for example, in political or sermonic discourse ... as with **Lincoln** in his vision to preserve the Union around the language, *The last best hope of earth* (the title of a book I've been reading on Lincoln). The Emancipation Proclamation and *saving the union* were linked together in Lincoln's vision.

It didn't happen all at once for Lincoln, but over time ... in a *defining moment* of insight and discernment.

- And later, with Martin Luther King, Jr. and his *I Have a Dream Speech*.

...that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all people are created equal.

I have a dream, King said. ... *that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places shall be made plain, the crooked place straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed ...and all flesh shall see it together.*

That day—in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C.—was a *defining moment* for our nation.

V.

Defining moments shape our lives. They feed our spirits. They give us impulse and energy to rise out of our doldrums ... out of the times of darkness and discouragement that at times fill our days.

But we have to be awake. We have to pay attention. And we have to be discerning.

In thinking about our first reading this morning from the book of Job, we hear all the time about *the suffering of Job* and about *the woes of Job*. Of course—from the beginning—the whole book is a story; it's metaphor. But at the same time, it's true.

Job's ultimate problem is that Job was too full of himself—too full of his own suffering and misery to the point where he couldn't experience the fullness of God. Finally, after one frustration and impasse after another; after endless debate and a seeming eternity of arguments and responses centering around him and his problems, Job comes to his *defining moment*: that it's not about him, it's about God.

A painful discovery, to be sure ...

Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, things I did not know.

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes have seen you ... and I get it, finally ... and, therefore, I humble myself in dust and ashes.

VI.

In the end, Job's story and his agonizing struggle is a good news story. He ends up with more blessings and abundance than ever.

The gospel, too, of course, vibrates with good news. From the *defining moments* of Baptism and grace in the waters of the river Jordan, Jesus, too, is baptized by John ... and as he emerges from the water, the heavens are torn apart and the Spirit descends on him like a dove. And a voice from heaven,

You are my Son, the BELOVED; with you I am well pleased.

These words of the Divine for Jesus are far reaching. They cannot be reduced or restricted. They are, at the same time, eternal and universal. And they're for us too, a *defining moment*.

As Jesus is God's beloved, we, too, are loved ... unconditionally. That's the fullest meaning of the Incarnation. Don't let the world or anybody else tell you otherwise. You are loved. We are all loved. All the peoples of the earth are loved. And our mission and purpose is to find ways of loving one another.

And God lives on, longing for the day ...

This is God's undying dream. It is God's vision that will not rest until it is realized.

- In **Gaza** with Israel and Palestine ...
- in the treacherous mountainous borders between Afghanistan and Pakistan ...
- in tribal conflict around Africa ...
- and in the heart beat of every conflict around the planet ...

VII.

Friends, we live in a noisy and uncertain world. Much of the noise is about money and power; and about control and fear and looking out for number one.

And to all of this, the Almighty has a word, ***ripping open the heavens with a declaration of love and promise:***

You are my Son, my children, my beloved of the earth. With you I am well pleased.

If you gain nothing else in attending our church and being a part of our fellowship, know that, at the end of the day ...

- with all you have tearing at your life,
- with whatever worries might be burdening your spirit,
- God's word for you—as the heavens open up and shout out their truth—is a word of love.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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