

No Turning Back

Living the surrendered life

Lesson 1 (Mark 1:9-11)

When Helen and I had our daughter Jessika, we never realized what we were in for. Oh we were young and energetic and nothing could hold us down, but I promise you we didn't know what we were in for. The Forkner's daughter (Lauren- several months pregnant) and her husband, Edd have no idea what they're in for. They were with us last week. The Fortners had their other son and daughter-in-law along with their two children. Edd said it was good to be together with the family, especially the other brother and his two kids. He said, maybe we can take some lessons (parenting). I smiled and said yep. But inside, I thought, he has no idea!

Going back in time and seeing Jessika behind the glass, screaming for dear life, I remembered how predictable life can be, but then I began to realize how unpredictable and exhausting life would become. Right from the very beginning Jessika made it pretty clear that life for her mother and father were going to change.

I had the opportunity to see Jessika come into the world. It is an image that I'll never forget! When the time came for her to make her appearance, she kicked and pushed her way with such fury Helen had to spend a couple of extra days in the hospital just to heal properly. But vividly I remember this helpless little girl entering the world screaming bloody murder with an attitude that the world was waiting for her to come and take control!

All I can say is, from that moment, our lives haven't been the same. This seemingly helpless fragile little child became the power-house in our lives. All of a sudden all of our habits and routines--our very lives changed to meet her desires and her schedule.

We did our best to domesticate her, but to no avail. She for the most part ate when and what she wanted and slept when she wanted. All I know is that a "change-your-ways kind of force had gotten loose and was running crazy in our lives.

And so I was thinking the other day, this is what Jesus' baptism is like. At the time of Jesus baptism, God breaks free into the world in sort of the same way Jessika broke free into our world. God breaking into our world is no quiet, gentle kind of entry. No, this is a wild, untamed God that comes loose when Jesus comes up out of the Jordon. As one author put it: God breaks "in on Israel the way a tiger in a zoo would, if he could, crash open his cage door just as you were walking complacently by it."

Mark's description of God's entry was that clouds were tearing and heavens were ripping, and divine voices were booming and the Spirit was descending. What an earth-shattering thing to experience. This God breaks forth from the safe side of heaven to this human side we're living on over here. Mark leaves us with this idea that the sky is this buffer. You know what a buffer zone is, right? It's a barrier that a great power uses to separate itself from others. It's sort of like the cage we use for tigers locked away in a zoo. This buffer zone allows us to see the tigers, without fear. The bars become the buffer zone between the tiger and us. In a similar way that's what the heavens do for us. God made it clear to his people in the time of Moses that no one could look upon Him and live. God is too holy, too bright, too powerful! God has protected us from blindness and ultimate destruction by staying on the other side of the barrier.

We see this very thing in the temple in **Ex. 26:31-33** Make a curtain of blue, purple and scarlet yarn and finely twisted linen, with cherubim worked into it by a skilled craftsman. 32 Hang it with gold hooks on four posts of acacia wood overlaid with gold and standing on four silver bases. 33 Hang the curtain from the clasps and place the ark of the Testimony behind the curtain. The curtain will separate the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place.

Woe to the person who would walk into the dangerous presence of God behind this great curtain. Only the high priest could go behind this buffer zone, and that, only once a year (Day of Atonement). The high priest went behind this curtain with the sins of all the people... how scary is that?

The world needed a buffer zone. The temple needed a buffer zone. Without a buffer zone our contact with God becomes too direct... and therefore far too dangerous for us to survive. God's power is too strong, too wild!

I know what we want with God. We want to have this more romantic kind of relationship with God. Songs like "I just want to be where you are," and "just a closer walk with thee." We want to be closer to God! We want to walk in the garden alone with God! We just want to be where God is!

Maybe that's why so many of us love the story of what happened to the curtain in the temple. You remember... **Mark 15: 37-38** "With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom."

When Jesus dies, the temple curtain rips. We don't really like the fact that Jesus dies, but we do like the fact that if we had to lose our Lord we can have comfort in knowing that with his death the Temple curtain was torn from top to bottom!

- We know what Jesus was doing ... God would no longer be separated from his people.
- Because of what Jesus did, God was saying that you no longer have put up a curtain; you no longer have to seek me out only one day a year through the high priest.
- God was saying "you can seek me out yourselves, whenever you want.
- God has removed the buffer!

We like to see it this way. We like to see it this way because it's nice and it's a safe way to look at it. That's how we want it--nice and safe... "Tamey romantic. Spiritually sedate."

The story of Jesus' baptism though is the story of what it looks like to have God on the loose.

I know... this God on the loose looks strange to us. The people are looking for an Arnold Swarzenegger as their Messiah! These people are looking for political freedom from the evil Romans and the reestablishment of an independent Israel. But Mark tells us that the Spirit of God has just ripped open that buffer zone between God and us who live here. The Spirit has abruptly made his way on to our side of creation and moves into Jesus. Look at the picture--Jesus has the wild Spirit of God running inside of him. It's like "Jesus has a tiger in his tank!"

We know about tigers... don't get too close! But do you know what happens when you get too close to God? Do you know happens when you get touched by the Spirit of God? I can tell you this-- you don't just sit there and enjoy the ride; you don't just lie down and take a nap; you don't even boast about the great thing that has just happened to you. Instead "you go immediately to wild work."

Mark shows us that when the Spirit comes into Jesus, the Spirit immediately drives him into the wilderness. It was no accident that Jesus engages Satan in hand-to-hand spiritual combat.

It's pretty tough to see isn't it (I mean Jesus and Satan going at it)? Ironically though, the wilderness for Jesus proves to be the least of his problems. Wait until Jesus gets into the civilized towns with all those church-goers. It appears that when Jesus catches up to these religious people that he gets into a lot of trouble. The wilderness looks more like a play-land in comparison to his hometown, the Synagogue, the Temple and the religious leaders.

I mean if you want to know what happens when God gets on the loose and gets into you, take a look at what happened to Jesus. When God gets into you, you get into trouble. You get into trouble because God will run you "into a world hell-bent on religiously remaining its same, tame, shameful self."

I was speaking with a young lady the other day. She is what most of us would call a backslider. She hasn't been to church in years. Although we spoke for about 20 minutes, she began the conversation by giving me an unsolicited response to why she's not going to church. She said, "Scot, I just can't go to that church. You don't understand-- they're too judgmental."

I don't think you'll ever know what I'm talking about until you let God get in you like a tiger. Wait until God leads you to places and circumstances that create more stress among fellow believers! Then what?

Here's what religion does:

Religion's focus is on keeping one unstained. It's designed to keep one on the right side of the barrier.

- Don't associate with those gamblers and prostitutes! Instead you need to be over here where there are nice people who go to church every Sunday and give their money to church and to each other.
- Don't associate with those people over there who are living the wrong way sexually, where there are people suffering and dying from sexual diseases. Instead you need to be on this side of the barrier where people are spiritually clean and morally straight.
- Don't associate with those people who cheat and steal. Instead you need to be on this side of the barrier where everybody acts nice.

Look at what Mark says:

- Jesus is the one who touches and holds lepers!
- Jesus is the one who parties with those cheating tax collectors and stealing sinners!
- Jesus is the one who lets the woman that the church fathers thought was a prostitute stroke and anoint him at a dinner party in a lepers house.

This is the kind of stuff that happens when God breaks loose. Maybe we should admit it. We don't really want a wild God on the loose. We don't want a wild God on the loose in our world. We certainly don't want him loose in our church were we want everything a certain way. What we really want is a domesticated God.

It's okay for him to be holy as long as he is humble. We're okay with the power God has and the reign he represents, but we want that power domesticated--we want it working for us. We want it on a lease. Our lease!

But the story of Jesus' baptism suggests to us that this is not how God works. It looks like when God gets a hold of us, God drives us to where he wants to go, to what God wants us to do and not where we want to go and what we'd rather do.

- God got into John the Baptist and drove him! John went out mouthing off at kings, soldiers and high priests.
- God got into Jesus' disciples and drove them. These disciples went around proclaiming that the reign of God was near. They looked for people possessed with demons, touching and healing people with impure diseases. They taught people that many didn't want to get near to.
- God got into Jesus and drove him. Jesus went out to clean the Temple, a place that was supposed to be the pinnacle of religious cleanliness and spiritual purity.

When God gets on the loose inside of you, you start to do things that turn your world upside down and inside out!

Here's the good news! It's good news whenever boundaries are broken down, and buffers ripped apart, and people are set free to reach out to others to set them free as well. The good news we see in this story is that the God who runs loose in Jesus' life wants to run loose in your life. When we allow God to run loose in our lives, we are letting a Tiger run in us. This is the Tiger that protects you from the destructiveness of the world and gives you the power to stop this world from being so destructive to one another. The good news is that God is loose in your life and in our church. Do everything you can to run after God, so that you can run loose knowing that the transforming power of God's Holy Spirit will empower everything you do and to bring change to every situation you face in life.

These series of lessons is entitled "**No Turning Back: living the surrendered life.**" We need to wrestle with the fact that the cause for which Christ died is being routed in our society. And the fact is that our story underscores that God has come near. And God has come near! 100 years ago in Africa about 7% of the people would have claimed to be Christian. Do you want to know what that number is today? 46%! Africans are now leaving their countries and going into other African countries to evangelize. Africa has become the center of Christianity. Or what about China? In 1900 about one half of one percent of the population claimed to be Christian. And after a hundred years of China trying to rid the country of Christianity it now has approximately 7% of the population that claims Christianity. There are more Chinese Christians than there are American Christians. But in our country the un-churched population is growing by leaps and bounds. Yet our story says that God has come near.

If we buy into the idea that there's "No Turning Back" and that we are called to "Live the Surrendered Life," we'll find ourselves going to all kinds of people with the message that God is near. Of course there is risk to buying into this idea. The risk is that all kinds of people will come into the church and make it look a lot different. The risk is that God will be in control and for those of us who like to be in control... will be challenged.

In my rock climbing "year" I learned a valuable lesson. You need to trust the rope that ultimately holds you when you fall. Believe that God is the one who is in control. Today we are being called to

go into a hostile, dangerous world to let creation know that God is near. It will cost us. It will cost us time, money and things will look different in the church. And I'm here to tell you today that when you do this, God's got ya!! Because it's his mission and he's the one in control.

We can take comfort in knowing this: we 're not the same in this body. We all come with baggage and somehow this dysfunctional family seems to be pretty good. I want to remind us (member and visitor) that wherever you've been, whatever you've done, wherever you are in your life you are very welcome here.

When we respond to God's call by leaving the old life behind (repent) and following Jesus into a new life for God (believing) we open ourselves to the Tiger. Make no mistake, this new life for God will be one dedicated toward the goal of transforming others.

There's no turning back... live the surrendered life!

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