

Year A Lent 1  
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7  
Psalm 32  
Romans 5:12-19  
Matthew 4:1-11  
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I'm sure many of you have heard about the ongoing studies measuring religious affiliation in our country that have shown the numbers of people who claim to be Christian has been decreasing over the past decades, especially among younger generations, to the point where we are no longer considered a "Christian Country". Young people have often expressed a disappointment in the hypocrisy they have seen among many who consider themselves Christian causing them to turn away from traditional church to express themselves as spiritual but not religious. Yet especially among the youngest generation known as generation Z which includes those born after 1997, there has been a growing hunger for something more, something authentic.

On February 8<sup>th</sup> this year, at Asbury College in Kentucky, the daily chapel service seemed like any other. Students are required to attend chapel three times a week so they go as a matter of routine. The preacher that day was the assistant soccer coach, Zach Meerkreebs, who took as his text Romans 12. It begins, "I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not be conformed any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Romans 12 speaks about the perfect, redeeming love of God and what

that looks like when we are living into it. The sermon that day called for them to become love in action. He spoke about experiencing the power of the love of God. But at the end of the service no one came forward and the preacher thought he had completely missed the mark.

After chapel about 18 or 19 students stayed in the auditorium to pray. One young man left after about an hour to go to class, but when he got outside he heard singing and went back in. He said, "It was surreal. The peace that was in the room was unexplainable." He and a few friends ran around campus breaking into classrooms to spread the word that revival had broken out in Hughes Auditorium. They recognized the presence of the Holy Spirit and wanted to let others in on it. By the end of that day the chapel was filled with students worshipping, praying, listening to testimonies, singing. It was a spontaneous response to the presence of God. In other words, it was worship pure and simple. This was not a planned event. It was just a small group of students who were praying when God showed up in a powerful way.

Thomas McCall, an Asbury Theological Seminary Professor of Theology wrote about his experience of what happened in an article in Christianity Today. He was naturally skeptical having seen many attempts at manufacturing revivals in the tradition in which he grew up. But this was very different, he said. There was no

pressure, no hype, no manipulation, or high-pitched emotional fervor, no trained evangelist on stage. He said, "It's been mostly calm and serene. The mix of hope and joy and peace is indescribably strong and indeed almost palpable- a vivid and incredibly powerful sense of shalom. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is undeniably powerful but also so gentle. The holy love of the triune God is apparent; and there is an innate attractiveness to it. It is immediately obvious why no one wants to leave and why those who must leave want to come back as soon as they can." His son later told him that he and his friends had been kneeling at the altar and praying together. There were 4 of them and each was praying in a different language. He asked his dad, "Is this something like what heaven will be?"

What happened at Asbury college was entirely a student response to divine initiative. The college responded immediately by setting up a team of volunteers that was 100 people strong at any given time to provide for the needs of the students who weren't wanting to leave the chapel and the thousands of others who arrived, and to keep out any who would seek to sabotage or try to manipulate what was going on. An estimated 15,000 people attended each day with the participants mainly being members of Generation Z. Wilmore, a small town of 6,000 people, was overwhelmed as 50,000-70,000 people arrived over the course of that time having heard about the revival. Additional spaces were set up that livestreamed the event to accommodate overflow but after 13 days of continuous worship they had to limit attendance to those ages 26 and under and move others to a venue off campus. From what I have read the revival lasted a total of

16 days before the university said it was time to return to business as usual.

One young woman and student at Asbury named Gracie was profoundly impacted by her experience of the Holy Spirit. By her own admission she had turned her back on God—not aggressively, just quietly going her own way and walking apart from God. She had rejected the efforts of friends to lead her back to faith. But somehow she was there in chapel on that day when the presence of God filled the auditorium and she didn't want to leave. She wept tears of release as she surrendered her life to Jesus Christ. This normally shy, quiet young woman who wouldn't be caught speaking up in class, spoke of what the Lord was doing in her not only to that auditorium full of strangers but also on national television. The love of God had overwhelmed her. She had been awakened to new life, filled with joy, and was compelled to shout to the world of the deliverance she had come to know.

Psalms 32, our Psalm for today, speaks of these shouts or songs of deliverance in verse 7 as if they are a hedge of protection or a mantle over the shoulders of the believer. This is a Psalm of David written after he had betrayed his most loyal soldier by sleeping with his wife; and arranged to have him killed when he learned of her pregnancy. It's a psalm about the forgiveness and mercy he found in God when he repented of his terrible sin, and the ensuing peace and merciful love of God he experienced in being restored to that relationship.

As verses 2-5 read in the Passion translation,

"What bliss belongs to the those who have confessed their corruption to God! For he wipes their slate clean and removes hypocrisy from their hearts. Before I

confessed my sins, I kept it all inside; my dishonesty devastated my inner life, causing my life to be filled with frustration, irrepressible anguish and misery. The pain never let up, for your hand of conviction was heavy on my heart. My strength was sapped, my inner life dried up like a spiritual drought within my soul."

David goes on to say, "Then I finally admitted to you all my sins, refusing to hide them any longer. I said, "My life-giving God, I will openly acknowledge my evil actions." And you forgave me. All at once the guilt of my sin washed away and all my pain disappeared."

In verse 7 David sings to the Lord, "You are my hiding place; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with songs of deliverance."

As I think of Jesus being tempted by Satan in the wilderness, I think of this verse in the Psalm of David that would have been written on the heart of Jesus.

Jesus had just come from his baptism when the Holy Spirit had come upon him in a powerful way. The words given to express what happened are that the Lord said over him, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." But we can't put into words the powerful experience of the love of God when God surrounds and fills us with the presence of His Holy Spirit. The presence of God was so palpable that day that it was evident to others gathered there. Jesus would have known in every fiber of His being the overwhelming love of God and would have experienced the power of God's presence. He had just come from that experience when he was led into the wilderness by the Spirit to fast and pray. But he did so engulfed in the love of God and surrounded with songs of deliverance. Satan didn't stand a chance.

1 Peter 5:8 says, "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around looking for someone to devour." Knowing God's love so completely and knowing he could trust God to fulfill the work he needed to do meant Satan couldn't find a foothold of fear or vulnerability. We tend to think Jesus was able to resist the devil because he was so strong and disciplined. I would imagine that his strength and discipline came from his intimate knowledge of the Father and deep awareness of His love that has just been reaffirmed in His baptism. He was truly girded up and surrounded by songs of deliverance.

The temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness were the same ones he would ultimately face on the cross. Only a deep awareness of God's love for Him and trust that God would work through what he was going through, to carry out His plan of redemption, would see Him through that excruciating time. Otherwise the temptation to take another way out that he would have known was available to Him, would have been too great. Even when he couldn't feel God's love at the time because he bore the weight of the sins of the world on that cross, he knew. He remembered. Even when he was looking death in the face he was surrounded by songs of deliverance and he wasn't afraid.

What happened in the revival at Asbury was a deep, transforming awareness of the love of God through an experience of God's presence in a powerful way. As Andrew said last week, it was truly a thin space- not because that place was always that way- but because when those students were praying and waiting on the Lord the Holy Spirit came upon them and remained.

We too are called to pray and to wait upon the Lord, and to carry with us into all

aspects of life a deep awareness of God's  
powerful redeeming love for us, and a  
knowledge that God will accomplish His  
purpose in us and among His people.  
Because he is indeed faithful.  
Amen