

Sermon Title: “Stuck in the Middle”

Text: Psalm 29; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Preached At: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Date: January 13, 2013/Baptism of Jesus

I have heard a number of times over the last little while something like the following: “It’s hard to believe that Advent and Christmas are hardly done and we are already almost at Lent!”

(Lent begins on February 13 with Ash Wednesday—exactly one month from today!)

I feel the same way. It’s hard to believe that no sooner is Christmas done than I have to mentally begin to prepare for Lent and Easter. I’m not even done with Christmas, truth be told! I feel like spending more time on the Incarnation, on the beauty and profundity of God becoming human and all that this implies. I want to linger with the shepherds and the wise men a little longer. I want to think more about how the hopes and fears of all the years are met in this little baby boy.

But Lent is coming. Easter is coming. It feels like we are moving too quickly, at breakneck speed, from the manger to the cross!

As I was thinking and reading about these matters this week, it occurred to me that the space we are in right now could be taken as symbolic for the way in which many, *many* Christians look at the Christian faith.

Jesus came, Jesus died and we are saved.

So much of popular theology moves with great speed from Christmas to Easter. And while Mennonites have perhaps focused on Jesus’ life and teachings to a greater extent than other parts of the broader church, I think we face the same temptation to skip over the middle as we focus on beginnings and endings.

This is even true of the creeds of the church. For example, the Apostle’s creed:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made,

Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man;

He suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven;

From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

Did you see that? For our salvation, he was “made man...” and then, right away, we are on to crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and future return.

I am not impugning the creed or saying that it doesn’t express truth or important convictions of the historical church. Indeed, we will be reciting the Apostle’s Creed next Sunday when Michael Nimz will be joining us for worship!

But what about the rest of the story? What about the *vast majority* of each of the four gospels?

Kevin and Jonathan and I had a conversation as we were preparing for their part in the Sunday School Christmas program.

At one point, I asked them the question, “What was the point of Jesus’ life?”

I gave them a bit of a grim image (and I apologize to Doug and Jackie and Carl and Helene for planting this idea in their heads): If the only point of God coming to earth in Jesus was to be born and to die for us, then why didn’t Jesus just die as a baby?

If all that was necessary to accomplish salvation was for a God-human to die in our place, why go through 30+ years of life?

What about the middle?

What is true of the church’s liturgical year and of its creeds is also true of the life of faith, I think. We talk a lot about beginnings and endings, but not so much about middles.

We hear dramatic stories of conversions and reconversions and baptisms, and we honour those who are approaching the end of the race, but what about the middle?

Middles are a bit trickier.

Lauren Winner is a professor at Duke Divinity School in North Carolina, and last year she wrote a book called *Still: Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis*. She had just emerged out of a painful divorce, her career was settling into some well-worn grooves, and she was entering or in the middle of the spiritual equivalent of a mid-life crisis. Here’s what Winner says about “middles”:

Here at what I think is the beginning of the middle of my spiritual life, I begin to notice that *middle* rarely denotes something good. Middle school—when girls turn mean and all kids turn miserable—is that “wasteland of our primary and secondary landscape,” the “crack” between grammar school and high school. And middles are often defined by what they are not: the space, the years in

between that which is no longer what came before and that which is not yet what will come later. The Middle Ages are those centuries after antiquity and before modernity—and while somewhat more neutral than the baldly pejorative “Dark Ages,” the term “Middle Ages” implies that the stretch of time under consideration is less interesting than the exaltations of classical grandeur or the wonders of today. I am not thrilled that I am entering a vague in-between, after the intensity of conversion and before the calm wisdom of cronehood.¹

Does this sound familiar to anyone (aside from the middle school girls part 😊)? It does to me.

It’s relatively easy to be inspired by the life and vitality associated with Christmas and Easter. These are massive hinge points of God’s story. God *with* us, God *for* us, God promising *new life*.

It’s easy to get excited about conversion and the rush of spiritual enthusiasm that comes when everything is new and the possibilities seem endless.

But in between, in the middle, it’s easy for faith to get a little stale.

We remember the high points in God’s story and in our story. But all of that happened a long time ago.

And there are bills to pay, and kids to drive around, and meetings to attend, and friends to visit, and routines to settle into, and grandkids to watch, and projects to finish... and before we know it, our faith recedes into the background, like an old piece of furniture or a picture on the wall that gradually accumulates dust and starts to look a bit crooked.

Lauren Winner describes how the middle feels like this:

Sometimes a whole life of straightforward churchgoing takes you to a middle. Sometimes, it is not about a conversion giving way, or the shock of God’s absence. Sometimes a life of wandering takes you to a middle. Sometimes you come to a middle quietly.

You may arrive at the spiritual middle exhausted, in agony, in what saints of the Christian tradition have called *desolation*.

Or your journey to the middle may be a little easier, a little calmer—it is not that God is absent—it is, rather, that your spiritual life seems to have faded, like fabric. Some days the fading doesn’t trouble you at all; other days, it seems a

¹ Lauren F. Winner, *Still: Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 60-61.

hollowing loss. You're not as interested in attending to God. You no longer find it easy to make time for church, for prayer.

Whether you feel a wrenching anguish or simply a kind of distracted listlessness, the middle looks unfamiliar when you get there. The assumptions and habits that sustained you in your faith life in earlier years no longer seem to hold you. A God who was once close seems somehow farther away, maybe in hiding.²

Middles are tricky.

Middles are when we could use an Epiphany. We are, of course, in the season of Epiphany, between the end of Christmas and the beginning of Lent.

And Epiphany is, above all else, the time of year when we repeatedly ask ourselves, "What does God look like? Who is this Jesus and how are we to bear his light into the world?"

I think our texts today are good ones for those of us who find ourselves in the middle.

Our gospel text is the story of Jesus' baptism. It is a text where there is a *lot* going on. I want to explain a bit about what the text means and then hopefully we can connect the dots to "middles."

First, we are, in a sense, given a God's-eye view of this event, specifically in the last two verses of our text: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

But God is doing more than just expressing affirmation for Jesus. He is saying something about the very nature of Jesus' identity as well.

This short phrase, "You are my Son whom I love; with you I am well pleased," contains two references to important traditions and hopes within the Old Testament (Israel's Scriptures). The first part, "You are my Son," is almost universally agreed by scholars to be a quote from Psalm 2:7:

*I will proclaim the LORD's decree:
He said to me, "You are my son;
today I have become your father.*

Here the language is found within what is known as a royal psalm. "Royal Psalms" were likely used during the coronation ceremony for the Israelite king. These Psalms were used to draw a link between God and Israel's king, with the human king reflecting the glory of the divine king.

² Winner, xv-xvi.

The point of quoting Psalm 2 at Jesus' baptism was to locate Jesus as a king within the royal line of David, fulfilling the promise made all the way back in 1 Samuel.

The **second** part of God's speech at Jesus' baptism says "with you I am well pleased." This is widely thought to refer to Isaiah 42:1:

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations."

It's not a direct quote, but an allusion that scholars are fairly confident about. Isaiah 42 is commonly known as a "servant song" which describes the suffering servant who will bring forth justice to the nations, the one who will be "bruised" for his people, to bring the prisoners out of darkness into the light.

In linking the divine speech at Jesus' baptism with this "servant song," Luke shows that it will be through Jesus that God's justice will be brought forth to the nations.

Thus in the second portion of the divine coronation speech from heaven, we have a depiction of Jesus as the Servant of Yahweh; not only is Jesus the king, from the royal line of David, but he is the obedient suffering servant of the Lord through whom God's redemptive plan will be accomplished.

He is not a generic god-man floating in from space to be born and die for the world, but part of a *story* with name and faces and places and beginnings and endings and middles.

But at Jesus' baptism we see more than a divine endorsement of his nature and vocation, more than a set of important links to the story of Israel and the shape of Israel's hope.

We see Jesus' identification with human beings.

We see Jesus lining up, with everyone else on the banks of the Jordan—those whose faith was strong and sure, those who were looking for a spectacle in John the Baptist, those who were desperate for a sign of hope, those who were weary and burned out by religion, those who were curious, those who were confused, those who were optimistic, those who were desperate for God to just show himself.

I imagine that many of those present were like many of us, struggling along in the middle.

And Jesus is right there with them. The one who knew no sin, trudging down into the muddy Jordan with everyone else. The one who would bear the sin of the world, the

one in whom all things hold together, the one through whom God was reconciling *all things* to himself...

He takes his place amidst the broken, mixed up, stubborn, sinful and fragile human race and says, “I am one of you. I am with you. We are in this together. I will never leave you nor forsake you.”

He goes down into the waters, and in so doing he says: “I will be with you—in the beginning, the middle, and the end. In exciting times, when your faith is vibrant and radiant, and in times when you’re just hanging on; in times when your hope is clear and true, and when it is foggy or a little out of focus.

I can be trusted with middles—I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

I am the Sovereign Creator whose voice spoke the world into existence, who, to borrow the language of Psalm 29 (read earlier), thunders over the waters, flashes forth flames of fire, flattens trees and shakes the wilderness, who sits enthroned over the flood, the chaos that threatens to undo life.

I am Emmanuel, God with you!

This is good news, whether we are taking our first steps of faith, or nearing our journey’s end, or somewhere in the middle.

Middles are important, even if they don’t always feel that way. God is no less present or powerful or sustaining in middles than he is at the more exciting events that surround them.

Important things happen in the middle, even if they can be messy and complicated and dreary and not always fun to walk through.

Our spiritual journeys as human beings are marked by many twists and turns and detours and mountaintops and valleys. And sometimes we’re not even sure what part of the journey we’re at.

But there are three truths about God from our text today stand over all of our journeys.

1. **God is sovereign**—God is the author of this story we are a part of, and sits enthroned over the flood
2. **God has come to us**—God has entered the story himself and written some surprising chapters about servants and kings and suffering and new life and all kinds of other unexpected ways in the world is made new
3. **God is with us**—Jesus has identified himself with us and bound himself to us

This is good news indeed, for all of our beginnings, endings, and middles.

Thanks be to God.