

“Disruption!”

December 6th 2020

A Sermon from the front pew of
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL
Matt Matthews

Rachel and I had the opportunity to meet our sons on Folly Island, just south of Charleston, over Thanksgiving. We cooked together, hiked the beach, hunted shells, played a Canadian game called Crokinole, and watched movies about Irish silkies, singing fishermen in England, and music lovers in Brooklyn.

On the way home, driving through snow, I noticed heavy chain-link fences on the side of the highways that cut through the mountains. The fences block large stones and small boulders from the mountain above from rolling onto the highway. Those protective fences reminded me of adults standing by the side of the road with their arms stretched out keeping children from running into the street. I felt a little safer cutting through those mountain passes with those fences protecting me.

There's nobody standing on the side of the road in Mark's gospel keeping us safe from the dangers of the amazing story of Jesus. Mark tugs us immediately into a dangerous crowd by the Jordan River. Mark's first sentence isn't even a sentence he's in such a hurry; he forgets the verb. Urgently, he's off and we have to walk fast to keep up. Good news, he says. I've got good news. *Hurry.*

John the Baptist is dressed like a mad man and we are pulled to the edge of the crowd. He's baptizing people in the Jordan River, and he's talking about the one who is coming, Jesus. *You're impressed with me, wait until you meet Jesus. I'm not even worthy enough to tie his shoes.*

We know this is a dangerous place. Look around. Look around at this crowd. Not all of them are *our people*, and you know what that means. And this place. Momentous things have happened by the Jordan. Jesus will be baptized here in a few verses. The heavens will be ripped open. “Ripped” is the word Mark uses. God will pronounce his blessing up on his son. And following this man will mean our lives will be disrupted. If you're looking for a way to get out of this, who can blame you?

Why is disruption part and parcel of this life? Why are there times for tearing, and war, and weeping? How can this be God's will and way for his creation? And yet disruption seems to be part of what God intends for us, and it is readily documented in scripture.

Look at where you're standing. You're standing at the edge of the crowd, at the back, but you can still hear the waters of the Jordan River, and don't let this tranquil stream fool you.

The Jordan is a common site for disruption. In the Old Testament Joshua crossed it, leaving Pharaoh's way of life behind and walking into the freedom of God's order (Joshua 3 & 4). Leadership change happens here. Elisha picks up the mantle of Elijah (in 2 Kings 2:14ff) at the banks of the Jordan. Elisha strikes the Jordan, the waters part, Elisha walks across on dry land. New leaders always mean a kind of disruption. Naaman is washed in the Jordan and cured of his leprosy (2 Kings 5). And in Hosea (2:2-13) the Jordan becomes a doorway into the Valley of Trouble.

There's no comfort in this place. If we follow John's Jesus, we know it will be a great journey. But there will be dangers along the way. Jesus will be baptized, then lead into a wilderness of temptation, not into a wine and cheese reception. John's head will end up on a platter. Jesus will end up on a hill outside of Jerusalem. Follow this Jesus and expect your comfortable life to be disrupted. Nobody is standing at the side of Mark's gospel protecting you from being swept away.

Disruption. You know what I mean. Look at where we are standing. Our lives are changing. We're growing up and that's so exciting, but it means change, and change can be scary. We are growing older, or just plain old, and we can't keep up with the change. The road is dangerous. Temptations lie like traps. Wolves howl. Jesus loves us, loves us, loves us, but he keeps calling us to follow him in the way of sacrifice. *Sacrifice* is a word we don't even want to talk about; our me-first culture avoids the very ideal of service, much less of its twin, sacrifice. Look at where you are standing. We are being tested right now, tested, changed, made brand new. This is exciting. But the scars remain. And the road is not certain. Disruption.

We have so much disruption in our lives we are not wrong to want calm, quiet, and rest. But more often than not, it seems, God has something else in mind for us, things like growth, which always means change. Why can't things stay the same? I don't know why things can't stay the same except to say that they can't; scripture bears witness to God's constant, transforming work in our lives. And John the Baptist is begging us to notice. He wants us to see it, and to do so, it required change. *Repent*, he cries. This word means to turn. See, we can't even stand still for a moment. We're expected to turn. *Turn*, John says, *turn*. And soon, Jesus will say the most dangerous word of all, "Follow."

See, I am doing a new thing. Do you not perceive it? (Is. 43:19-21)

God uses disruption to lead us into promised lands. We gather at the Jordan not so much to catch a glimpse of John the Baptist, but of the new life he talks about. We gather not to watch, but to walk, to begin our exodus from the old life to the new.

If we want an easy rest, we've come to the wrong place.

If we want hope, and light, and life, and justice, and peace that passes all understanding—we have, indeed, come to the right place. Lean in. Listen up. *And look*, John says, pointing. We cannot help but to turn. *Look there. The son of God is coming to walk with us.*

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.

Isaiah 43:19-22

Behold, I am doing a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
²⁰ The wild beasts will honor me,
the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
²¹ the people whom I formed for myself
that they might declare my praise.

Mark 1:1-8

¹The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’”

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And 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. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He 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. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”