

“Come Up!”

A sermon in the Lenten series

“Listen Up!—Following Jesus More Closely”

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- Mark 1:9-15 ⁹Not long afterward Jesus came from Nazareth in the province of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰As soon as Jesus came up out of the water, he saw heaven opening and the Spirit coming down on him like a dove.
- 2 Peter 1:3-11 ¹⁰So then, my friends, try even harder to make God's call and his choice of you a permanent experience; if you do so, you will never abandon your faith.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Jesus calls us to “come up” from the mire where we feel weak, vulnerable and overwhelmed, to discover the comfort, reassurance and strength for living which we derive from adopting his way.

Being a Christian is not a spectator sport. Why should that surprise us? Jesus was usually quite active, usually on the move. While we do note that Jesus devoted some time to rest and retreat and prayer, what we usually read in the gospels is that Jesus was walking from one place to another, or he was sitting on a hilltop preaching to the crowds gathered there, or he was in a boat imparting a lesson about God's kingdom, or he was bringing healing and wholeness to one who was stricken in some way or another. Wherever Jesus was, he was “up to something.” That realization becomes the basis for our worship services during Lent this year. In a series called “Listen Up!” we'll consider how the gospels call us to “Store Up” and “Come Up” and “Take Up” and “Raise Up,” “Light Up” and “Lift Up” and “Sit Up” and finally “Look Up.” From all that upward movement we'll discover how Jesus implores us to engage with him actively.

Today's episode I call “Come Up!” That action comes from the description in Mark's gospel of when Jesus launched his public ministry. Mark tells us that Jesus sought to be baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptizer. Mark writes that when Jesus came up out of the water, mystical signs seemed to confirm that here was long-awaited savior/messiah:

- Jesus experienced a penetrating vision of the heavens, as if they had been torn open to reveal their secrets.
- God's Holy Spirit descended upon him with a blessing of authority and courage as plainly as if a dove flew down and roosted on his shoulder.
- The air thundered mightily as though the very voice of God was pronouncing, “Jesus, you are my dear, dear son.”

Coming up from the waters of baptism was empowering for Jesus. He found confirmation for his calling to tell anyone and everyone that God is love. Jesus found encouragement to take on this uncharted territory of person-to-person sharing. Coming up from the waters of baptism energized him; it excited him; it moved him forward.

Most of us came up from the waters of baptism long ago, and probably in a different way. A few of you might have experienced full-immersion baptism like I did when I was twelve years old. But for many of you, “coming up” from the waters of baptism may have meant your mother shifted you onto her shoulder after the minister sprinkled a few drops of water onto your forehead.

So while it was the waters of baptism that Jesus came up from, what we're awash in in our day is more mundane. Our daily lives are filled to overflowing with pressures and concerns that wash over us and prevent us from offering our best for God's purposes. Consider a few examples.

First, for many of us, one of the things that swamps our minds constantly is the proverbial "to-do list." It may be jotted on a piece of paper or entered on our smartphone or simply floating around in our head... but our to-do lists may make us feel that we are always struggling to come up for air. One night last week my wife Mary woke up in the middle of the night. After a while she made a list of things that were displacing her idyllic dreams. The next morning she told me that she'd created a to-do list of fourteen things. Having a bigger to-do list is not something that we want to have bragging rights for. It crowds out sleep, and disrupts waking thoughts, too. What if we discovered that putting our trust in Jesus empowers us to come up out of the "to-do list mire"?

Those who are in the tax preparation business (we have a couple of them in our church) provide a second example of what it feels like to be swamped. Throughout the year I may joke with them that Advent or Lent are for me what "tax season" is for them. But from what I see, they have it worse. The ones I know are working six, maybe seven days a week, putting in fourteen- or sixteen- or eighteen-hour days. And although we all know that tax returns are due April 15th every year, the way the calendar falls this year, taxes aren't due until April 17th. We may see that as a bonus... but professional tax preparers see it as two extra days that they are longing to come up out of the pit.

I can think of other folks who are swamped by expectations and duties, who feel weak, unsure, vulnerable, who long to be able to come up from what's holding them down. We may think that youth is a carefree time. But I know that many students are making final pushes on college applications, worried about whether their preferred universities will deem them "worthy." They are starting to envision college not as a far-off dream but a looming reality, and they wonder if they'll be able to handle the work, the social pressure, the independence, knowing their weaknesses and insecurities better than they want to admit.

I hear from lots of parents who struggle to provide the proper balance for their children. They want to expose their children to wonderful opportunities in the arts and athletics, but they worry about so overscheduling their children that the kids miss out on important skills like problem-solving and socialization, skills that are developed by unstructured free play in the neighborhood. Some parents are driven to assure that their older teens over-achieve in every way in order to land the coveted spots at the most prestigious schools. For those adults (and quite possibly the children), what a blessing it could be to be able rise from the entrapment of overachievement, to be able to come up to receive the relief and contentment that trusting in Jesus offers.

Every year some folks face the formidable task of downsizing their possessions. Maybe they want to prepare to relocate for retirement. Maybe they need to downsize in order to respond to new circumstances brought about by a change in health. When you've spent a lifetime accumulating possessions – each one infused with memories – the prospect of disposing of even some of that can overwhelm and paralyze you. You can feel trapped by a rising tide, and see no way to come up to safety, no way to make progress.

Yes, our daily lives are filled to overflowing with pressures and concerns that wash over us and prevent us from offering our best for God's purposes. What, if anything, can we do about it?

Have we forgotten who we are? Have we forgotten why we gather here today? We are "Christians" – followers of the one called "the Christ," "the anointed one," the one who God

called "my beloved Son." We are here because we have been blessed to discover Jesus and we have been graced with the conviction to embrace him.

Here is what Jesus says to us: "Come up out of that rut, that quagmire which is holding you hostage, pulling you down. Come to me. Trust in me. Come up out of the pit:

- come up from your struggles with relatives;
- come up from the worry about health concerns;
- come up out of your nervousness about employment;
- come up from your worry about world event;
- come up from your anxiety about paying the bills.

Come up from that pit that seems like it's swallowing all of your attention and energy and passion. [Jesus says,] Trust me as I walk through your life with you."

That's what Jesus says to you and to me today. Jesus may have lived in a technologically primitive culture in a land far, far from here. But he knows life. He knows what it is to face daily struggle. He knows that we have to make choices or take actions that can be emotionally distressing, physically stressful, costly in terms of money or reputation or friendship or other measures. Jesus the Son of God knows what it is to live life in our world.

So let us know this: Jesus stands ready to help lift us out of the pit where each of us struggles with the stuff that makes up "daily life." For comfort, for reassurance, for strength to "come up" and cope with all that seems to engulf you, call on Jesus to be your partner on life's way, your master and savior.

Let us pray. Jesus, in your baptism you found strength to face the enormous challenges of living to proclaim your Heavenly Father's will. May we hear and respond to your call to come up out of whatever everyday struggles hold us down, so we can follow your lead in serving God's will. Amen.

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