The Rev. Andria Skornik

Sermon for Advent I

November 29, 2020

What Are We Imprinted By?

What’s the very first thing you do every morning? Get up and make coffee? Attend to the child who has just woken you up? Try to stay a bit longer in the warmth of the covers?

In the book, Liturgy of the Ordinary, author Tish Harrison Warren describes a morning routine with which some of us are probably familiar. She says that every morning the very first thing she’d do was grab her phone and lay in bed checking the news, email, Facebook and Twitter. After a while, though, she noticed how that little morning ritual would set the tone for the rest of the day. Pretty soon it extended to turning to her phone in between activities and whenever she could get a minute it. It began to take precedence. She’d find herself ignoring her children’s request as she skimmed an article. She said it was like being imprinted. When a human rescues a baby animal from the wild it’s said to be imprinted, meaning it accepts the human as its mother. From that point on it will look to people for what it needs; taking its cues from them. After that, it can no longer live in the wild on its own. The author writes, “My morning smartphone ritual was brief — no more than five or ten minutes. But I was imprinted. My day was imprinted by technology. And like a mountain cub attached to her humans, I’d look for all good things to come from glowing screens.”

To borrow the metaphor, we all have been imprinted by something. We all have sources we look to throughout the day that tell us who we are and how we’re to understand our world. On the face of it, they may just seem like mundane activities or how we fill the hours of a day. And yet, they have a way of forming us. As Annie Dillard writes, “How we spend our days is of course how we spend our lives.” Hour upon hour composes our self-understanding.

Just think about how an interaction or a few minutes spent on something can turn our awareness this way or that. A positive story someone shares can leave us feeling hopeful about things. A report of something threatening can leave us anxious, on guard or pessimistic. Getting to do something slowly and deliberately can be centering and satisfying. Rushing through a task can leave us feeling tense and exhausted. The little things we do throughout the day have surprising power.

In our current situation, this is especially true. The extreme nature of the news these days means we’re that much more likely to be affected by it. The dopamine hit we get from every new development only reinforces the urge to check what’s going on. We’re also missing so many good nourishing interactions that’ve been pivotal in shaping our identities, worldviews and well being. After this service we would usually get to go into a noisy Parish Hall with people drinking coffee, interesting conversations happening, and kids running everywhere. Or normally the Thanksgiving holiday would leave people feeling full — having just been with family and friends. But this year most people didn’t get to do that in the same way.

With this in mind, this morning’s gospel is both resonant and instructive. In our gospel from Mark this morning, Jesus predicts a world in a time of extremes, where the sky is falling and the heavens are shaking. What he says to his followers in this time is, when everything seems like it’s going wrong, don’t look where everyone else is looking. Look to the fig tree — in other words — look to other signs to find your truth. Which is a way of saying don’t let yourself be imprinted with the wrong things. As my followers, you should look to the things that help you see God and that remind you that in it all, God is coming to you.

In a world where it is so easy to get imprinted by things that make us fearful and discouraged, as Christians, we always must be looking elsewhere. Situating ourselves elsewhere. We need to be looking to accurate sources that will tell us who we are and whose we are. We need to immerse ourselves in daily practices that bring us back to who we are in God.

It is the identity talked about in today’s reading from 1st Corinthians. We have been given God’s grace. Called into the fellowship of Christ. Not by anything we have done, but because God has made it so. It is the identity we affirm in our baptism. Regardless of what’s going on in the world, what’s going on in our lives, and whether or not we’re not living up to what we had hoped, we are loved by God, sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ’s own forever. This is how we are to understand ourselves and the world. One that is centered in who we are in God. And then everyday we need to be doing the things that bring us back to that.

What we’re talking about is not a major overhaul, which many of us don’t have the capacity for now anyway. It’s making small changes. Maybe even doing the same things but doing them differently. It may be the difference between eating a meal mindfully and while being present as opposed to quickly while multitasking. Or finding natural opportunities for gratitude through the day: thanking God for a warm shower and clean clothes. Or doing a daily devotional where we hear God’s promises in scripture and are reminded that — before all the things we have to do — our first identity is as a child of God.

In the book I mentioned, the author talks about how she changed her morning ritual. Rather than reaching for her phone first thing, she decided to make her bed, slowly and intentionally. Then sit on the neatly tucked in sheets for a few moments of prayer. It was something small that set the day in a different direction. There are so many moments throughout the day that can call us back to ourselves if we look for them and let them.

Today, as we begin Advent, a season that is so rich in ritual, it’s a great time to be thinking about the kind of rituals and daily practices we want to make time for. What do we let set the tone and make its mark on us? In the hours that make up our days, let us look to those that affirm who we are in Christ and the imprinting of our true mother and father, God.

Amen.