

Sermon February 18, 2024

Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Stuck in the Wilderness

"It has been a dark, few days," a friend told me. And then she told me of the shadows that lurked in corners and the gray clouds that hovered over her head. Aging parents facing new diagnoses, her young adult son dealing with mental health issues that never end, and a variety of smaller issues that continued to weigh her down.

It is as if she had entered into the wilderness and could not find her way out. As we talked, I realized that she was looking for a glimpse of the light.

Scripture is filled with references to the wilderness. Over and over, the people of God find themselves in dark and dangerous places,

only to find that it is in the wilderness that they find the promises of God. The early Israelites stumbled into the wilderness without food or water for the journey. They were stranded there for 40 long years, hungry and thirsty, frightened and alone, they faced powerful temptations to turn away from the God who rescued them from slavery.

Their descendants were stranded in the wilderness of Exile for 40 long years. The prophet came to them with words of comfort: "In the wilderness," he proclaimed, "prepare the way to God...Then the glory of God shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together!"

John marched out of the wilderness. Wearing animal skins and eating locusts and honey, he came to the people proclaiming a message of repentance and renewal.

After being baptized by John, Jesus went into the wilderness too. Mark's version, that we heard today, does not have the details that we are so familiar with. All we are told is that Jesus was tempted, surrounded by wild beasts... and the angels waited upon him. But whatever the details of his time in the wilderness hold, we do know one thing. When Jesus reemerged, he was ready to take on the mantle of his ministry and begin his long journey towards the cross.

The wilderness can take on many forms. Sometimes it is a desolate desert. The heat pounds down on us, mirages of water tempt us to go in the wrong direction. Sometimes it is a dark place, filled with shadows. Those shadows reach out, covering the light. Unseen dangers lurk hidden from sight, but never hidden from our imaginations.

For Noah, the wilderness was miles and miles of water. First there was the steady rain, day after day after day, ferociously rocking the boat filled with terrified creatures. No sign of sun, no sign of hope. And then, after 40 days and 40 nights, the watery wilderness became even more frightening. The rain finally ended and all he could see was clear blue skies and water... water as far as the eye could see. The earth as he knew it was gone.

Part of what makes the wilderness so frightening is that we have to face it alone. No matter what it looks like, in the wilderness, we are cut off from our community: no one to cheer us on; no one to hold us when we are scared; no one to reach out and touch our hand. In the wilderness, we are truly alone.

We all face the wilderness sometime in our lives... and many of us return to the wilderness over and over again. The wilderness can be dirty city streets, with threats of violence around every corner. The wilderness can be found in war zones, surrounded by enemy fire or in a school that is filled with a hail of bullets. The wilderness can take the form of addiction, domestic violence, financial problems, bullies... the wilderness can be found anywhere - even in our homes.

When we enter the wilderness, we face hidden fears that can strike us anywhere. And we can feel so alone... Just like my dear friend

I know so many of you are in the wilderness too. Some of your stories I know. The pain of loss, the fear for loved ones who have strayed away. Some of your stories are hidden from us all... and you carry your pain alone.

When you are in the wilderness, you can only take what you have. Noah & Jesus had the promises given to them from God. Noah was sent out with a clear mission, build the boat, take the animals. No matter how terrifying those days on the water might have been, Noah could go back and remember the clear plan laid before him directly by God.

Jesus had the baptismal promises. A voice from heaven calling out: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." No matter how many challenges Jesus faced, he had those words echoing around him, giving him strength.

Most of us don't have direct encounters with God before we find ourselves stranded in the wilderness. We don't have the memory of God's voice ringing in our ears or the skies parting for us. Many of us feel completely alone, even when we are surrounded by others.

But it is important to remember that we do have each other. The wilderness can be very lonely... a place, by definition, isolated from our community. Yet, we do have our experiences with each other, and we carry those memories with us. In the wilderness, as shadows creep and the mirages fool us, we can remember. We can remember the touch of a hand when we feel alone... we can remember the prayers lifted up for us... we can remember the touch of the bread on our lips and the taste of the wine on our tongue. All that we do for each other in the name of Christ is what we need to survive our time in the wilderness. And, when we finally emerge from the wilderness, we will be stronger and more prepared for the hard work that lies ahead.

We can all emerge for our wilderness stronger than ever. When Noah leaves his watery wilderness, God makes a promise to all the generations. In the sign of the rainbow, we remember God's promise of faithfulness and love.

When Jesus leaves the wilderness, he proclaims the "good news." News that is good because it announces the beginning of God's new reign. Mark does not tell us just what God's reign involves; we can only learn that by following the way of Jesus through the Gospel, hearing his word and joining him on his journey. We begin this journey of Lent in the wilderness, but we carry with us one more thing – Jesus' gospel message. Repent and believe, Jesus says. Turn around and look at your life from a new perspective so you can see the places that need to be repaired... to be renewed... to bring about the change that God craves so much. Look up and believe... trust the One who will guide us on this journey and beyond.

This Lent we are on a common journey. It begins in the wilderness and will end on a hill in Calgary. We carry with us the love of each other, the gospel message and the promises we made today to God. We are sent out to proclaim the good news of God's reign on earth... to begin the hard work of repairing relationship and making all things new: "Get up!" we should say. "Repent! Change your life around to be a reflection of God's good love. Because you can be sure that God's rainbow will stretch across the sky, and God's Beloved Kingdom is coming!"