

INTO THE WILDERNESS

Mark 1: 9-15

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Last Sunday Mark prepared us for the beginning of Lent by focusing on Jesus and reminding us to “listen to him.”

This Sunday we hear the first words uttered by Jesus in his ministry: “*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.*” This, biblical scholars tell us, is the entire gospel message condensed into a single sentence. It is one of the primary texts for the season of Epiphany which we just concluded and it is the primary text that kicks off the season of the present season of Lent.

But before we explore that one sentence, however, Mark asks us to first look at the calling of the one who spoke it. Jesus did not pop out of the womb saying profound theological things, neither did he teach them to his little friends at recess. Nothing in scripture even suggests that he spent his childhood thinking, “Hee, hee. If they only knew my real identity they’d treat me better.” No, the absence of childhood narratives for Jesus in the gospels suggest that Jesus’ childhood was pretty much like our own. He fell down and had scabby knees, he got a snotty nose, he teased and was teased by his brothers and sisters. And, being the oldest, he was probably a little bit bossy. (I’m the oldest. I know.)

Mark takes us back not into Jesus’ childhood, but to his baptism by John in the Jordan river and his ordeal in the wilderness, the forty days of which are the inspiration and model for the forty days of Lent. And he asks us to take a hard look at those two events because they provide the context for the miracles Jesus will perform and the message he will preach.

BAPTIZED BY JOHN

As always, Mark is in a hurry, and he assumes we know the stories so he just gives us reminders – shortened, redacted, Reader’s Digest versions of the baptism and the temptations in the wilderness.

He takes care of the entire baptism story in a single verse: ***In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.*** (Vs. 9)

Mark is more interested in what happens after the baptism but even that is given in truncated form. First, Jesus comes up out of the water. As he does this, he sees the heavens rent asunder and the Spirit of God descending gently, like a dove. Then he hears a voice coming out of heaven that says, “You are my son, the Beloved; in you I am well pleased.”

Note that in Mark the revelation, visual and auditory, is for Jesus alone. No one else sees what he sees or hears what he sees and hears.

This seems to be the case throughout history when God speaks to human beings. We all experience God’s calling differently and personally. Some hear God’s voice in the thunder and lightning, some hear it as still and small. Some are knocked to the ground and blinded by

God's presence and some are gently awakened from their slumber. Some are compelled and some are invited.

I truly believe that I was first called to the Christian ministry when I was about nine or ten years old, when I was at church camp. And then, again, when I was about twelve, and again, when I was sixteen and several more times. But my calling was never of the dramatic kind. It was always more of a gentle nudging.

I never heard a loud voice from heaven. I never was knocked to the ground and blinded. I was not saved from drug addiction or alcoholism or a life of decadence and corruption. I didn't walk the sawdust trail at a tent revival or get saved by coming forward and, weeping, making a public confession of Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior.

In fact, my story was of the opposite kind, really. Rather prosaic and mundane.

I was raised in the middle-class suburbs by a mostly supportive and loving family. I never got into any serious trouble. I was the "Golden Boy" of my high school. I got good grades, was on the student council, was president of my senior class, played sports, was in the band and choir, and got the lead roles in the plays.

I was raised in the church. My father sang in the choir and taught a Sunday School class. My mother was president of the UMW (WSCS) and worked tirelessly in the kitchen and taught in the VBS. I went to worship and Sunday school just about every Sunday, volunteered in the toddler nursery as a teenager, went to Youth Fellowship meetings and retreats, went to summer church camp and was elected president of the Conference Youth Council my Junior year in high school.

When my calling came it was usually in the form of a church member or a youth counselor or a pastor saying, "Dean, have you ever considered the ministry as a career?" I don't ever remember a time when the ministry wasn't a viable career option for me. I learned about grace not through a miracle but through reading, studying and talking with other Christian youth and adults.

When the time came, I tried several other career options, found them to be unsatisfactory and then decided that I wasn't going to be really happy until I was an ordained minister.

I told Jean, she sort of shrugged, and said, "Okay," and the next thing I knew I was in seminary. That's how I was called to the ministry.

But it's not how everyone is called. There are all kinds of callings. The Bible makes that clear. Paul is knocked to the ground, blinded, and shaken to his very core. Peter is introduced to Jesus by his brother, Andrew. Cornelius, the centurion, throws a dinner party and invites Paul. Phoebe provides financial help to Paul's mission and comes to Christ that way. James and John hear from Jesus while they are at work. Isaiah hears the words of grace and calling while he's at a funeral. Jeremiah hears them in a dream. Moses goes to a mountain top and sees a burning bush. Joshua receives his calling by following his mentor, Moses. Timothy receives his calling through his mentor, Paul.

How is God calling you? Do you have a role model or a mentor? Are you reading regularly in the Bible or other Christian literature that expands your thinking and your understanding? Are you working in the mission field to make the world a better place? Do you meet and study and talk with other Christians on a regular basis? We don't have to wait for a miracle, you know. These are the tried and tested ways that God speaks to us.

Are you listening? What is God saying to you?

THE BELOVED, IN WHOM I AM WELL PLEASED

In Mark's account the heavens are torn apart but the revelation comes to Jesus gently, as a dove, with a sense of both calling and affirmation: *You are my son, whom I love and of whom I am very proud.*

Oh, man! Wouldn't it be nice to linger for a day or two, right here?

Wouldn't it be pleasant to just hear that last sentence, that up-lifting, strengthening, affirming pronouncement of God upon your life repeated a few times, and then to let it warm and comfort you?

After a moment like that don't you just want to join hands and sing, "They'll know we are Christians by our love?" Don't you want to pick up your guitar and write a contemporary Christian song and record it and make a zillion dollars? Don't you want to write a book, maybe a best seller that will sell a million copies and then you can go on the speaking tour and tell people what it says and then autograph it at tables in the front of books stores and in the halls outside auditoriums?

Or maybe not. Maybe it would be nice to get that word of assurance and acceptance from God and then just do... nothing. To go home and lie on the couch and revel in God's grace. To know that it's a gift and nothing I do is going to change that one bit. God loves me just the way I am; pass the remote and the potato chips.

Alas, it is not to be.

If Jesus is to be our model, we don't get to rest and luxuriate in that moment for very long. God has other plans for us. What does it say?

"And the Spirit immediately drove him into the wilderness."

The old Revised Standard Version says "compelled." The Spirit compelled him into the wilderness. He has a choice but it is one driven by compulsion. He feels he must do this and off he goes.

INTO THE WILDERNESS

We Americans have a tendency to romanticize the concept of wilderness, don't we? What does that word bring to mind for you? The Canadian Rockies? The Sierra Madres? The Blue

Ridge or Smoky Mountains? Nine times out of ten when we say “wilderness” we think of idealized versions of nature.

Ansel Adams photographs spring before our mind’s eye.

But that was not the wilderness of first century Palestine.

This was ugly, barren, hot, miserable, dangerous wilderness. No one in his right mind went there voluntarily. Scorpions lived there and cut-throat criminals, and crazy people, and wild animals. Rather nasty.

Also, there are, we are told, temptations in such a wilderness, the number one of which being that we will become like the wilderness, itself: uncivilized, untamed, wild and anarchic.

The question for us is, of course: “Where is our wilderness?” Mark tells us that if we use Jesus as our role model, we can identify the wilderness by what goes on there.

First, we hear that Jesus was there for a long time. Forty days. That’s a symbolic number, of course, meaning a long time but not a really long time -- about a month, but not a year.

Actually, what we discover when we’ve been in our own personal wilderness, is that it wasn’t as long as we thought it was. When we are going through a difficult time, a barren time, an uncomfortable and trying time, the minutes stretch out and seem like hours. When we can’t sleep the night goes on forever. The day filled with worry and anxiety is forty hours long. Temptation turns every moment into a lifetime. Danger stretches out forever.

What we discover, in retrospect, is that the time was often fairly brief. The darkness lasted but an hour before the daylight broke again. The storm passed over in just a few minutes that only seemed like hours.

But whether our time in the wilderness is, in reality, brief or long, it always seems like forty days.

Secondly, the wilderness is always filled with wild beasts.

That is to say, it is dangerous. One uninformed decision can lead to devastation and destruction. A wrong turn can place you in harm’s way. A bad choice can bring you to a lifetime of misery.

One does not go quickly or unprepared into the wilderness. If you are going to go you study it like you would study an adversary. You read about it and learn its ways and you take with you the things you will need. You plan your route carefully and you follow it and you leave a plan with someone else so they can find you if you run into trouble.

Wildernesses are always dangerous.

And this is true whether your wilderness is in the mountains, in the desert, on the sea, or in the concrete canyons of our inner cities. It is true whether your wilderness is the wilderness of grief or addiction or compulsion, whether it's the wilderness of depression or the wilderness of disease.

The dangers of the wilderness can be found as easily in the office as in the desert, as easily on the field of competition as on the open prairie, as surely in the depths of academia as in the depths of the ocean.

Wherever danger lurks, that is a wilderness.

But not danger, only. The **third** thing Mark tells us about the wilderness is that temptation lurks there, as well.

Jesus had to contend not just with the natural dangers that are found in that wilderness but with temptation as well. "He was tempted by Satan."

Of course, the greatest temptation that lurks in any wilderness, is that, in order to survive, we will become like the wilderness itself, untamed, uncivilized, ruled by passion and a lust for survival and not by the compassion and kindness that dwells in our better nature. The greatest temptation of the wilderness is that, hoping only to survive, we will become one of the wild beasts that live there.¹

In the movie, "The Untouchables," there is a very touching scene where Elliot Ness, played by Kevin Costner, confesses his disappointment and his sense of failure to his wife. He came to Chicago, he says, a pillar of uprightness and proper legal authority. He and his men were uncorrupted and incorruptible. They could not be bribed, there was nothing in their past for which they could be blackmailed. They were law abiding and righteous in every sense. They were above the temptations of other mortals. They were, quite literally, untouchable.

But he confesses that, in order to defeat the forces of evil, he had to bend the law, compromise his convictions, to do things he never thought he would do. Then, after a long pause, he says to her, *"I have foresworn myself. I have broken every law I have sworn to uphold, I have become what I beheld and I am content that I have done right!"*

The greatest temptation of any wilderness is that we will become one of the wild beasts that live there and which we feared, that we will become that which we beheld and will have convinced ourselves that it is the right thing to do.

No spiritual challenge is left by itself without a promise, however, and that is the case here. If we allow ourselves to be compelled into the wilderness by God's Holy Spirit, we will be challenged and tempted but we will also be ministered to by angels. That is the **fourth** thing which Mark tells us about the wilderness.

God does not let us go there alone. He provides us with... resources. Often, our own experience bears this out.

¹ This temptation is beautifully demonstrated in the 1965 film, "Sands of the Kalahari." Unfortunately it's not available on DVD.

When did you find yourself alone in the wilderness and ministered to by angels?

Perhaps your angels were your next-door neighbors or your parents, your children or your fellow church members. Maybe, instead of wings and a halo they wore scrubs or a uniform. Whatever they looked like for you, the promise of God's word is that, if you have allowed the Spirit to take you into your personal wilderness, you did not go alone; angels went with you and ministered to you.

They prayed for you in your hour of trial. They accepted you when those you thought were your friends turned their backs and walked away.

They brought food to your home and fed you when you had not the strength to feed yourself.

They sat with you in the waiting room and held your hand when the surgeon appeared at the door.

They watched your children while you kept the appointment you didn't want to keep but were afraid not to.

They fixed your car when you had neither the knowledge, nor the skills nor the funds to get it fixed or fix it yourself.

They taught you when you didn't know and they reminded you when you did know.

They laughed with you when you laughed. They wept with you when you wept. And they didn't care a bit whether your house was clean, your pants were pressed, or your hair was cut. They came because you needed them to come.

Go into the wilderness, says Mark. And as surely as there are wild beasts and temptations lurking there, there are angels also.

READY TO PREACH

Mark concludes this passage by reminding us that only after we have been chosen by God and then gone into and come out of the wilderness will we be ready to understand, repeat, and live the good news of the gospel.

We are not called for the sake of the calling. We are not affirmed so we can bask in the warmth of affirmation. We do not sojourn in the wilderness because it strengthens our character or gives us good stories to tell.

These are the things that prepare us for the work of the kingdom and the spreading of the gospel: ***The time is fulfilled; the kingdom has come near; repent and believe the good news.***

AMEN