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Mark 1:9-15

In the Wilderness

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Mark 1:9-15 New Revised Standard Version

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.”

There is a theme park in Florida called the Holy Land Experience where you have the opportunity to walk where Jesus walked. Everyday at 1 p.m. you can watch Jesus’ crucifixion and at 3 p.m. you can experience the joyous resurrection.[[1]](#footnote-1) We rush to Easter, to the happy, to the joyful. As uncomfortable as it is, Lent is not happy, it is not joyful. This is a 40-day march until the crucifixion. This is 40 days of suffering. As much as we want to, we can’t skip to 3 p.m. and the joyous resurrection.

During Lent this year, we are going to be talking about being in the wilderness. It is hard for me to imagine wilderness. I have lived in a city my entire life, I have done the tour of Texas, born in Houston, college in San Antonio, and adult life in Dallas. I did spend a year of my life in a rural town in Japan and a year of my life in a town in England, but neither of them felt like wilderness. Do you image wilderness as desert or forest? As unchartered territory? As bleak? I am so thankful for Howard Pelton and for his photo on the cover of our bulletin that is his depiction of the wilderness. You can’t see the road; you can only see the tops of the trees. It is disorienting. I think of wilderness as disorienting and lonely and dangerous.

I think of the wilderness as a place where I am waiting for God to speak. Last week Kate Bowler’s new book came out. It is called “Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I’ve Loved.” Kate Bowler is a Professor at Duke who was diagnosed with incurable stage four cancer at age 35. She says her diagnosis has taught her that God’s presence is in a way a place that she was introduced to in the worst moments of her life. She can visit God’s presence by spending time in quiet, or prayer, and going for a walk, or having coffee and conversation with a friend, but she has to cultivate God’s presence. Maybe the wilderness is a place where we are encouraged to cultivate God’s presence.

In our scripture today Jesus is baptized and immediately the Spirit didn’t lead Jesus into the wilderness, but drove him into the wilderness. He was not calmly led or encouraged with sweets. He was driven. Mark’s Gospel doesn’t try to sugarcoat the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus isn’t walking into the wilderness holding hands with his friends singing Kumbaya, he is kicked out into the wilderness. We want life to be easy, but it isn’t. Jesus’ baptism doesn’t protect him and it doesn’t protect us. Baptism calls us and drives us into the challenge of life. Being God’s beloved child does not exempt us from tragedy. Being human means we will have struggle and conflict with the powers of evil in our world. Did you notice the wild beasts in the scripture? Our world has wild beasts and angels roaming in the same territory.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Jesus emerges from the wilderness and his cousin John the Baptist is arrested. That arrest will result in John the Baptist’s death. It is one bad thing after another bad thing. And I want to gloss over it, I want to get to the happy, I want to get to the announcement about Jesus’ ministry, but maybe the injustice of his cousin’s arrest was the reason why Jesus declared why he was here and what he was about. Maybe the tragedy was what made Jesus stand up and proclaim the good news of God, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” Jesus has been in the wilderness, his cousin gets arrested, and Jesus says enough. The time is fulfilled, God’s rule is near and so everyone needs to repent, turn around from the way they have been living, and believe.

On Ash Wednesday we hear those words as a cross is put on our foreheads. “Repent and believe the Gospel.” We also hear the words, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” We are just dust and God breath. And someday our dusty body will fail and our breath will return to God.”[[3]](#footnote-3) We are dying and Lent reminds us of that because to have resurrection, we have to have death. God is with us in our pain and in our dying. God is in the business of bringing life from death, giving hope to the hopeless, and drawing us to life abundant.[[4]](#footnote-4) God is with us in this wilderness we call life.

We can take this 40-day journey of Lent as an opportunity for us to be in the wilderness. We can step back, contemplate our mortality, and make room in our lives for the coming of God’s rule and activity in our lives. Our lives are filled with challenges, moments of feeling overwhelmed, hearing sobering news, and loss. You may feel like you are already in the wilderness and you need help to feel grounded. Maybe carving out five minutes for prayer and quiet before you start your day, will give you the strength to make it through each day. These 40 days of Lent is a great opportunity to start that spiritual practice. Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness. Can we spend a few minutes each day to connect with our wilderness?

In Brene Brown’s book Braving the Wilderness she says, “The wilderness can often feel unholy because we can’t control it… But it turns out to be the place of true belonging, and it’s the bravest and most sacred place you will ever stand.”[[5]](#footnote-5) She continues to say, “True belonging is the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness. True belonging doesn’t require you to change who you are; it requires you to be who you are.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

In Mark’s Gospel, the Spirit present at Jesus’ baptism drove Jesus into the wilderness, but the Spirit does not leave Jesus unprepared or alone. Jesus is driven into the wilderness with the affirmation of baptism that he is God’s Beloved Son, that God is well pleased with Jesus and that the power of the Holy Spirit is with him.[[7]](#footnote-7) In our baptisms we received the affirmation and acceptance and promise that we would never be alone from the God who created the heavens and the earth, the One who caused light to shine in the darkness and raises the dead to life.[[8]](#footnote-8) “If God is for us, who is against us?” (Romans 8:31). If we use this period of Lent to dive into our wilderness, we can be sure that we are not alone. It is not dangerous. We do not need to be disoriented. If God is for us, who is against us?

Yes, there will be temptation and challenge and suffering and growth, but this world God loves needs our care and attention, our action and commitment, and God has called us to be part of the struggle as agents of love and protection![[9]](#footnote-9) After the school shooting in Florida, Bill Holston, a member of our church, put on facebook, “Just so you know, calling your representative and urging them to support Dreamers in the current Bi-Partisan Senate Immigration bill or suggesting some reasonable approach to gun control is an act of prayer.”[[10]](#footnote-10) “We don’t have to live in a country where school shootings are normal. We don’t have to live in a country where ICE is tearing apart families. We don’t have to live in a country where food stamps are slashed. It doesn’t have to be this way. It shouldn’t be this way.”[[11]](#footnote-11) How do you and I want to take action this Lent?

You and I might have different ideas on how to make our world better. We are all called to do justice, to stand with the oppressed, the persecuted, to sit ourselves between the lines of hatred and violence. I feel angry about the lack of action to prevent more mass shootings. Brene Brown says we are more sorted ideologically than we’ve ever been in the history of our country. We go to church, we go to school, and we hang out with people who hate the same people we do. Brene Brown says being a part of a church community should be about singing, breaking bread, and passing the peace with people you want to punch in the face.[[12]](#footnote-12) Brene Brown says people are hard to hate close up and that we need to hold hands with strangers.[[13]](#footnote-13) We can all agree that there is work for us to do. I believe in a God who says that hatred will not win, guns will not win, violence will not win. God chooses us for salvation, for freely given grace, for a sacred call to stand tall in the face of violence. May we together fight for change in this nation and this world as we stand with our children and our teachers for peace.

Our world is desperate to hear and experience God’s love. I think it is why when there is great tragedy like the school shooting in Parkland Florida, we are drawn to stories of heroes like geography teacher Scott Beigel, or football coach Aaron Feis or Athletic Director Chris Hixon, who all died using their bodies to protect students from gunfire. We can’t protect one another from pain but we can help one another journey through pain. We need one another. When we feel hopeless, when we feel disoriented and lonely in the wilderness, we need reminders that nothing can defeat those aligned with God’s love and life. God is with us even in the wilderness, especially in the wilderness, and God calls us, all of us, to embrace the opportunity to continue the work of God’s reign to share the hope we have been given with all God’s children.[[14]](#footnote-14) Thanks be to God, Amen.

1. https://www.npr.org/2018/02/12/585066841/a-stage-4-cancer-patient-shares-the-pain-and-clarity-of-living-scan-to-scan [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.davidlose.net/2018/02/lent-1-b-lenten-courage/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.instagram.com/p/BfL1uFFn6Q4ukBRsubvVF\_Gn-WwzPgpLiKZdAw0/?taken-by=revjkwright [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://www.davidlose.net/2018/02/lent-1-b-lenten-courage/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://www.globoforce.com/gfblog/2017/true-belonging-brene-brown-braving-wilderness/ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. http://www.globoforce.com/gfblog/2017/true-belonging-brene-brown-braving-wilderness/ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. http://www.davidlose.net/2018/02/lent-1-b-lenten-courage/ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. http://www.davidlose.net/2018/02/lent-1-b-lenten-courage/ [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. http://www.davidlose.net/2018/02/lent-1-b-lenten-courage/ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. https://www.facebook.com/bill.holston?hc\_ref=ARQmCfe\_L2CCusdwdRf3VfPmfEpy52u8hVDS0nFebAmqOgEDu0S-hm5E\_WK952nJAT0&fref=nf [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. https://twitter.com/i/web/status/963934915967545346 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. http://jenhatmaker.com/episode-02-brene-brown.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. http://www.globoforce.com/gfblog/2017/true-belonging-brene-brown-braving-wilderness/ [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. http://www.davidlose.net/2018/02/lent-1-b-lenten-courage/ [↑](#footnote-ref-14)