

## Mark 1: 9-15

<sup>9</sup> In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

<sup>12</sup> And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. <sup>13</sup> He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

### Trinity Presbyterian Church February 18, 2018

---

#### “Into the Wilderness We Go (Whether We Want It or Not!)”

Did we hear the words correctly? The Holy Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness? It is a puzzling image, to say the least. If we took a vote on what the Holy Spirit does we'd say she comforts, empowers us, advocates and prays on our behalf. But in the story, the same Spirit who affirms Jesus at his baptism in the matter of one verse is suddenly driving him into the land of wild beasts and temptations. The Spirit is not being gentle here, not this time. The word used to describe “the driving” is the same word for when Jesus casts out demons and unclean spirits. The Holy Spirit casts Jesus out; she forces him to go. Like a parent forcing their child to go to church. Is it just me, or does it sound like Jesus does not really have a choice.

Makes me wonder if we get a choice. Do the baptized get to skip over the wilderness? Do we get to take a pass on the desert because it's inconvenient for our lives? Or must we face the barren place as an essential part of our faith? Of course, we have the free-will to leave the wilderness whenever we want. But at some point, are we not only amusing ourselves until we take a hard look within, asking questions about who we honestly are? Until we examine the methods of distraction we use when we are anxious. Until we peer at the factory defaults that have been engrained in us since we were children to prove our worth to the world. Once had a seminary professor who said, “Beware of the minister who hasn't spent time in the wilderness.” Immediately, after Jesus is baptized, the Holy Spirit casts him out into the desert where he sits for forty days. It seems that he doesn't have a choice. Maybe there comes a point in our lives when we don't really have a choice either.

Well, it's a crummy time. We don't like it. Who among us would willingly take a vacation into the wasteland? Think back to a season of life when you found yourself there. Doubts about faith. Questions about our calling. Wrestling with our ornery gremlins. Maybe it happened when waiting for a job. Before coming here, I remember sitting in Detroit surrounded by six feet of winter. No money. No prospects. Two kids. A date night meant going to Costco for a

slice of pizza. It was hard. I don't talk about it much, but it was one of the most depressing times of my life—and I'd prefer to not live through that experience again. Or maybe we found ourselves in the wilderness when there was a rough patch in the relationship. The dry spell made us take an honest look at what we had been avoiding, at the direction the relationship was really headed. It feels awful. It's like in the wintertime when we look at all the naked trees. All the leaves are gone, the branches look like boney arthritic fingers. Have you ever looked up to the top of the tree line and seen the all the clusters of empty bird's nests? They are everywhere. A bunch of old abandoned homes that without the protection of the leaves are now totally exposed. It's how we feel in the wilderness: exposed, vulnerable, unsafe. It's crummy. Most of us don't want to live through that experience again.

Except, if Jesus' life has anything to do with our own, then the desert place has a holy purpose. Notice Jesus is in the desert before he begins his work. The wilderness prepares us for our work. Just as Advent prepares us *to receive* Christ, Lent prepares us *to be* the Body of Christ in the world. Most of us have gone to school. Our backpacks stuffed with folders and no. 2 pencils. In high school we were too cool for backpacks. It was a time of preparation, like a period of training for the real world. Or turn on the Winter Olympics in PeyongChang. See ski-jumpers soaring through the air, ice skaters landing triple axels. Listen to their stories. A life shaped by preparing for the moment. Same for us in the wilderness—we are preparing for the moment. Yesterday, there was a Racial Equality Institute Training here. The room was full, the leaders of the church went—they claim I forced them to go—and after being shown slide after slide of data proving racial disparities exist in every institution of our lives, we were asked to sit in our discomfort. It's not fun to be asked to sit still inside all the ways my skin color benefits me at the cost of black people's lives. But it is essential training if we are going to be a people who care about justice. The wilderness has a holy purpose: it prepares us to be the Body of Christ in the world.

So perhaps this year we go deeper with the discipline. Maybe we try sitting with the brokenness rather than trying to fix it. Try exploring the emptiness rather than trying to fill it. You know, the empty spot inside does not mean there is something wrong with us. It means there is something human about us. I'm convinced that 99% of us are addicted to something. Maybe food is my coping mechanism after a tough day. Perhaps perfectionism seduces me into the illusion that I'm in control of my tiny world. Maybe being helpful really helps me to avoid my loneliness. We all have something that we go to, but there's something deeper going on. Like our friends in A.A. say, "Our drinking isn't the problem, it is the unhealthy answer to the problem."

I know it is hard to figure out sometimes so here's a hint: you'll know you're on the right track when the voices begin to show up. First come the initial justifications: "You really don't need to

add this kind of pressure to your life right now, do you? Things are stressful enough.” Stick with the discipline a little longer and then enter into phase two: “Why sit here in your feelings when you should be doing something about it!” Stay the course and then comes the dangerous phase three: “If God really loves you, you can do whatever you want.”<sup>1</sup> Here’s the warning: If we go deeper there are no guarantees what will happen. But here’s the promise: God will use you to help heal this broken world.

Who knows, you might even encounter a few angels along the way. Some who will look a lot like you; who will remind us with a “thinking of you” card or some warm soup that we are God’s beloved child. And do you know what that means? It means the last thing that we are is alone.

---

<sup>1</sup> This idea was adapted from a sermon by Barbara Brown Taylor entitled “Lenten Discipline.”