

Liminal Spaces

Mark 1: 9-13

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 upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, "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, tested by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him.

Liminal spaces. The moments of transition between point A and point B. Between what was and what is to come. The process between the hurt and the healing, the wound and the recovery. In bible language a liminal time is the forty day/year period. Forty days goes back to Noah's ark between the flood and rainbow. It's forty years of Israel's wandering the desert between emancipation and promised land. And it's in Jesus' journey between baptism and the beginning of his ministry. While Jesus is still drying off from his dip in the river, the Holy Spirit casts Jesus into the liminal wilderness. Into the barren landscape where stories about beasts are told to children. The wilderness is where the temple priests would ritualistically send a scapegoat who carried all the sins of the community into the arena of the wasteland. Today, just like every Lent, we find ourselves inside the liminal space of the wilderness.

Maybe you've been there? The liminal space where there are more questions than answers. Where our insecurities rise without warning, and our faith walks on shifty ground. Remember during Covid—it was the lentiest lent we've ever lented. Remember, during Ash Wednesday services, some churches did a drive through imposition of ashes, where ministers in masks marked foreheads using Q-tips. Remember? Or maybe we don't because for three years we sat in the pandemic vortex where we wandered around in the wilderness of uncertainty. It was a liminal time. Or inside a season of grief where each morning has a film of exhaustion over it and time stands still. Or maybe between jobs: wrapped in a cloak of vulnerability with no clue about how to move forward. They are transitional places. Exposed places. Liminal places.

After Jesus gets a baptismal affirmation, as the Spirit falls on him as God's beloved child the text wastes no time. Immediately, the same Spirit who affirmed him now drives him into the wilderness—it's the same word used for when Jesus casts out demons and unclean spirits. The Spirit casts Jesus into a place where he probably wouldn't choose to be if he didn't have to. It's like dragging our pet to the vet. Or like a parent forcing their kid to go to church!

It makes me wonder if, when it comes to the wilderness, we get a choice. I mean, do the baptized get a free pass on skipping over life's vulnerable moments? In Mark's gospel we don't get a psychology of Jesus' temptations. We don't hear the dialogue between Jesus and the Satan figure. All we know is that Jesus is tested for forty days; notice not at the end of the forty days, but the whole time. So we can imagine it's a time when Jesus is wrestling with existential questions about who he is, what's his purpose, and what is next. It's as if he is in our confirmation classes wrestling with what faith is all about just like we all do. And as the Spirit forces Jesus into the

liminal space, we might wonder if Jesus has a choice. And if Jesus doesn't have a choice, then what's the point?

So here's a hunch: What if the wilderness is an sacred part of our faith? I know it doesn't feel good; I know it isn't fun. But what if the wilderness is where we get in touch with something deeper. A place where holes get poked in our understanding of who God is. A place where we are worn out and no longer in control. A place where we come face to face with the truth about ourselves. And it is this part of the journey which prepares us to be God's ministers in the world. Beware of the minister who has never been to the wilderness.

At the presbytery level, there is a committee dedicated to preparing seminary students for their calling. Over and over again, we hear the students saying that ministry didn't feel real until they did their time as a chaplain in the hospital. Every once in a while we would get a student who makes the case for skipping over this part of the training. And every time we say "no way!" Why? Because it is there—where there are no words, where they pray with the dying, and came face-to-face with the impossible emptiness, where they find themselves being impacted and formed for ministry. In the wilderness. It's why having our confirmands doing "The pilgrimage on the margins" next month as part of their curriculum—and why we are all invited. (We have 24 folks going so far and there is room for more!) As we walk with street folk as our guides to experience what they go through, as we get in touch with our achy feet and grumbling bellies, as it forces us to see the world from a different perspective, we ask questions and wrestle with our middle class identity, and grow an acute compassion which changes something inside of us and we find ourselves becoming more equipped for God's mission in our city. Where does it happen? In the liminal wilderness.

But here's the kicker: do you remember what keeps Jesus going? Jesus is receiving the ministry of angels. No one can go through the wilderness alone—not even Jesus. In the Greek he is being deaconed. Perhaps you can remember a moment when someone ministered to you in a liminal space in your life? Maybe it was after a surgery, or after a loved one died. Maybe it was during a crisis of vocation or identity. But we aren't meant to travel through the wilderness alone.

Heard a story about a widow who went to a restaurant alone for a meal. Three young men saw her sitting alone, so they asked her, "Do you mind if we join you?" So they all sat together and enjoyed a meal together. To this day, they still make time to grab a meal at that same place. "It's like we are her grandkids," the young men say. The widow says, "I think it was a God thing...God sent me there that evening." She got deaconed. Ministered to by angels while she was in a wilderness time.

In the wilderness places and liminal spaces, perhaps you remember something similar? An angel who saw you, or ministered to you, or reminded you that you aren't alone. Take two minutes and write down a story that comes to mind (and maybe share it with someone). Amen.