

Mark 1:9-15

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And 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. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." ¹²And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

The Journey of the Beloved February 18, 2018

Jesus walked this lonesome valley, He had to walk it by himself; O, nobody else could walk it for him, He had to walk it by himself.

We must walk this lonesome valley, we have to walk it by ourselves; O, nobody else can walk it for us, we have to walk it by ourselves.

You must go and stand your trial, you have to stand it by yourself, O, nobody else can stand it for you, you have to stand it by yourself.

This powerful spiritual is one I often think of when I consider this first reading in the Lenten journey. That Lent is a time of trial, loneliness, temptation, and clarity. A time to walk in the wilderness and come face to face with our God. A time when the Holy Spirit drives us into the wilderness just as God's people wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. A time to let your ego and your, "self" die, to the temptations of the world and trust God completely. Mark's Gospel doesn't give us the details of some of the other gospel accounts. We only read here that Jesus was driven into the wilderness after his baptism. That after he heard God call him, "Beloved Son" he is led into the wilderness to face the deep truth of that calling on his life.

Jesus, I think, is not only showing us about baptism and repentance but also about going into the wilderness and facing our fears and doubts. I often read this passage in the gospel and ask, "Why did Jesus come to be baptized? Why did he need to be driven into the wilderness after hearing God call him his beloved son? Did even Jesus need to come to terms with who he was and who God was and what it means to trust in God for everything...even to die if need be? I wonder. Don't you? And it is in these forty days that we too walk with Jesus to the cross and beyond, and our trust and faith in God will be challenged as we face the difficulties of living as faithful, beloved children. That Jesus is again showing us the way of discipleship. He is showing us that he too struggled with life, that he too, is human and understands what it means to live in this world and face the many joys and sadness's that are part of this human experience. That he too understands violence, greed, oppression, prejudice, anger, politics, religion, the beasts that threaten our lives, and all the facets of being human and living together.

And so we enter this liturgical season of Lent a period of 40 days, not including Sundays. To walk with Jesus to the cross and to Easter. It is a time for reflection and questioning. Perhaps even a time of testing and certainly a time to pay attention.

Frederick Buechner in his book *Wishful Thinking* shared this thought about Lent. He says, "In many cultures, there is an ancient custom of giving a tenth of each year's income to some holy use. For Christians, to observe the forty days of Lent is to do the same thing with roughly a tenth of each year's days. After being baptized by John in the river Jordan, Jesus went off alone into the wilderness where he spent forty days asking himself the question what it meant to be Jesus. During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask one way or another what it means to be themselves.

Questions such as, If you had to bet everything you have on whether there is a God or whether there isn't, which side would get your money and why? When you look at your face in the mirror, what do you see in it that you most like and what do you see in it that you most deplore? If you had only one last message to leave to the handful of people who are most important to you, what would it be in twenty-five words or less? Of all the things you have done in your life, which is the one you would most like to undo? Which is the one that makes you happiest to remember? If there is any person in the world, or any cause, that, if circumstances called for it, you would be willing to die for? If this were the last day of your life, what would you do with it?

To hear yourself try to answer questions like these is to begin to hear something not only of who you are but of both what you are becoming and what you are failing to become. It can be pretty depressing business all in all, but if sack-cloth and ashes are at the start of it, something like Easter may be at the end."

Sometimes our wilderness journeys do that, don't they? They cause us to ask difficult questions as we perhaps find ourselves caring for our aging parents or going through a mid-life career change. A diagnosis of cancer or some other devastating disease. A marriage or relationship that falls apart. Tragedies and events that lead us into the wilderness, ready or not.

And somehow for me, that is often the point and purpose of the wilderness. To learn the most important lesson of all. That God is the fiery cloud by night and the pillar by day. That God is with us and for us and walks with us through the wildernesses of our lives just as he did from the beginning.

Isn't that the story of God in the Exodus as well as so many other stories of God? That the biblical narrative is full of the stories of those going through the wilderness seeking the promises and struggling with the evils and temptations of power and injustice in their world? Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, John the Baptist, Jesus, all striving to answer the question of, "Where is God when my life seems to be falling apart?" And they all encountered God who is the presence that makes wilderness journeys what they are.

Jesus was in the wilderness, as we all are. And his being there in the story reminds us all that no matter what wilderness we find ourselves in, he too, is not only there, but has already been there, long before we ever set foot on the pathway and that he emerged victoriously, not only from his own wilderness but from ours as well. The Angels were with him. God was with him. Perhaps the boldest and most powerful message of the story of God and his people is that God is with us. Before us and behind us. God is no stranger to the wilderness and seems to never be absent.

Now I can't convince you of that truth. You will need to find it for yourselves. But the one thing that I heard in this reading that I didn't hear before, is that Jesus may have walked this lonesome valley, but he didn't walk it alone. Which may be where the song gets it wrong. Jesus was never alone, and neither are we as we walk the wildernesses of our lives. I was reminded recently by someone who loves me, that while I find myself in the wilderness right now, that I should keep my eyes open for Angels. You have to be looking for them I suppose. Or as Mr. Rogers always said, "Look for the helpers." Those folks who remind us that we are the beloved children of God and precious to God and to one another.

This week we experienced another tragic shooting at a high school in Florida. 17 people were killed, both students and adults and many others injured. And as I was considering the text for today it struck me that this is in many ways another wilderness story, isn't it? A time where we question our own evil nature as well as our response to that evil when it is displayed so violently. It is a time where we question God and God's purpose. A time when we easily cast judgment or assign blame. A time where we feel lost and alone. A time when we lash out in our own anger and frustration wondering, where are our angels, where are our helpers.

And yet, there were angels present that day. Angels, helpers, saviors, and they appeared as teachers, coaches, and others, who put themselves in between a shooter and the students they loved and cared for.

This is a different, but oh, so familiar wilderness story where questions about life and death, God's purpose and calling, about choosing who you will follow and serve, all seem to come to the surface. These are questions that all seem to be unclear in a moment like this, where we are left with nothing to do but trust and hope. Where we feel there is no way to fight, but only to surrender to the One in whom we trust, holding on even in the wilderness, to those words that remind us that we are God's beloved children. The very words that Jesus heard as he ministered to a violent world.

Poet, Theologian, and Pastor, Jan Richardson shared this beautiful blessing in her book *Circle of Grace* which I'll close with today. It is titled **Beloved Is Where We Begin**, and it goes like this.

“If you would enter into the wilderness, do not begin without a blessing.

Do not leave without hearing who you are; Beloved, named by the One who has traveled this path before you.

Do not go without letting it echo in your ears, and if you find it is hard to let it into your heart, do not despair. That is what this journey is for.

I cannot promise this blessing will free you from danger, from fear, from hunger, or thirst, from the scorching sun or the fall of the night.

But I can tell you that on this path there will be help.

I can tell you that on this way there will be rest.

I can tell you that you will know the strange graces that come to our aid only on a road such as this, that fly to meet us bearing comfort and strength, that come alongside us for no other cause than to lean themselves toward our ear and with their curious insistence whisper our name:

Beloved.

Beloved.

Beloved.”

Thanks be to God! Amen