

Mark 1:9-15

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."

“The Taming of the Wilderness”

Jesus' baptismal scene in Mark is one of a few peaceful and comfort-giving episodes for Jesus in his whole Markan ministry. As he came up from the water he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove. In the midst of the heavens being torn apart we get the sense that the Spirit or the dove, shelters Jesus for a moment as he learns God is well pleased with him and that he is the Beloved. When I picture this image I imagine Jesus aware of the protective white dove whose white wings shelter him more than the tearing of the heavens. God's words of love, comfort, and assurance must have sounded like beautiful music to Jesus' ears. This beginning of the vision for the life of the baptized is promising indeed.

Then Mark has the audacity to jolt us from this serene vision! As Barbara Brown Taylor once said, "here is no sweet dove." The Spirit morphs into a kind of pecking, beating, bird nightmare that sends Jesus fleeing to the wilderness. He was driven there. "And the Spirit immediately drove him into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."

In my life the wilderness has been as a place of solace and retreat. Remembrances of camping trips, fishing, rock hopping, playing in a field of wildflowers come to mind. This is not the type of wilderness Mark is talking about. In this wilderness, which we might describe as an isolating and barren desert, the wild beasts surround Jesus for days on end. Throughout Christian history the wilderness has been used to describe times of temptation, seasons of illness, lifelong struggles, and the wayward journey of a people always drifting and then finding their way through God's grace to a righteous path again. A wilderness journey can mean many things.

What does it mean to Jesus in Mark? Our reading provides us with some clues. Jesus isn't the only one facing "the wilderness." John the Baptist, the one who came to "prepare the way" in the wilderness for Jesus, was arrested during this time in Jesus' ministry. The wilderness, his arrest and imprisonment, will eventually lead to death.

Jesus and John both faced the testing of their faith through suffering. Those forty days in the wilderness, Jesus struggled to live into the words of his baptism "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Mark doesn't give us the details of the temptation Jesus faced as do the other gospels. All we know is that he was in "the wilderness" for 40 days, tempted by Satan, surrounded by the wild beasts.

Could it be that even in this first wilderness visit, Jesus faced sin and began to put it to death? The authorities have John the Baptist, and they will put him to death, but first, the wilderness is being tamed through the person and work of Jesus so that death is

not the end of our journey with God. Sin's grip on us is already being broken down. We hear this as Jesus comes out of the wilderness proclaiming, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Through Jesus' survival of his wilderness experiences, even unto being raised from the dead, and his proclamation of good news, God has offered all people the blessing of knowing that the bow hung up in the clouds in Genesis remains there forever. As God did then, God offers new life now through baptism and the opportunity to renew our lives through repentance. In Jesus, God has tamed the wilderness of our sin by facing temptation and defeating it. God came so near that in Jesus God experienced the depths of despair we face in the wilderness of our lives, and has ultimately defeated it. There is no place our sin can drag us that won't find a merciful God waiting to vanquish it and call us to new life. The wilderness is tamed. Repent and believe the good news!

Gary Charles, a Presbyterian minister now serving in Atlanta, Georgia, tells a personal story in his book *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*. A college student had a religion paper to compare theological positions from different Christian denominations. After bombarding Charles with series of questions she asked, "What is the central message of your faith?" Charles said he "rambled a bit, giving her an acceptable answer, one that would pass muster before any examining body of mainstream theologians, but her question lingered long after our conversation ended." He yearned later for another shot at her last question. Charles believes the central message of our faith has to do with the first words Jesus spoke when he began his public ministry in Mark. "I wish that student would come dashing into my office one more time and ask again, 'What is the central message of your faith?' The message, I would tell her, is a gift. The gift is the call to *Metanoieite* [the Greek word for repentance], which, simply put, means the freedom to change and embrace God's future, because God is on the loose and, in Jesus, gives us the chance to begin again....Still dripping wet from the Jordan, Jesus says, 'Repent, and believe in the gospel.'"¹

Jesus wouldn't have invited us to repent if change weren't possible in our lives. Repentance is our response to what God has done, and was doing even in the beginning of Mark's gospel in Jesus Christ. Repentance and belief go hand-in-hand. You cannot have one without the other. Both are our response to a generous and loving God.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. As we repent, and turn to embrace a better way of living that God has initiated for us we remember we are marked for life as Jesus was in the baptismal waters, incorporated into Christ's own body, the church. We are not alone because God is with us always through the Spirit and we have one another to lean on in the wilderness of our lives. We can call each other out in love, not judgment, when we are stuck in the muck of sin. For we never say only repent, but "repent and believe in the good news!" If we forget that the good news is about justification by faith through grace alone, thanks be to God that the Lord's Table and the Baptismal font remind us that God's grace is abundantly enough, and always will be. Repent, and believe, and receive God's grace. Amen.

¹ Brian K. Blount and Gary W. Charles in *Preaching Mark in Two Voices* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2002) 36-40.