

Lent I  
Mark 1:9-15  
February 21, 2021  
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Each week Pastor Dane and I preach in an empty sanctuary. It is a strange thing to do. Pastor Dane, I'm sure, has his strategies for addressing the oddness. Mine is simple. I imagine that you are here. I survey the pews, looking at each section of this four-quadrant space, remembering who likes to sit where, what time you arrive, and offering a prayer for your current life. It's no secret that we are creatures of habit; and so some persons get here early to listen to the gathering music, some persons come through the side sanctuary door after making a stop at Sunday school, some scoot into the back pews during the opening hymn. Most of us have a cherished pew. Can you find yours?

In the wilderness of the past year, the familiar patterns of worship have been altered. We have had to discover new ways of making sacred the space we still share together. It is a wilderness time.

By definition, a wilderness conjures up images of a desolate place, a pathway devoid of familiar markers. If you are walking in sand, the footsteps of the person ahead of you or even the ones you have made behind you are erased. If you are walking across a desert, your water supply is your most valuable asset, along with a shading hat. A wilderness space is a transitional one, because few make a permanent home here when there are more inhabitable geographies. Traveling through the wilderness arouses one's survival instincts. Think of the Great Salt Desert in Utah, which rendered the impulsive travels of early settlers foolish, or the Sonoran Desert in Arizona, where many have lost their way. In the wilderness, one's alertness is sharpened by the reality of strangeness, by possibility of death. Someone, somewhere, travels such a wilderness today.

Wilderness describes a geography. It is also a spiritual state. "I'm in the wilderness," we might confess. "I feel cut off from God, rent asunder from my old identity. I am being tested, forced to struggle apart from what has felt good or comfortable about my life."

The inclination is to equate such a landscape with God's absence. But scripture testifies to a different story. In Genesis, when Abraham casts out Sarah's servant Hagar and their son Ishmael into the wilderness, Hagar prepares to die, only to be visited by God who enables their survival. Generations later, the Israelites are led by Moses into the wilderness, as the crucial step toward freedom. And Jesus, newly baptized, with the voice of God saying "This is my Son," still ringing in his ears, is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness. The wilderness can be a place to meet God.

Last week in his sermon Pastor Dane prepared us for Lent, suggesting the season is a time for taking a holy pause, creating moments to account for where we find ourselves before God. His sermon, along with today's scripture, got me thinking about such spiritual wildernesses.

Some of you know, I was born without the ability to hear in my right ear. I have lived with this partial deafness my entire life and often marveled at the brain's ability to compensate for a sensory loss. Being deaf in one ear means I have never cared for loud spaces, be they dance clubs, pep rallies, or stadium-filled concerts. If you speak to me from my right side without my awareness of your presence, I might miss you, which, as a pastor, is never my intention. By far the biggest hurdle, though, came in learning to speak. Without the full ability to learn through imitating others' speech, I have had to learn the mechanics of speech; where to place my tongue for tricky sounds like r's, s's, sh's. As a kid, this challenge, by no means a life-or-death precipice, created a strange, at times alienating, space. Occasionally, I would wonder, why is something that is so easy for so many was so hard for me? Why do I have to work so hard at something that comes so easily for most?

I suspect every one of us has some space where we feel cast out from the familiar, expected, the normal into a strange, more difficult space. Each of us might encounter something where we wonder why do I have to work so hard at something that comes easily for most, why am I walking this rough road when others can take the by-way?

The Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness, beyond security, safety and the comfort of others. Here he faces the temptations of Satan, the presence of wild beasts. He ekes out a survival for forty days, a length reminiscent of Israel's forty years of wilderness wandering. We don't know precisely what wilderness was like for Jesus. Let's imagine a threadbare tent, with the entrance flap slapping in a fierce wind, and a fire kept small for safety. Silence dominates the air, except for the coyotes howling at night, the mountain lions pacing in the distance, and the occasional flap of a hawk's wings.

Satan- the personification of all the forces opposing God – tempts from the edge of the encampment. You don't have to follow the path laid out for you; he suggests You could take the smooth highway. Grab the glory of being God's Son and run for the nearest synagogue to cash it in for a prestigious post. Comfort, safety, power all can be yours. Jesus looks across the desolate landscape, taking in these tempting scenarios, pondering whether he is up to his task.

Mark doesn't tell us if Jesus ever wavered in his testing, if there was a day that Jesus thought about packing up and heading back into comfortable civilization. Instead, Mark focused upon the angels who waited upon Jesus amid his struggle. There were angels with him in the desert. Maybe the angels sprinkled his skin with water as the sun scorched down. Maybe they touched his forehead with their wings to help him release the tension. Maybe angels sang a lullaby to drown out the howling wind, a small "hark" to signal his suffering was not endured alone. At the end of forty days Jesus emerges resolute in his vocation to embrace the hard road, the desolate moments experienced by you and I in order to forge a path to a new home, in order to create a community of beloved-ness made whole by a cross.

When I first sensed a call into the ministry, I didn't think about the fact that such a vocation would require a fair measure of public speaking. I closed myself off from the obvious reality. It

felt ironic to me that God might use the parts of me that felt most vulnerable. And frankly embracing my vocation has meant more work, more vulnerability, more bumping up against the limitations that come with being a mortal, fallible, human being. This is the spiritual work of Lent. As preacher Christopher Henry says, “Lent begins in the wilderness. It is the place where pretense fades away and honest vulnerability becomes possible. In the wilderness we are unable to keep up the public image of effortless perfection that plague us. We are freed to confess the messy reality of our lives.”<sup>1</sup>

I don’t know where our present wilderness is taking us; or when and how we will emerge from it. But some truths are bubbling to the surface. The first is the spiritual freedom that comes with being honest about our mortality, our susceptibility to every kind of brokenness. The past year, I pray, brought us closer together in our common struggle. The pain of it has shown us our interdependence; my wholeness depends on yours, yours depends upon mine. Let’s commit to being honest with one another. Let’s be brave enough to admit that there are days we’re just holding it together, that there are places in us that need hard work. And let’s trust that in our weakness, angels bend down to shelter us through.

A second truth emerges from Jesus’s wrestling with Satan. As Matthew Skinner notes “the antagonists in Mark are not human ignorance or religio-political authority; they are spiritual forces, things that oppress human bodies and minds and defy human attempts to subdue them.”<sup>2</sup> The wilderness of today invites a similar recognition. As we make sense of the inequity exposes in the past year in education, health care or the disproportionate suffering placed upon some lives, it becomes obvious that we wrestle against forces larger than us. May this Lent be a time when we take up Jesus’s wrestling and claim the power of Christ to defeat that which defies God.

Lastly, living alert to vulnerability and to larger forces has made me freer in my expressions of love. Simply put, I’m more willing to say I love you; I’m sending you my love. In the end, love is what matters. Love is what will see us through. Jesus’s life with us is God way of saying: I love you so much that I won’t leave you to struggle alone, unaided. I’m aware of your vulnerability and the larger forces of evil. Here I’m sending my love, wrapped in a man resolute in his vocation to redeem us all. There is no more powerful force than love. Our primary vocation is to be those who love like God.

So as we begin Lent, where are you before God? What vulnerabilities need to be named? What forces for ill need to be acknowledged and resisted? How is it that you love? The sanctuary may be empty. But the Spirit, the Spirit has no boundaries. There is no distance the Spirit cannot cross. May we, together, observe a holy Lent.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry, Christopher, “Where to Begin,” on Day One, February 26, 2012. [https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003026/where\\_to\\_begin](https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003026/where_to_begin). Accessed 2/17/21.

<sup>2</sup> Skinner, Matthew. “Preaching this Week: Mark 1:9-15” in Working Preacher, February 22, 2015. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-mark-19-15-3>. Accessed 2/17/21.

