

Lent 1B  
Peace, Seattle  
February 18, 2018  
Mark 1:9-15

## **WILDERNESS JOURNEY**

**The journey we begin today is a journey that winds its way through wilderness territory.** We follow in the footsteps of God's chosen people who spent a whole generation there, on their way to the Promised Land; 40 years learning how to trust God and live in community.

**It didn't always turn out so well.**

**A sacred tent—a tabernacle—traveled with them** through the desert, a sign of God's presence in their midst. This space has become our sacred tent for the season.

**Jesus, too, followed in the footsteps of his ancestors and the prophets. In today's gospel he moves from a baptism by water in the Jordan to a baptism by fire in the desert.**

The way Matthew and Luke tell it, Jesus was "led" by the Spirit into the wilderness after his baptism. But Mark, as I've noted before, has a different take on what happened.

**Mark tells us that after his plunge in Jordan's waters, after the heavens are TORN APART and the VOICE names him BELOVED, Jesus is DRIVEN by the Spirit into the wilderness.**

**The verb is ekbalow and it conjures up the image of a desert hawk in hot pursuit of Jesus.**

Wilderness is the longest story the Scriptures have to tell, and it often plays the role of necessary tutor for those whom God has called to bear God's message to the world.

**What happened there for Jesus?**

**Matthew & Luke tell the story in riveting detail; three distinct tests, three distinct responses. But Mark? Mark leaves us guessing; one verse is all he has to say on the subject.**

HE WAS IN THE WILDERNESS FORTY DAYS, TEMPTED BY SATAN;  
AND HE WAS WITH THE WILD BEASTS; AND THE ANGELS WAITED ON HIM.

**One thing we know for certain: driven into the desert by the holy raptor of God, Jesus comes out the other side with a message and momentum that will carry him through his entire ministry:**

GOD'S REIGN IS HERE! CHANGE YOUR LIVES AND BELIEVE THE GOOD NEWS!

**Israel had spent a whole generation stumbling through the desert and getting tripped up along the way.**

God provided manna and water, and 10 words to guide their common life; 10 commands to teach them what it meant to live in covenant with God and in community with each other. But time and again, those words were rejected, bypassed, or ignored.

**Three millennia later, we're not doing much better.**

**Truth be told, we live in a time when our common life is beginning to feel like an endless slog through wilderness places, the most desolate of which springs from our national obsession with resorting to violence as a means to an end.**

So we stood by helpless once again, as a lethal weapon in the hands of an angry young man stole the lives of another 17 children—bringing to an even dozen the number of school shootings that have gone down since the 1<sup>st</sup> of January.

Fred Niedner, Valparaiso University Professor and columnist for the Indiana Post-Tribune, had this to say about the Ash Wednesday massacre:<sup>1</sup>

“The last cross I saw on Wednesday...showed up the next morning on the front page of this newspaper and many others. It appeared on the face of a mother who wept as she hugged her living, breathing daughter outside the high school in Parkland, Florida, where another kind of priest all too familiar among us these days had rained death on dozens of school children, not with ashes ... but with bullets...

“Make no mistake about it. This latest shooter is a priest—an angel of death dispatched by the enslaving powers behind one of the most fiercely held religions of our time. We have proved ourselves willing year after year to sacrifice the lives of scores of children on an altar we call “freedom,” and specifically, the freedom of anyone who wants to manufacture, sell, and own powerful killing machines, without regard for public safety...

“The young man...who killed 17 people on Wednesday couldn’t legally purchase beer at a convenience store, but despite his age and troubled background, he could walk into a gun shop and without difficulty buy an AR-15 rifle with which he could not only protect his hearth and home, but wreak unspeakable havoc on a community.”

**The predictable promise of “thoughts and prayers,” proffered *ad naseum* by elected officials makes me want to puke.**

I’ve heard Niedner speak several times up at Holden Village. The last time was at a theological conference, where he told us the origin of the Hebrew term for wilderness—“MID-BAR.”

To get to MID-VAR, he said, you begin with the Hebrew word for “word”—“DA-BAR”—and add a preposition that means “away from,” “apart from,” or “without.”

What you end up with, then, is a word for “wilderness” that translates:

- *“the place where words don’t work anymore,”*
- *“the place where meaning eludes us,”*
- *“the place in which we don’t have the words for what we’re experiencing.”*

At times it seems we’ve taken up permanent residence in that dark desert place, as the list of intractable issues grows.

- Carbon pollution is raising temperatures, unleashing destructive forces on oceans, land, and air.
- Selfishness, greed, and fear have us turning our backs on refugees, immigrants, and Dreamers.
- Nuclear arsenals are growing.
- Partisan rhetoric is eroding our institutions and threatening the underlying principles of our democracy.

**We’re traversing a wilderness largely of our own making, and wondering if we’ll ever get to the other side.**

At times such as these we need reminding that God's intention is NOT that we stay in the desert forever, but that we emerge with hard won wisdom, and a well tempered trust that believes, come hell or highwater, that God is with us for the long haul; that this journey has a destination.

That's the gift which emerged out of Jesus' experience, and that's what God wants to give us, too.

**But before we can get at THAT place, something has to die.** That's the hard lesson God's people keep on having to learn over and over again. The journey of faith is a life-long pilgrimage in which we continually let go of more and more, turning over control of ourselves, our agendas, our possessions, our illusions—all we so carefully gather and seek to preserve—giving it into God's hands, until we can say, with Jesus, NOT MY WILL BUT YOURS BE DONE.

**Only when we engage in that kind of emptying will there be room in us for God.**

For Jesus, entering the wilderness is a matter of obedience. If he is to be God's instrument for bringing God's saving power to the world, then he must walk that desert road.

**And so he goes**, and for 40 days he practices saying YES to God and NO to everything NOT of God. And at the end of it, accompanied by wild beasts and attended by angels, he is prepared to go the full distance; to say YES to all that God has in store for him...even his own death and resurrection.

**This is our journey, too, this Lent, taking the wilderness road with Jesus.**

Walking this road means preparing for an intensely personal journey, while at the same time recognizing it's also a communal journey.

- Our journey is a communal one because we have been washed in the same waters and called as one family to the same Table.
- Our journey is a communal one because the Spirit has called us together into this congregation named Peace.
- Our journey is a communal one because NOBODY can be a Christian alone.

When Jesus emerged from the desert and began proclaiming God's reign, the first thing he did was gather a community of apprentices around him; men and women who would travel beside him on his trek through the hills of Galilee, on to the hills of Judea, and finally up to Jerusalem.

During these 40 days we are invited, like them, to gather under the sacred tent with Christ at the center. And our first act is to receive from his hand bread for the journey.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus, sometimes the wilderness seems so vast, and the terrain so treacherous, that we feel paralyzed, frozen in our tracks. Yet, you come among us, walking beside us, and reminding us that on the other side of this desert a Promised Land of community awaits.

Keep us close to you and to each other as we make our way through the challenges and trials we face, and give us the strength to endure. Help us, along the way, to know the joy of community, to be agents of change, and to widen the circle of your beloved ones through acts of compassion, inclusion, hospitality, and sacrificial giving. In your name we pray. Amen.