

Watermarked: Our Baptismal Identity -Wilderness

A sermon preached by

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Mark 1:9-15

⁹ About that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. ¹⁰ While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. ¹¹ And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."

¹² At once the Spirit forced Jesus out into the wilderness. ¹³ He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among the wild animals, and the angels took care of him.

¹⁴ After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee announcing God's good news,¹⁵ saying, "Now is the time! Here comes God's kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!"

This morning we are beginning a Lenten series on our baptismal identity as Christians that I've called *watermarked*. Over the next few weeks we will preach, pray, sing, and study together the baptismal liturgy that forms each of us as Christians. Five Sundays in Lent may seem like a long time to unpack these meanings, but fortunately for you, Jane and Bonny will be preaching on these themes for a couple of these Sundays while I am on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

And historically, five Sunday is nothing when compared to the way the early church prepared its followers for baptism and admission into the faith. In the earliest days of the church, candidates for baptism were offered a three-year process of Christian formation that culminated in an intensive final stretch during Lent in the last year and was capped by a night-long Easter Vigil service where candidates were baptized and anointed with oil. The church called this entire process *catechesis*. Some of you may have come from faith traditions where the church used catechism classes to prepare bored children with a list of answers to memorize as a response to a series of questions about Christian doctrine. But thanks to God, our United Methodist traditions, and great teachers like Jim Hagedorn, that is not what is going on in our confirmation classes, nor is it our goal in our adult Inquirer's Class.

The word *catechesis* comes from two other Greek words, *kata* and *akouw*, which together literally mean something like "to listen alongside." We get our word "echo" from this word. That's the sense behind its early Christian usage. Catechesis is the process by which the church

comes “alongside” candidates for baptism to help them learn how their lives can become a “living echo” of Jesus. Catechesis, and these forty days of Lent, in particular, were about helping us learn how to live the way of Jesus. This period of catechesis was barely about doctrine at all.

So, our hope as the church is to come along side of you in the next five weeks as you listen to the baptismal liturgy. To join together and bring our reflections on how the stories of Jesus are a mirror into the sometimes jarring words from the ancient practices of the church.

The story of Jesus’ baptism in Mark is a sparse description of Jesus submitting himself to the baptismal practices of John the Baptism. Prior to Jesus’ time there are multiple instances of ritual washing or cleansing that go back as far as the Adam and Eve stories. Baptism, next to circumcision and sacrifice, was an absolutely necessary condition to be fulfilled by a proselyte to Judaism.

The Jesus tradition takes this further by showing that after his baptism Jesus was anointed by the Spirit, which says that he was loved and claimed by God. Mark says that immediately -- or at once in the translation of the Common English Bible -- Jesus was forced out into the wilderness for 40 days. That Greek word that is translated immediately (*euthys*) is one of Mark’s favorite words; he uses it forty-one times compared with ten times in all the rest of the New Testament.¹ So Mark doesn’t mess around with meandering narratives, he gets straight to the point. Jesus was tempted by Satan, or in Hebrew, the word for adversary; he shares the location with wild animals; and he is ministered to by angels. There is no description of the kinds of temptations that he faces as we read in Luke and Matthew, little to guide us, and much to let our imaginations do the work of interpretation.

If you are a United Methodist pastor sitting with the parents of a newborn child and wondering how to describe the mystery of the baptismal liturgy in a way that makes it at least somewhat palatable to 21st century ears, the first question that parents or adults are asked isn’t a whole lot of help. “*On behalf of the whole church, I ask you: Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world and repent of your sin?*” Perhaps that is what Mark refers to as being forced into the wilderness. Because it speaks of a landscape, a reality that we’d like to avoid. And it speaks of a response to that landscape -- *renounce, reject, repent* -- that requires a head on confrontation.

¹ William Placher, *Mark*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, p. 26

If you think that raising a child, changing countless diapers, experiencing month after month of little or no sleep is difficult, consider the landscape that baptismal identity invites us to; consider the cosmic conflict that awaits those of us who come to the waters. If you think we are not in the midst of a cosmic conflict, then you aren't listening to the news, when week after week we hear of our children being gunned down as they sit in school rooms.

The wild animals of our wilderness may be lobbyists dressed in thousand-dollar suits who can say with a straight face they are praying for the departed little ones, while at the same time they are fighting in a cosmic effort to make certain that criminals can still purchase body armor while they gun down our police officers or stockpile AR 15 rifles that fire 13 bullets a second when equipped with a still legal bump stock.

I've never spent forty days in solitude and silence, much less in a state of physical deprivation and danger, but I can't imagine that Jesus' time in the wilderness passed by quickly. Nor can I believe that the grief of losing a child unnecessarily lasts a convenient time period and then goes away. Instead it is a lifetime sentence of pain, sorrow, and lost opportunity. There is a sense in all the gospel accounts of Jesus wrestling with these demons that he experienced each day as a battle of mind, spirit, and body. Indeed, he never really leaves the wilderness. In his moments of healing, teaching, confronting the Roman and religious leaders, he is still in a conflict with these cosmic powers, still on his way to the trial, the mocking, the beatings, and the cross. There isn't a rainbow at the end of these forty days. Surely the hours he spent there stretched into years, and the dark night of the soul must have felt as if it would never end.

In our quick-fix culture, this aspect of the wilderness can be especially trying, because we both tire and despair easily. Why, we ask, is this pain not ending? Why are our prayers going unanswered? Where is God?

Nadia Bolz Weber suggests that temptation (Jesus' and ours) is always about identity — about *who* we are and *whose* we are: identity. "It's always God's first move. Before we do anything wrong and before we do anything right, God has named and claimed us as God's own. But almost immediately, other things try to tell us who we are and to whom we belong: capitalism, the weight-loss industrial complex, our parents, the cool kids at school — they all have a go at telling us who we are. But only God can do that. Everything else is temptation."²

² Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint*, FaithWords, 2013

Jesus' temptation begins with his baptism. But what happened to that certain sense of identity and belonging, I wonder, as Jesus's wilderness wanderings stretched into week two, or beyond in year one or two? Did it begin to waver? Did the Son of God have to keep reminding himself of who he was? Did God nudge him each time he forgot? "Can you hear me now? Can you hear that you are precious and beloved *now*? Can your identity as my own hold in this oppressive silence, here, now? Will you continue to renounce, reject, and repent of the evil that surrounds us?"

At his baptism, Jesus heard the absolute truth about who he was. That was the easy part. The much harder part came in the wilderness, when he had to face down every vicious assault on that truth. When the memory of his calling faded, and he had to hold on to being loved even in a lonely wasteland. You see, to be in the wilderness is perhaps the best way to learn that we are loved. Because the unnerving fact is: we can be beloved and uncomfortable at the same time; we can be beloved and unsafe at the same time. In the wilderness, the love that survives is flinty, not soft; salvific, not sentimental. Learning to trust it takes time, it takes purpose, it takes confrontation.

So today with the smudge of ash still on our foreheads and the reality of our mortality still echoing in our ears, I pray that we'll not avoid the wilderness this Lent. I hope that these wanderings in the desert will teach us who and whose we are. For it is there that we can still hear the angels whispering to us...you are beloved, you are beloved, you are beloved. And if that can wash over us, then indeed we can be born anew. AMEN