February 22, 2015

Mark 1:9-15

Lent: A Journey to Resurrection: Wilderness

Rev. Kerry Smith

Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Mark 1:9-15 NRSV

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.”

 In Bill Bryson’s book, “A Walk in the Woods,” he writes about his attempt to walk the Appalachian Trail, with his friend Stephen Katz. Now Bill had not seen his friend for a while, and his friend had been busy partying and was very out of shape. Stephen had a difficult time keeping up with Bill on the trail. Finally, he decided that he might be able to increase his speed if he could make his backpack lighter. He threw out everything that wasn't absolutely essential. His backpack was a lot easier to carry, and he was able to travel a lot faster. He realized that his journey was easier when he carried a lighter load.

We are beginning the 40 days of Lent. Many of us come to this time of Lent with heavy backpacks, filled with burdens, problems, old issues that don't seem to have good solutions. Lent is an intentional time of self-reflection and repentance, a time to look at our lives and see if God can help us find the answers we need. Lent began in the early days of the Christian Church when people would fast to prepare for Easter, to inspire a deeper faith experience and appreciate the sacrifices and suffering Christ endured. Some of us might choose to fast or give up something or practice a spiritual discipline so that we may be more fully focused and engaged in following Jesus.

This Lent we are going to go on a journey together. We bring our heavy loads, but we also look ahead to Easter with hope. We are on a journey to resurrection, a journey to new life, to new creation. As we begin our journey, we hear about the beginning of Jesus’ journey. This beginning of Jesus’ ministry, his baptism where he receives his identity as God’s child, is immediately followed by wilderness. Jesus receives his identity as God’s child and it is this that helps him to weather the temptations and struggles that come.[[1]](#footnote-1) When we have our times in the wilderness, when our challenges and struggles seem overwhelming, may our identity as God’s beloved child guide us as well.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Did you notice in the scripture that it is the same Spirit who descends upon Jesus at his baptism and also drives him into the wilderness? The Holy Spirit not only was with Jesus, but led the way. We flee from challenge, from struggle, but Jesus was driven toward the wilderness and he stayed there 40 days. When I do counseling with anyone, I always talk about the value that I have found in my own life of therapy. But, therapy is hard – and sometimes it takes more than 40 days to find the answers to our problems! Looking at yourself, looking at why you do things, looking back at your family of origin and the painful parts in your life, that is hard work.

Before I began as the pastor at Greenland Hills, I was working part-time as an Associate Pastor at a church that was having budget problems. When my position was eliminated, I went to see my therapist because I felt like a failure. Eventually, I realized that whether I had a job or not, I was not a failure in God’s eyes.

 Now, when we talk about suffering, testing, and temptations, I want to be clear that God does not cause our suffering and God does not want us to suffer. God is not trying to teach us something, God does not want to punish us or put us in our place.[[3]](#footnote-3) But God is with us in the wilderness, there is no doubt about that. Life is hard. Struggle, trials, misery, testing, it happens during our lives. So, when those times happen, because they will, we can look for how God is at work. What can we learn from this? How might God use us to help someone else?[[4]](#footnote-4)

 As I said last week, God is in the business of bringing life out of death. That is what the resurrection of Jesus Christ is all about. So, do we allow the Holy Spirit to drive us? Do we listen to that still, small voice inside of us that is the Holy Spirit comforting us in our loneliness, guiding us when we feel lost, reminding us each and every day that God is with us? We are not alone, even in the wilderness.

 Last Saturday I was so frustrated with myself. It was a beautiful day and I had this wonderful family bike ride planned out. However, not everyone was as excited as I was to have a family bike ride. During our ride, I could feel my frustration level and my anger rising. And then we got home and I had all of these text messages because we had completely missed the basketball game for our 10 year old. I had written down the wrong time. I just wanted to be alone, alone to be angry, alone to scream, and alone because this togetherness stuff was too hard!

But, even though I was frustrated and angry, I knew that there was nowhere that I could go where God and God’s love would not already be. And even though my vision for the day was not what happened, I tried to appreciate the gift that the day had been. Yes, the bike ride had not been perfect, yes, we had missed the basketball game, but after I had calmed down and tried to forgive myself for my impatience and for my mistake, we made a homemade pizza dinner together. It was a gift. It was a reminder that we are not alone, even in the wilderness. We have to trust God, we have to allow the Holy Spirit to drive us. We have to know that no matter what happens, God is with us, we are not alone. Thanks be to God.

Why did Jesus follow the beginning of his ministry by being in the wilderness? Jesus being in the wilderness is a reminder to all of us that we have to take the journey. And the wilderness is a place where we learn what we can and must do without.[[5]](#footnote-5) Those forty days in the wilderness were a time for Jesus to become very clear about the direction his life would take, the commitments he would make, and the commitments he would not make.[[6]](#footnote-6)

We have to deal with our pain, we have to face whatever obstacle is in our path, we have go to the wilderness to be led out of the wilderness into resurrection, into new life, into transformation. We can’t start with resurrection. We can’t start with Easter. We have to allow the Holy Spirit to drive us, because we do not know what is in store.

Many of us are in the wilderness with our finances. One way that Lee and I decided to focus on what was important with our finances was to tithe. When Lee and I decided that we needed to tithe, that we wanted to tithe, we did not know how it was going to work out. We did not know what was in store. We just knew that we had to do it. I was tired of paying more to restaurants than I did to my God. I was tired of paying more to the people who watched my children in their daycare, than I did to the God who created my children. God asked for 10 %, and I wanted to give God more than I gave to the bank for my car loan. We had to make giving to God through our church a priority. And it has been good. It has not always been easy, and it has definitely been a sacrifice, but we made a commitment to each other, to this church, and to God that we would give our best and our first to God. It is the first check that we write every month and it is the largest check that we write each month. And the Holy Spirit has been with us. And it was a journey, and through that journey we have experienced resurrection and new life and transformation.

 It was like my trip this January with 17 others from Greenland Hills to Juarez. I was so nervous before we left. I was worried that I was not going to be able to do the work and that something terrible and violent would happen and I would die. But I knew that I was not alone. There were 18 of us, and it was hard. It was hard to see great poverty. It was hard to think about how much I missed watching TV, how much I missed surfing the internet, and especially how much I missed taking long showers. I am very spoiled. It was hard to think about how much I have here, and how little they had there. And how I was just going to be there three days, but that city would be home to the people I was getting to know and beginning to love forever. Did you catch in the scripture that the angels waited on Jesus? Not only was the Holy Spirit with him, but the angels took care of him. We are not alone, even in the wilderness.

 Does anyone watch the show “The Biggest Loser”? I can identify with people who are taking that difficult journey to lose weight. Like many of us, the people on the TV show soon realize that they can lose weight only after they have confronted the pain and the emptiness that drive them to overeat. They can’t achieve the weight loss until they deal with some pain or obstacle. If we don’t go on the journey of Lent, we don’t experience resurrection, new life, or transformation. This journey includes dealing with your pain. This journey includes dealing with your obstacle. Remember the story of the person walking the Appalachian Trail? What do you need to throw out of your backpack so that your load will be lighter? In the Message translation of the Bible by Eugene Peterson, Jesus goes to Galilee preaching the Message of God saying, “Time’s up! God’s kingdom is here. Change your life and believe the Message.” The time is now to change your life; time is up. May we not only survive the wilderness times of our lives, but also emerge from the wilderness – and from this Lenten season – with renewed hope, faith, and confidence. Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/02/lent-1-b-wilderness-faith/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/02/lent-1-b-wilderness-faith/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/02/lent-1-b-wilderness-faith/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/02/lent-1-b-wilderness-faith/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://www.gbod.org/worship/lectionary-calendar/first-sunday-in-lent8 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. http://www.gbod.org/worship/lectionary-calendar/first-sunday-in-lent8 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)