

Again & Again: Near and Far

*A sermon preached on Mark 1:9-15 on February 18, 2024,
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I.

There once was a young man who had gone to the desert to pursue a holy life. For months on end, he fasted, he prayed, he pondered the meaning of scripture, and he began to sense that these disciplines that constituted his rule of life just weren't rigorous enough. Back he went to his teacher to ask for even stricter rules to follow.

The teacher was a bit taken aback, but responded with ease: "Simply do this: go back to your cave, pray as you usually pray, fast as you usually fast, sleep when you are tired." Well the young man expected something better than that! Surely there was a tighter parameter or stronger boundary he could draw around his life! He found a second teacher and asked again, to which this teacher responded: "Go back to your cave, pray as you usually pray, eat when you are hungry, drink when you are thirsty, fast as you usually fast, sleep when you are tired." The young man was getting incredibly frustrated, so he sought out yet a third teacher, who told him, "just go back to your cave."

Reflecting on that story, writer Lauren Winner says this, "The point, I think, is that you can't simply pursue God in the desert, you must also begin to pursue yourself. You cannot fast if you have not first noticed that you are hungry; your hunger is what the cave can teach."¹

II.

The Christian season of Lent prompts us with discovery. In part, that's why we trade our colorful garments for ones more spare, our tables filled with basins and branches and burlap to remind us of what exists when all is stripped

¹ Lauren Winner, *Still*, p55-56.

away, so that we can notice we are hungry, as Lauren Winner says. We gathered here last in worship on Ash Wednesday to begin the season with a reminder: “from dust you are, and to dust you shall return,” we heard, a smear of ashes on our foreheads to remind us of our fragility and finitude. And this season, we’ll hear the reminders of how again & again as suffering finds us, as grief and fear and indifference repeat throughout all the corners of our living, God’s love becomes a counter refrain, grounding us again and again when all feels lost.

We hear this refrain of God’s nearness in baptism and far reach in Jesus’s ministry in our text for today, but it’s the two simple verses about Jesus’s experience in the wilderness where I want us to dwell.

Mark’s trademark brevity and urgency punctuate this text, particularly as the story turns toward the wilderness. No sooner had the water of his baptism dried on his skin than the Spirit who has spilled forth from the heavenly sphere is *immediately*, Mark tells us, driving him out into the wilderness. That verb here for “drive” propels and expels, as we see Mark use the same verb later as Jesus drives out evil spirits from the possessed. This is no gentle day trip! Nor is this a coddling Spirit. *The Message* translation helps to paint the picture here, saying, “At once, this same Spirit pushed Jesus out into the wild.”

We can practically hear the wind whistling through Mark’s spare wilderness backdrop. What we **know** of Jesus’ time there is so limited, but we do know this: (1) it was extended – 40 days, Mark tells us. His first hearers would recognize the significance of ‘40,’ the biblical way of saying ‘for a long time.’ They’d connect it with the 40 days with Noah amidst the flood; 40 days with Moses atop Mount Sinai and 40 days with Elijah atop Mount Horeb, all needing food; and not the least of which would be the 40 years of the Israelites’

journey through the wilderness toward the Promised Land.² (2) Jesus had three sets of companions. First, he was *tempted by Satan*. Matthew and Luke will give us a much rounder picture of what this looked like for Jesus, but Mark's account leaves much about how that unfolded for us to wonder. Then, he was *with the wild beasts*. Were they dangerous and fearful, or were they gentle?³ Finally, the *angels waited on him*. The Greek verb that Mark uses here suggests that the angels kept him, ministered to him, refused to leave him alone.

What we know of Jesus's wilderness experience is limited. But what we can *imagine* is rich in meaning, because what we imagine comes from our stories too.

III.

The metaphor of the wilderness has been a rich one in Christian theology in all the years since Jesus's 40-day turn. It's a season, an experience, a time we go through – often not of our choosing – where so much of what we know has vanished, and we have to contend with the angular truth of our vulnerability.

In the wilderness, we hardly know what is up and what is down. What is near and what is far blur into one another. *Didn't we pass that tree already?*, we ask. *Is that water or just a mirage?* Author Sarah Bessey speaks to this wilderness disorientation, saying that “the temptation when you've found yourself here in the wilderness is to run for the nearest shelter of certainty you can find.”⁴ I trust we can all relate.

Think with me for a moment about a wilderness season of your life. The job loss. The relationship failure. The diagnosis. The tragedy. The trauma after

² <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/3/5/the-hidden-fountain-salts-Lectionary-commentary-for-lent-1>

³ William C. Placher, *Mark, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, p27.

⁴ Sarah Bessey, *Field Notes for the Wilderness: Practices for an Evolving Faith*, p15.

the tragedy. The debt tsunami. The secret that was no longer secret anymore. The death. The never-ending caregiving. The long, interminable middle between where you've been and where you're going. Maybe even one you're in right now.

Perhaps your entry into a wilderness season has been anticipated, even if not desired. You've seen it coming for months as the storm clouds gathered on the horizon of your relationships, your faith, your vocation, your sense of self. Maybe like Jesus, you even felt the driving force of the Spirit – you didn't just happen upon the wilderness, you were *taken* there. The seams were fraying. The certainties were crumbling like a house of cards. That series of gut feelings left you a muddled mess of anxiety and fear and certainty and dislocation, but bewildered you are not. The time has come, and here you are, as if on cue, within an austere season you didn't ask for, but ready to make sense of it all and get back to yourself.

Or maybe your wilderness arrival has confused you entirely. This was not the plan, not on the road map! You blinked, and a dizzying turn of events later, here you are, and what in God's name *happened*?! It's precisely the feeling I had yesterday morning when all I was trying to do was warm up my coffee in the microwave, and I blinked and the mug is somehow shattered all over the countertop and floor, and lukewarm coffee is now dripping onto the oven, the baseboards, the floor. Did I whack it against the counter en route to the microwave? Did it slip? Who knows!

In wilderness confusion, we look up and find that two people once rapturously in love have become nothing more than logistics managers in a marriage. We discover that the team we once adored in our job has somehow become rife with passive aggressiveness and silence and fear. We notice that

the trusted ways we've found God no longer work anymore, shocking us into darkness and dislocation. And we can't help but wonder: *how did I get here?* *Could I have seen this coming? What should I have done differently? Where was God?*

IV.

That we live through wilderness seasons is not debatable; we do, many times over in a life. *How* we live through them becomes a matter of practice. So what might the wilderness have to do with Lent?

As I shared in our Ash Wednesday service, it's a common, longstanding Christian practice to "give something up for Lent" or "add to our daily practices of faith." In part, this practice is one of fasting, of removing something from your daily life in order to fill that space with the trust that God is with you, even when you don't have your nightly cocktail, or the hour scrolling through Facebook since you went to the gym instead, or that extra sweet at the office.

But I wonder, in light of our wilderness conversation today, if part of what we gain through Lenten practices like these is just that: *practice*. Honoring one rhythm of your days and calling it a Lenten commitment gives you the daily habit of denying the thing you most want. Through this practice, you become at least a bit prepared for what you'll need in the inevitable wildernesses ahead.

Not checking your phone at any moment of boredom is a small act that readies you to be more attentive and present in your life when you most need it. Not indulging in gossip with your friends is a small change that prepares you to hold fast to confidentiality when someone's life is on the line. Not having seconds at dinner is a small commitment that anticipates a need to empty yourself and be hungry for another type of sustenance. As Barbara Brown Taylor says it, "forty days to cleanse the system and open the eyes to what

remains when all comfort is gone. Forty days to remember what it is like to live by the grace of God alone and not by what we can supply for ourselves.”⁵

Popular author and podcaster Jen Hatmaker talked about this in the aftermath of her divorce. As she recalls it, her friend and fellow thought leader, Brene Brown, called her just days after “def con one,” as Jen says, to tell Jen some things to do as her marriage fell apart. “And when Brene tells you what to do, you do it, right? You don’t get to disobey,” Jen says with a laugh. She recalls how Brene told her to sit down and grab a pen, and then how in the haze of the wilderness, Jen’s friend Brene gave her some practices that she could follow to keep her grounded when the ground beneath her had vanished. None of these are rocket science, she noted. Radical self care. Drinking lots of water. Eating nourishing food. Moving your body every day. Sleeping every night. Meditating.

“And I did all that, I did what she said,” Jen said. “Number one, because I’m scared of her. And number two, it felt smart. And so those very primal measures. I mean, we’re just in the bones and the guts of the thing, right?”⁶ The wilderness you might say.

Perhaps the most famous practitioner of these daily commitments to discipline in Jesus’s name (besides Jesus himself!) was Saint Benedict, who had high hopes for the spiritual community he founded back in the 6th century. That is, of course, until the people he was trying to lead found his rules for living so unnecessarily strict, that his followers tried to poison him! He survived and calmed down, creating a regular rule of life more accessible and saying, “we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome... As we progress in this

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, p66.

⁶ <https://momastery.com/blog/we-can-do-hard-things-ep-120/>

way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with this inexpressible delight of love."⁷

V.

That's a love that flows through today's passage. With these texts in my mind, it's hard not to see the contours of Jesus' experience of wilderness temptation sandwiched between his baptism and the beginning of his public ministry. Baptism, the site of ultimate belonging. Wilderness, the landscape of deepest doubts. Proclamation, the crystallization of message and purpose into the good news of time fulfilled and a dream of God come close. Baptism, Wilderness, Proclamation. Surely Jesus could not have made meaning through the wilderness if not for what he experienced in baptism. Surely he could not have proclaimed as directly as he did that "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" if not for what was made clear in the wilderness.

Indeed, where God seemed farthest, God's promise was nearest. Where the wilderness seemed wildest, the grounding was clearest. So too can it be for us.

Friends, I want to encourage us today: if you find yourself in a wilderness season or if you merely need the practice, let these Lenten weeks be for you the space to rehearse what matters most. Find a small practice that readies you for a big loss, and practice it. Discover the wilderness companions that remind you of God's nearness even when God feels far. Adopt some holy grounding rhythms now so that they're second nature later. Again from Barbara Brown Taylor, "anything can become a spiritual practice once you are willing to approach it that way – once you let it bring you to your knees and show you

⁷ Story as told in Kate Bowler's book, *Good Enough: 40ish Devotionals for a Life of Imperfection*, p4-5.

what is real, including who you really are, who other people are, and how near God can be when you have lost your way.”⁸

In the words of a dear friend, “if Jesus went to the desert to find out just what it meant to be Jesus, perhaps this desert of reflection is where you can find even more of what it means to be you.”⁹ Perhaps for you, these Lenten days can be spent in the wilderness, listening carefully to what beckons and remembering what grounds you in God’s unconditional love and care for you. Perhaps for you, the same angels that ministered to Jesus can surround you and remind you of your identity as beloved. Perhaps for our church, these weeks of preparation for Easter can be for us a season when we discover the distinct shape of our obedience, discovering more fully who and whose we are. And perhaps when we find our way home by way of the wilderness, we’ll recognize who we’ve been all along – the ones God calls ‘beloved.’ Amen!

⁸ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, p82-83.

⁹ Thanks to dear friend, Alan Sherouse, for this good word!