



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Will We Ever Get Out Of Here?

SCRIPTURE:
Mark 1:9-13

January 16, 2022 – Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

The temptation of Jesus is brief in description, but if I understand it, this wilderness struggle lasts Jesus' whole life. If I understand this gospel, this passage provides the lens through which the rest of the gospel is to be read. And if that is so, then it also provides the lens through which our lives are to be interpreted. All that happens as Jesus is tested.

When I was graduating from seminary, I was required to take ordination exams. Exams on bible and theology, on polity, and an exam on worship. I failed that one. Had to retake worship. When I finished them, I remember caring less that I had passed, but more just relieved that it was over. The ordeal was behind me. That relief is part of taking tests; particularly, if the test is a big one.

I suppose there is no bigger test in life than to be tested by Satan—being tested by all that is wrong in the world. That was Jesus' test and I'm not sure that Jesus ever got to put his pencil down. I think this test lasted his whole life. I know, the story moves on, but I'm not sure he ever really gets out of this wilderness. And yet, this passage is filled with hope.

We have begun a new year, but omicron is raging and it feels like we will never get past this. And this weekend we remember Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and how much has changed, but also how much needs to change. And yet our current conversation about race is stymied, as it seems some lie in wait ready to call us out for any misspoken word, and others are so offended at the idea they have any need to grow, they refuse to engage in self-reflection. All of this—more than 50 years after King was assassinated. It leaves you to wonder if we will ever reach that dream King taught us to celebrate.

We know what it is to be in the wilderness and not be able to find our way out.

Last week Rodger preached a wonderful sermon on Jesus' baptism. Jesus' identity as a child of God is announced. It's true with you as well; we are all children of the living God. The Spirit comes on Jesus. The first thing the Spirit does is drive Jesus out into the wilderness. That's what our translation says, 'drives,' but don't think the Spirit was Jesus' Uber driver. The Greek is *exballo* and it means to 'cast out.' It's the same verb that is used to describe Jesus casting out demons. The Spirit does not lead Jesus, or escort Jesus, or chauffeur Jesus, but casts Jesus out into the wilderness.

Why? It seems the wilderness is where God wants Jesus to be. In the biblical story, wilderness is almost never mentioned as a physical address; it's a spiritual address.

Wilderness is anyone, any place, any time where the word of God is questioned. Which I suppose is almost everywhere. Who doesn't question the word of God at times? We all live in the wilderness where the word of God is questioned. And I suppose that's why God wants Jesus in the wilderness because that is where we are.

The wilderness may be where we live, but it's not home. We don't always know how to get out of it, but it's not home. We were created for a different way.

When our kids were preschoolers, Carol and I took them to "Ghost Town in the Sky." It wasn't my idea. Some friends had extra tickets and said, "Here, take the kids. You'll have a great time." Ghost Town is a theme park.

There we were with two children, 3½ years and 18 months old, and we had a whole day with rides that jump and bump. I tried to get Sarah to ride the merry-go-round, but she thought the horses looked scary. I never noticed that before, but if you look at them, they do look frightening.

Then she saw the umbrella ride. It's the one where you go around and around, and then the whole thing tilts and you go around and around. Sarah said, "Daddy, will you ride the umbrellas with me?" I thought it might frighten her, but I said, "OK, just hold on to me."

The day we were at Ghost Town, the weather forecast called for bad weather. It never materialized, but it kept the crowds away. When there's no line, they will let the rides run a long time. The umbrella ride was run by some kid who looked like he was still in high school. He turned the ride on and then went to class, I think. I don't know how long we were spinning. By the time it stopped, my head was spinning, my eyes were blurry, I was amazed I still had my breakfast. That's when I heard my daughter say, "Daddy, let's do that again." I said, "Sweetheart, if you will take my hand, and promise not to let go, and help me find your mother, I'm sure she would like to ride with you."

She rode it two more times. And they followed that with the spinning teacups. They had a wonderful time. I'm getting a little queasy just telling you about it. God did not create me to live in Ghost Town.

We live in the wilderness, but we were not created to live in the wilderness; we were created to trust the word and way of God. That's why the Spirit casts Jesus into the wilderness because that's where we are. We can't get out and he won't leave us.

Now I said that this passage is good news. The good news is not that we can't get out of the wilderness. If I understand it, the good news is the wild beasts. Mark says Jesus was with the wild beasts. What are these wild beasts? Some say the wild beasts are examples of the power of evil... lions and tigers and bears, oh my. They are a metaphor for those forces that seek to destroy us. Makes sense, but there is another option.

The text doesn't say Jesus was threatened by the wild beasts, or surrounded, or stalked, or pursued by the wild beasts. It says he was *with* the wild beasts. If I have it right, this is a place where Mark leans on his favorite prophet, Isaiah. Isaiah describes God's promised day this way:

*The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,*

*the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.*

It's a metaphor for the violence of life, the hatred in life, the destruction of life, being redeemed. It's God's promised day. It's an image of all that has gone wrong being made right. I think that's the metaphor Mark has in mind.

I think Mark says, "Let me tell you who Jesus is. He is the one who by God's Spirit is thrown into the wilderness with us. When things fall apart, he's right there. When the world collapses, and when faith is weak, and you question the ways of God, Jesus is right there."

But Jesus also gives us glimpses of God's promised day. The wild beasts are signs of God's promised day. In these two verses, Mark tells us, throughout his ministry, Jesus will invade the wilderness and give us glimpses of the promised day of God; glimpses of the life for which we were created to live. And even in these days, we get glimpses.

I went to a Session meeting to welcome new members. In this church, we welcomed new members in the church parlor. The parlor had been an old church school room, but a committee of interior designers renovated it. They put in plush carpet, wingback chairs, ivy wallpaper. And sconces for lighting. I told them, "I love the lights." "They are sconces, Tom." It was beautiful, but by the time it was finished, they became concerned that people might actually use the parlor and mess it up. So, the only thing we did in the church parlor was welcome new members. It made a good first impression and we could let them know they weren't ever allowed back in there again.

This particular day, a man and his daughter were joining. The strange thing is they had never been to our church before. This was before livestream. They hadn't checked us out. They just walked in and asked to join their first Sunday. I am embarrassed to say, there was some discomfort. I didn't notice it at first, but it was the man's teenage daughter. She was a beautiful young woman, but she had a haircut that was unforgettable. On one side of her head, she was shaved clean to the skin. The other side was rather long and moussed up in spikes that jumped off of her head five or six inches. The spikes were green, which I assumed was a safety precaution—after all, you

could probably poke somebody's eye out with one of those spikes. This was 1988, long before hair like this was cool, and this clean-cut, suburban, manicured-lawn, Izod-shirt and khaki-pants congregation had never seen anything like this.

And here's the truth about us: When someone is perceived to be different, it makes us uncomfortable. Now we might tell ourselves, "Oh, I would never be uncomfortable just because someone is different..." and that would make you the first person in the history of people to be free of such judgments. In this case, it wasn't skin color or economic status or culture. It was just hair that made this Session uncomfortable. But these folks remembered that they were the church and we welcome whoever Jesus brings in the door.

But then Wallace walked across the room right for the man and his daughter. Wallace was on the building and grounds committee because we wanted to keep him away from people. Wallace said, "I don't believe I have ever seen you here before." The gentleman said, "No." "It's kinda strange to join a church you have never been to." "Well, some friends told us this was a good church." "Have you even heard our

preacher? You might want to give him a test drive. You might not like him. A lot of us don't." "We just need a church right now." "Well, you aren't going to know where to sit. Everyone has their place, it's easy to get in someone else's place." Oh, Wallace.

And then an amazing thing happened. Wallace looked right at this young teenage girl and said, "Our daughter is off at school. We miss her more than you could imagine. It would mean the world to my wife and me if you would sit with us in church."

It ruined the mood when I fell out of my chair. But you know what that was? It was the wild beasts of God's promised day breaking out in the middle of ivy wallpaper and sconces. It can happen anywhere.

Seeing the wilderness? That's easy. But the moments where Jesus is casting a bit of God's grace into the moment? If you are not paying attention, you might miss it.

Mark would tell us that the battle against the forces that pull us apart, tear us down, and destroy community... that battle will never end. Life is lived in the wilderness. But do the good that is yours to do and maybe you will get a glimpse of God's promised day. It can happen anywhere.