



Mark: Man in the Wilderness

TEXT
Mark 1:9–13

January 12, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Over the next few weeks, I want us to take a quick walk through the Gospels. We will do this differently than we do most Sundays. Most Sundays, we are down in the weeds. We read a few verses or a single story and then lift up its meaning for our lives. But I want to try to do something different in these upcoming weeks. I want to try to take a step back and look at the entire Gospel — to take in the whole story, as each gospel writer tells it; to read the gospel as if it were a play, and rather than focus on a single scene, we would pay attention to the overall meaning. From that perspective, it seems to me that the central conversation of the Gospels is they each want to tell us who Jesus is.

We begin with Mark — because Mark was the first person to tell us who Jesus is by telling the story of his life.

A gospel is not a collection of dates and places; it's not even a collection of conversations and events. The gospel tells the meaning of Jesus' life.

We had several services here this week where we gathered to commend loved ones to the arms of God. Saints came with

tender hearts, and together we bore witness to the resurrection. We sang songs we have sung before. We read passages that we know by heart. And we told stories. They were stories of courage and stories of silliness. They were stories of first dates and last instructions. They are stories of trips taken and traditions shared. They were stories of childhood memories and the things that can only be appreciated once we grow up. We laughed and we cried, and we did our best to tell the truth of who these people were.

And yet, at no time were we trying to cite the obituary. The obituary tells what and when. But in here, that story is too small, because the obituary struggles to capture the love of a life. It doesn't tell what a person means to you. When we gather to bear witness to the resurrection, what matters is what these people mean to us.

If I understand it, the gospel writers write like that. They tell us what Jesus means to you.

And Mark has a particular point to make. You may have noticed — particularly since we just put our Christmas decorations away this week — that Mark makes no mention of Jesus' birth. I don't know if Mark

thought that was unimportant or if Mark just didn't know the story, but Mark begins this story with Jesus' baptism.

Mark says Jesus is baptized and the Spirit of God comes upon him, and God tells Jesus who he is: "You are my Son, whom I love." I don't know if Mark thinks this is new information for Jesus. Or maybe the voice is not for Jesus at all, but for you and me, that we might know who he is. But when Jesus is baptized, God reveals his identity: "You are my child, whom I love."

But then the first thing the Spirit does is drive Jesus into the wilderness. Actually, the Greek says "the Spirit throws Jesus into the wilderness." It's an aggressive verb. If I understand it, the point is that Jesus came to invade the wilderness. Mark understands the wilderness not as a testing period. The point is not to get through it. The point is to get in it. The wilderness is where Jesus lives.

Remember this: Wilderness is not a geographical descriptor; it's a spiritual descriptor. Mark is not telling us where Jesus is; he is telling us what life is like wherever he happens to be. The wilderness is where evil is real. The wilderness is where faithfulness is hard. The wilderness is

where we can confuse the ways of God with our own ways. In other words, the wilderness is where we are all the time. That's why Jesus was thrown into the wilderness.

Mark tells us that Jesus battles religious leaders who want faithfulness to be more about doctrine than right relationships. He battles diseases that erode human flourishing. He crosses boundaries ... you know what I mean. Culture is always setting up spoken and unspoken rules about who is allowed in and who is welcomed and who must be kept out and who is looked down on. And Jesus will have none of that. He constantly crossed cultural boundaries to include women where they had not been welcomed before; children who heretofore had been viewed as insignificant. He lifted up the poor and the enslaved and even Gentiles — those nonchosen people.

Jesus is in the wilderness his whole life, battling the realities of evil. Mark says that when Jesus enters the wilderness, he is with the wild beasts. Mark is the only one to mention the wild beasts. Some interpreters think this is a frightening reference: lions and tigers and bears, Oh my. But Mark knows his Bible. I am convinced this is a reference to Isaiah, who says that in God's promised day, when all that has gone wrong is made right, the lion and the lamb shall lie down together. None of God's children or creatures will be afraid of one another anymore.

I think the central message of Mark is this: Jesus came into

the mess of this world. And Jesus battles all that is wrong, setting right what has gone wrong. His ministry is incomplete in you and me and in the world ... but now and then we get a glimpse of how God wants life to be; now and then there are wild beasts in the wilderness.

I think the entire gospel of Mark can be encapsulated in these few verses. What I love about Mark is how honest he is about how hard it is to be Christian in this world — for to follow Jesus is to live in the mess of this world and to choose to see the good in each other: to live as if peace is preferred to power; to choose joy even in the midst of heartbreak; to live knowing that love is a power. And the thing Mark knows is that crucifixion, sacrifice, is always part of that life.

Hans Kung wrote a 600-page book called *On Being Christian*. In the prologue, he says, "I write this book not because I think I am a particularly good Christian; but because I think being Christian is a particularly good thing."¹ I think Mark gets that. Mark knows that even when we want to live this way, we stumble — because we never escape the wilderness. So, Jesus comes to us in the midst of our wilderness.

A few years ago, it was reported that the most frequently read article in the *New York Times* was titled "Why You Will Marry the Wrong Person."² The author says we are all complex human beings, who only look completely normal to those who do not know us very well. He says, therefore, when we go

on a date and appear to be, well, grounded, we have misled our date a bit. He suggests a more fruitful approach to the first date is not to try to impress one another with how wonderful we are, but rather to explore a more honest self-reveal. He suggests something like, "I'm crazy like this ... how are you crazy?"

Well, if that is your lead, I don't know if there will be a second date, but I think I get why so many people read that article. We know we are a mixed report: beautiful but also broken. We know that the wilderness of the world is not only out there, but it's also in here.

That's why I find Mark so honest. Mark knows that following Jesus is hard. But Mark also knows — and I don't know how he knows this, but he does — that even when we are stumbling in our faith, that's the precise point where Jesus will come to us — because the Spirit of God has thrown him into our wilderness.

I read about a kid named Ben Comen. He ran cross country at Hannah High School, near Anderson, South Carolina. He ran, but he was never competitive. As a matter of fact, Ben was always, every single time, the last runner to cross the finish line. But the word is that people from across the upstate of South Carolina would knock off work early to go watch Ben Comen run.

Now why would you drop everything to go watch a kid run who you know is never going to win?

Ben has cerebral palsy. C.P. has not restricted his intellect, but it seizes the muscles and

contorts his body, leaving him to lunge and falter, tripping over bottle caps and twigs. So, it would take him a better part of the morning to run the 3.1 mile race. In almost every race, he falls. When he falls, he falls hard because his body can't react quickly enough to catch himself. It is not unusual for Ben to cross the finish line bloodied about the elbows and knees. But people would wait. Kids on his team, and sometimes kids from other teams, would wait. And when he nears the finish line, they all return to the track and together cross the finish line. Grown men from town watch, twisting their jaws, trying to keep the tears in their eyes and off their faces. Why do you suppose the whole town turns out to watch a kid run who will never win?

I think they watch Ben Comen because they are so much like him — or more likely, they want to be like him. They watch as people who know we aren't always very good at the things that matter most. In the journey to be righteous, we can sometimes feel more than a little spastic and clumsy. So, they watch a guy who reminds them that you don't have to be particularly good at it to do a particularly good thing.

Look, it's a new year. It's an artificial mark of time, I know. But let's use this to remind ourselves that no matter what this year brings to us, let's stay in the race. There will be times when it is very difficult — because in this world truth is attacked, and love is crucified.

But Jesus has come into this particular wilderness of ours, so

we know how we are to be: To follow Jesus is to live in the mess of this world; to choose to see the good in each other; to live as if peace is preferred to power; to choose joy, even in the midst of heartbreak; to live knowing that love is a power.

And sometimes, we might even get a glimpse of the lion lying down with the lamb.

¹Hans Kung, *On Being Christian* (1984), p. 21

²https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/29/opinion/sunday/why-you-will-marry-the-wrong-person.html?_r=0

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.