

*Lent 1 February 21, 2021 Psalm 25:1-10, Genesis 9:8-17, 1 Peter 3:18-22,  
Mark 1:9-15 In the wilderness with Jesus*

\*\*\*\*\*

Today's entire episode of Jesus's forty days in the wilderness is told in just two sentences – wedged in between his baptism and the beginning of his first public ministry, preaching the good news of the kingdom of God near at hand...

Every year on the first Sunday of Lent we go into the wilderness with Jesus. So many I hope are familiar with the longer accounts of Jesus' time in the wilderness that we hear in Matthew's and Luke's gospels. But Mark tells his version in barely thirty words. Leaving out any description of the temptations we hear of in Matthew and Luke... And not even mentioning Jesus fasting...

Yet in spite of his extremely brief telling of the story, Mark manages to mention several details not found in Matthew or Luke. First the detail of *wild animals* with Jesus. Then the detail of *angels waiting on him* even before the end of his temptations (where the angels join the story in Matthew's telling).

Then we have the details of Mark's unique choice of words – as he describes first the heavens *torn apart* – as the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove – then tells us “the Spirit immediately *drove him out* into the wilderness.” And I wasn't planning to mention those details. Till I read the daily prayer New England Methodist Conference sends every morning... and on Ash Wednesday morning I noticed the prayer was a poem written by my friend pastor Mitch Hay of Essex Vermont United Methodist, who wrote:

*Hey, God —*

*Remember when I was seventeen and contemplating  
bailing out on my parents' church – and maybe bailing out on You –  
in all my teenage sophistication?*

*And how my parents bought me my own brand-spanking-new NIV Ryrie Study  
Bible – (with the genuine bonded leather burgundy cover and my name  
embossed in gold?) – Do You remember how I decided one day to read  
the opening chapter of Mark's breathless gospel,  
really reading the words for myself for the first time?*

*And for the first time I found myself*

*Wondering why Mark insisted that the heavens were “torn apart,” and not just  
“opened,” and – Yearning to hear Your tender words to Jesus for myself:*

*“You are my Son, whom I love” and – Smiling wryly at the thought of a long-haired, sandaled Nazarene – being “driven” into the wilderness – (my mind’s eye picturing a laughing Spirit gripping the wheel of a speeding Jeep CJ-5 with the radio turned up and the top stowed down and the still-wet-from baptism Jesus hanging on for dear life as they bolt out into the desert for a mutual adventure.)*

*Do You remember?*

*I remember.*

*Much later now, I remember.*

*And I’m so grateful for my own 40 days, 40 weeks, 40 years in so many wildernesses since then, and the syncopated rhythm of temptations and rest, silence and resilience, friends and solitude and the terrifying assurance of Your wild, unleashed presence undergirding all of it.*

Well. Mitch’s prayer-poem woke me up.

Now I’m guessing this is probably how Mark hopes we hear his gospel. Which indeed is breathless – immediate – and full of images meant to grab our attention.

So it’s no accident – Mark strings together the baptism of Jesus with the Spirit descending gently like a dove and the voice of God announcing “You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased” – and – without slowing down – cuts to the Spirit *driving* Jesus – *immediately* – off into the wilderness for temptation – testing (the same word means both). Then again without pause off driving off to preach the Good News of the Kingdom of God – close at hand – Get on board – hold on tight.

And all these details Mark tosses in like seasoning for gospel soup have me thinking... Lent with Jesus this year’s not about what we’re *not* told. Not about specific temptations of Jesus we hear of elsewhere – temptations to turn stones into bread – or jump from the top of the temple trusting God’s angels to catch him – or worship the devil and be called king of the world. Nor is this Lent about fasting which Mark doesn’t mention. (Not that I need any encouragement to skip fasting...)

Instead, this Lent is simply about time in the wilderness with Jesus and the wild animals and wild angels...And I’m noticing these wild animals all the

more – because our reading from Genesis reminds us – all God’s creatures great and small are covered by God’s rainbow-covenant-sign. And God repeats the word *covenant* seven times to make sure we notice – God’s unbreakable commitment – never to flood the earth again into extinction.

And the sign of the rainbow in the clouds now serves as God’s own post-it-note to himself – that every time God sees the rainbow sign God will be reminded – no more, never again... a flood to end life on earth.

A reminder for us – of how our broken covenants with God made that flood necessary in God’s sight... As every covenant with us God ever made, we humans have broken – starting with the covenant to obey God and take care of the earth... Whose waters now threaten to flood creation again – not by God’s design – but because of our God-defying human choices to disrespect and disregard God and creation... and creation’s proper care and nurture. As –

God has made covenant with *all* creation and *all* living creatures – to continue caring for creation and all God’s creatures great and small. And God has promised not to flood all the earth into oblivion ever again.

But God has never promised to suspend cause and effect... Or spare us the consequences of bad choices. So now here we are...

\*\*\*

Living with covid for almost a year now... Which has felt like one long continuous Lenten season for many of us – with the wearing of masks and distancing from one another and prolonged fasting from close contact with other people serving as our daily reminders – that Lent is a season for repentance – repentance meaning turning. Turning from sin. Turning and re-turning to God.

God who is always waiting and hoping for our return... So the message we hear as Jesus drives on with the Holy Spirit is simply that good news begins with repentance – and repentance is Good News. The words of Jesus are the words we say on Ash Wednesday: “Repent and Believe the Gospel.” Gospel means Good News – and God’s Kingdom near at hand. Please receive the gift properly Jesus says – with thanksgiving. Remembering –

Repentance can start with the simplest of details... On the physical level simply wearing masks, distancing, washing hands, getting vaccinated soon as we’re eligible and able. Caring for others as much as for ourselves.

On a deeper level, repentance can be as simple as the ancient practices of Lent: Praying always – Abstaining from anything that gets in the way of time

with God (and) – Giving of our time, talents and treasure – especially giving for those most in need.

Thanks be to God we get to see God's grace at work when we do even the simplest things we're supposed to do. Thanks God, we see some people praying for the first time, and some praying more than ever. Thanks God we see many noticing – some for the first time or first time in a long time – life is a serious matter – an astonishing gift given by God. Life is a gift and responsibility to be handled with care. And as this sinks in (again or for the first time) – some are finding deeper purpose in life. Some are showing deeper compassion. Some are making sacrifices for others – more than ever before...

As always, we don't know how the story ends... At least not till the final trumpet sounds... But we do know... to the extent we are able to make decisions – able to live and breathe and act alive, as people of God who believe in God's Son Jesus – to the extent we're willing to invite God's love to rule in the details of our lives – we will be able to resist every temptation –

Every temptation to act as if we (or any other human being) is God – or worthy of worship and obedience as if we were God – or worthy to rule over the town of Bourne or the Commonwealth of Massachusetts or the nation we love – as if we were God.

If we know who we are in relationship with Jesus Christ our Lord, we'll be able to withstand every temptation to imagine our own power and wisdom as sufficient to do anything – even get out of bed in the morning and put on our shoes and shirt – without guidance from Jesus. If we really know who Jesus is and what Jesus says and does – we won't be easily fooled by the devil or the devil's demons that are always trying to squeeze in and inhabit the details of our lives...

If we know who Jesus is we will be looking always to Him and the Spirit of God – looking for the angels of God... even in the smallest details of this life we share by the grace of God...

And by the time we get to Easter...by God's grace with Jesus... We will know for sure... how good, how very good God is. And how truly good it is to be alive on this good earth that God has made. In this good place that God has blessed. Turning our hearts and minds and lives always home to Jesus... Who is always welcoming us home to Him.

Thanks be to God. Amen.