

March 1, 2009

Scripture: Mark 1: 9-15

Title: "Into The Wilderness"

You have got to love the author of Mark. He gives us just the facts: Jesus was baptized. Jesus was tempted. Jesus begins to preach. Three acts. And not a lot of description.

Not like Matthew or Luke who both give the readers some background, who give the readers some family history, and who give the readers some details!

Nope, Mark just gives us the facts to set the scene. Jesus was baptized. Jesus was tempted. Jesus begins to preach. There is no birth narrative. There is no conversation with John the Baptist about John being unworthy to baptize Jesus. There is no conversation with Satan. There is no drama of turning stones into bread or jumping from the top of the Temple to see if the angels catch you.

Nope, Mark just gives us the facts. Jesus is baptized. Jesus is tempted. Jesus begins to preach the Good News. And Mark lets the facts tell the story. Jesus is baptized. Jesus is tempted. Jesus begins to preach the Good News.

You see, for Mark, he is not concerned with our questions. Mark is not concerned with our assumptions. Mark is not concerned with our need for details. Mark just tells the facts, and lets the facts sit there in a concise, straightforward plotline. Just the facts.

And as we read just the facts, we realize that we are being forced by the author to go back to the basics, back to the basics of what we know about Jesus, back to the basics of Jesus' relationship with God, back to the basics of our understanding of Jesus as the Son of God.

And as we read just the facts in Mark, we realize that we are being forced to enter into the struggle over the identity of who Jesus really is. All we know as we enter this struggle is that Jesus was baptized. Jesus was tempted. Jesus begins to preach. Once again, just the facts.

And as we read just the facts in Mark, we realize that we have been driven into the wilderness. We have been driven into the unknown. We have been driven into mysterious. We have been driven into this desert, where resources are limited, where the landscape is barren, where there seems to be no hope of renewal.

And we feel alone and we are afraid.

And we are surprised that that is exactly where Mark wants us to be as we read his Gospel. We are surprised that Mark wants us to feel vulnerable as we read his Gospel. We are surprised to learn that Mark wants us to feel defenseless as we read his Gospel. We are surprised to learn that Mark wants us to feel helpless as we read his Gospel.

And we are even more shocked to hear Mark tell us that our time in the wilderness is a gift from God. And we are even more shocked to hear Mark tell us that we have been driven in the wilderness by the Spirit of God. We are even more shocked to hear Mark say that us being in the wilderness, afraid and confused, is what God wants.

And that honestly is not what we want to hear! We begin to say, "Mark, I don't know the God that you are talking about. My God would never have driven me into such a deserted place. My

God would never have driven me into such a hopeless place. Mark, that is not my God. That maybe your God, but that definitely is not the God that I know.”

And Mark simply responds by saying, “Really? Do you really know your God? Do you really honestly know your God?”

And it is that moment that gives us a pause. Do we really know our God? Do we really know our God or just the God that we have created to fit our needs? Do we really know our God or just the God that we have fit into our lives?

And we realize that this is why the Spirit of God has driven us into the wilderness. We are in this wilderness to get back to the basics of our relationship with God. We are in this wilderness to struggle with the hard questions of what it means to be a Christian in our world. We are in this wilderness to face our temptations as people of faith, to face our temptation to ignore the hard questions facing us. To face our temptation of sitting down, giving up, and waiting for someone to find us. To face our temptation of letting our fears overtake us. To face our temptation to put God in a box where we define the rules, where we define our relationship, where we tell God what is acceptable and not acceptable in our relationship.

We are in this wilderness, driven here by the Spirit of God, to be molded, to be remade, to be prepared for the journey to share the gospel to the people of the world.

And all we know are the facts: we are baptized. We are tempted. And we are called to share the Gospel Message. And only we can answer the question of how these three basic facts will shape and give meaning to our faith as Christians.

And so we find ourselves in the wilderness, alone and confused, scared and tempted to go the other way, very much like the community that Mark first wrote his Gospel to. They were a community of believers “seeking to discern the implications of their own baptismal identity, battling a hostile environment, and yet commissioned to bear the gospel word”, just like we are today.

Mark wrote a simple story, giving just the facts about Jesus, to reassure them, to let them experience the humanness of Jesus, to show them what was important about Jesus and what they need to know about Jesus to live their lives as Christians. And he is doing the same thing for us today.

Mark is inviting us to really understand that for us to be true to our calling as people of faith, we must struggle with our human moments as well as the holy moments of our lives. Mark is inviting us to sit in the wilderness between the wild beasts of our lives and the angels who are there to care for us and protect us. Mark is inviting us to get back to the basics.

As we are being driven into the wilderness by God’s Spirit, Mark is inviting us to really experience our utter dependence on God as people of faith.

As we read the Gospel of Mark, We have been given just the facts: Jesus was baptized. Jesus was tempted. Jesus begins to preach the Good News. As we read the Gospel of Mark, we begin to understand that we as disciples have had a similar experience: We are baptized. We are tempted. We are called to share the Good News in a world that is hurting, that is broken, that is hostile.

And as we continue to read the simple story of Mark's Gospel, we begin to understand that Mark has given us the most important fact of all: The Spirit of God drove Jesus into the wilderness. The Spirit of God was with Jesus during this time of temptation in the wilderness. And the Spirit of God led him out of the wilderness and filled him as he began to preach the Good news.

And as we continue to read this simple story found in Mark's Gospel, we realize that we have been given the most important fact of all: The Spirit of God will lead us into the wilderness. The Spirit of God will care for us and provide for our needs while we are in this wilderness. The Spirit of God will lead us out once more and continue to be with us as we begin to share the Good News to the world.

Each year, we celebrate the beginning of Lent. Each year, we celebrate the forty days that lead us closer to the cross. Each year, we celebrate the season of Lent.

And each year, we are tempted to let Lent come and go. We are tempted to let Lent be the same as last year, and the same as the year before.

Forty-days: Check.

Give something up for Lent: Check

Start with Ash Wednesday and end with Easter: Check

This year, Mark is inviting us to let the Spirit of God drive us into the wilderness. This year, Mark is inviting us to go back to the basics: back to the basics of our relationship with God, back to the basics of our relationship with each other, and back to the basis of our relationship with all of God's creation. This year, Mark is inviting us to join the struggle of who Jesus is for us as Christians and to join the struggle of what it means to call ourselves people of faith. This year, Mark invites us to sit between the wild beasts of our lives and the angels who care for us. We have been given just the facts: We are baptized. We are tempted. And we have been called to share the Good news in a world that is broken, that is hostile, that is hurting. And only we can answer the question of how these three basic facts will shape and give meaning to our faith as Christians.

We have been given the opportunity to get back to the basics in our relationship with God and with one another.

We have been given the chance to struggle with who Jesus really is for us as Christians. We only have to open ourselves up and allow ourselves to be driven into the wilderness by the Spirit of God for the chance to answer these questions of faith.

May the Spirit of God drive us into the wilderness this Lenten Season and nourish us as we struggle with our calling and our identity as people of faith. Amen.

Rev. Heather McColl
Midway Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)