

**SLD03.05.06 First Lent**  
**EPC**  
**Mark 1:9-15**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

**“The Wisdom of the Wilderness”**

For those of you who follow the rhythms of the church year, it may seem a little odd for us to be reaching back to the beginning of Mark’s gospel today. After all, the baptism of the Lord is supposed to be celebrated shortly after Christmas. But our focus this morning is not on Jesus’ baptism so much as on what happens just after it. That’s what we’ll be looking at this morning: what happens right *after* John baptizes Jesus and God offers that poignant and memorable public service announcement letting everybody know that Jesus was God’s Beloved One, with whom God was well pleased.

What we’re going to look at this morning is, after Jesus is publicly examined, installed and commissioned to do his work, what happens next? Just how does that first ‘body of Christ’ on earth go about organizing his work and beginning his ministry in the world?

Does he organize his followers? Call a Session meeting? Sketch out a 5 year plan? Schedule home visits? Review the budget? Start a fund-raising campaign? Oh no, he does not. Once Jesus is installed, he does none of those hit-the-road-running, turbo-pastor, wish-we-had-called-*him* type of activities.

And why not? Was Jesus not clear what needed to be done? Could he not read the needs of his flock? Did he lack confidence or time, vision or chutzpah? Was he just inexperienced?

No, the reason Jesus didn't jump right into his pastoral and prophetic duties was because immediately upon receiving the baptism of John and the blessing of God, the Spirit drives Jesus out into the wilderness. Which had to be frustrating.

I mean, here you are, you finally figure out what God's calling you to do, the Search Committee agrees, the community lines up behind you, God approves the package, you're all good to go and blam, you gotta start walking. Away. Away from everything you thought you were supposed to be doing. Toward the desert. The wilderness. To suffer. Alone.

You gotta turn your back on all the hoopla of your divine installation, in which God's own Self preached, and walk out into the wilderness all by yourself for a personal wrestling match with doubts and demons. That's how it was for Jesus in the gospel of Mark. In fact, according to every one of the synoptic gospels, as soon as Jesus gets baptized and commissioned, the Spirit yanks him out of whatever he might have *thought* he was up to, and drives him out into the lonesome hinterland of divine confrontation.

Though, of course, according to Mark, it seems like Jesus was out there only a short while. I mean, it was forty days and all, which is the Bible's way of saying a *long* while, but the way Mark describes it, Jesus' wilderness experience is pretty abbreviated and efficient. Oh sure, he's tempted by Satan, accosted by beasts, and served by angels, and all, but next day, according to Mark, Jesus pretty much just gets up and goes to work.

But that's just Mark's literary style. Things move fast in Mark. "Staccato Mark," Don Saliers calls him, because everything happens immediately in Mark. Not much for process, Mark is like a first century Palestinian one minute manager, sticking to the facts of the story, keeping it brief, clear, and fast-paced.

But now Matthew and Luke, they go at Jesus' wilderness experience a good bit differently, and I like to think, more accurately. Matthew and Luke both take great pains to describe Jesus' various temptations in the wilderness and how he goes about handling them, each dedicating a good half a chapter to the various curve balls Satan throws at Jesus, and how our Lord returns them. From Matthew and Luke we get a whole lot better idea just how challenging, disorienting, and *re*-orienting a sojourn in the wilderness can be. But when it comes to describing to the results of Jesus' time in the wilderness – the energy and passion and focus with which he commences his ministry, well, Mark keeps up just fine with his gospel-writing colleagues.

From which I conclude that however inconvenient, counter-intuitive, challenging, and downright 'non-productive' hanging out in the wilderness may seem to us perennially busy, painfully productive and determinedly results-oriented folk, there must be some wisdom in the wilderness, some divine method to the madness it often engenders, that even impatient, staccato Mark can appreciate.

Still, regardless of how productive, few of us head to the wilderness, at least any *existential* wilderness, voluntarily. And there's good reason why. Dutch anthropologist Arnold van Gennep described the physical and spiritual

components of wilderness experiences as 'chaotic gaps.' "Chaotic gaps in existence from which new beginnings emerge."<sup>1</sup>

As though what's required to get from 'what was' to 'what will be' is some kind of beast-ridden, angel-sprinkled 'between times.' As though God's new beginnings require some kind of wilderness experience during which creation is somehow mysteriously rearranged a little closer to God's original intention.

And, of course, you and I are all for new beginnings, are we not? But chaotic gaps? Beast-ridden, angel-sprinkled 'between times?' That doesn't sound attractive at all. Yet even the Son of God can't begin his ministry without hanging out a good long while in the wilderness.

Now, in case you're thinking this sermon is a set up to grant me some transition time into this new gig, well, yeah, if that works for you, it works for me. But where I've always had a homiletic field day before with the notion of new beginnings emerging from a sojourn in the wilderness was as a professional interim. In fact, 'wilderness' pretty much defined my work, plus gave the congregation a heads up, and maybe some divine justification, for the inevitable challenges and difficulties of the transition period on which we were about to embark.

But now I'm not an interim (which, as I've mentioned, is no minor transition for me). Now I'm a 'fixin'-to-be-installed' pastor and our relational horizon is no longer the next year to year-and-a-half we'll spend together, but the coming *years* we'll share ministry. (Mercy, that still makes me nervous. No church has ever had to put up me that long. Nor, for that matter, I, them.)

---

<sup>1</sup> William Bridges, Transitions, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1980, pp. 84-85.

So really, the particular wilderness I see us facing together at the moment, the current impending chaotic gap in existence, is not the customary interim transition period, but a spiritual wilderness both shorter- and longer- term than that. Long term, the wilderness you and I pledge to face together as a community of faith is that of Life itself, which increasingly strikes me as one damn wilderness after another. Can I get an 'amen' on that? Does anybody else feel that way?

But shorter term, the wilderness we are entering together today, indeed, that we entered ritually last Wednesday evening, (and I thank the many of you who came) is the season of Lent, that uncompromising time of self-examination, confession, and preparation for death, our own and Jesus'. During which wilderness, in my experience, neither demons nor angels pull any punches.

Now, as Reformed Protestants, we have successfully avoided the wilderness aspect of Lent for centuries. In fact, those who preach the gospel of prosperity, or even of politeness, manage to continue avoid any of the wilderness aspect of faith altogether. But as mature Christians are painfully aware, many of you even more so than I, just as life in general can feel like 'one damn wilderness after another,' so can one's spiritual journey. Certainly that's the way it was for Jesus.

And whereas all active seekers of God pass through many, many individual wilderness periods, Lent is a time when we enter the wilderness together, as a community. Last Wednesday night, all of us, young, old, wise, naïve, confident, doubtful, every single one of us present, left the sanctuary with

the ashy sign of the cross on our foreheads as a symbol of Jesus' resurrection, to be sure, but also of our personal mortality and sin. During Lent you and I and all the company of believers commit to being in the wilderness together.

“So, what are you giving up for Lent, Mom?” asks my son, Christopher, the other night. Took me by surprise. For one thing, we were getting ready for bed, Christopher had finally gotten under the covers, and I was just about to launch into the next riveting adventure of the Swiss Family Robinson. Second, this is a pretty unusual question to be issuing from my little Quaker/Presbyterian hybrid of a pre-teen son. But apparently Lent had come up at school and the kids, ever competitive, had been out-sacrificing one another.

“Hmmm” I think to myself, “Given my day job, I’d better come up with *something*. Anyway, when was the last time Christopher asked me a spiritual question? Here’s my chance!”

So I say, thinking out loud, “I haven’t decided yet, honey. Maybe chocolate, maybe television...maybe wine...though I don’t know if I love Jesus *that* much. Anyway, *he* never gave up wine.”

Christopher is looking perplexed; this is not going well.

“Okay,” I say, “I’m going to give up a lot of freedom because I’m starting back to work.” All right, that’s a cheap shot but I was grabbing, plus, I got stuck of the theme of ‘giving up,’ until I realized....

“Hey, wait a minute,” I say, “Lent isn’t just about giving up; it’s also about taking something on – like more time for prayer, or service, or relationship, especially relationship with God. The whole point of Lent is to draw closer to

God, whatever that takes. Because we're preparing ourselves to face our sin and limitations, and Jesus' death, and our own death, and frankly, to do all that we need all the help we can get. The kind of help we can only get from God."

Surely I've lost him by now, but no....

"Okay," says Christopher. "I'll think about it."

And I'll tell you, for me, that was enough. In fact, to me, it was a veritable breakthrough. Because, truth is, regardless of how Christopher or you or me decide to mark this season of Lent, the most *important* thing is for us to think about it. To turn our attention to it, to make room for it, to let it matter. And then, who knows? Maybe we'll clear some space in our personal quotidian for a moment of confession, an act of repentance, or an unblinking gaze at death. If you and I actually take some personal time to think about it, what we're meant to give up or take on will come to us. Maybe to pray more or eat less; to listen more or talk less. Maybe to wonder more or demand less, to give more or take less, to quiet down, to sit still, to take a walk, own a sin, forgive somebody. Just think about it.

Here at Emory Church we have a corporate commitment to observe the season of Lent, but how each of us participates in our hearts is all God really cares about. Frankly, that's all I really care about, too. So for my part, I've made bold to alter our Lenten worship services just a tad on the general principles of more prayer and less palaver, more scripture and less sermon, more communion with Christ and less going it alone. Anybody wants to show up on Wednesdays between 1 and 3 for brief individual prayer with me, I'm available for that, too. Or

come to Taize worship tomorrow night at 8. Or show up at a Sunday School class you haven't visited before. Or stay for the Kenyan worship one Sunday afternoon. Or walk the labyrinth. Or sign up for Safe Haven. If we take a minute to think about it, and to listen to what God tells us, well, who knows what we'll hear. But this we know, because with his life, his death and his resurrection, Jesus has shown us - there's wisdom to be found in the wilderness. Just think about it.

To the glory of God. Amen.