

**SLD03.01.09 First Lent**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Mark 1: 9-15**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

### **What Wisdom Now?**

You know, this is the same text I preached three years ago on the First Sunday of Lent, which makes sense, of course, because I usually follow lectionary and lectionary is built on a three year cycle. (Lectionary is a 3-year calendar of scriptures for every day of the year. Preachers who preach lectionary use the texts assigned to each Sunday. Every three years The Common Lectionary starts over with the gospel of Mark, which means that the text I'm preaching on *this* first Sunday of Lent is the same as the text I preached the First Sunday of Lent three years ago.)

For me this is somewhat momentous, because I've never served a single church for so long, never completed an entire Lectionary cycle with one body of believers, never mind started another one! As an intentional interim pastor for the last 15 years, I've served churches for as little as 6 months and as long as 2 years, but always moved on well before the lectionary cycle repeats itself. Yet here we still are, you and I are, three full liturgical years later, starting over again from the beginning. Same passage, same church, same preacher – now what am I supposed to do with that?

Well, fortunately, scripture is a living thing, and like all living things, presents itself a little differently every time you interact with it. We're living things, too, you and I, ever changing, growing, *aging*, backsliding, getting lost, finding our way, recommitting, and so forth, over and over in the cycle of life. So neither we, nor the world, nor scripture itself is the same as three years ago.

One thing that's different is that you and I have the gift now of three years of shared time, three years of shared experience and memory and perspective.

So I thought it might be interesting to go back and see how I preached the first time on this text, what I thought was important to lift up as we began this leg of our journey three-years ago.

I know you don't remember. Shoot, / don't even remember! It's said that renowned folk artist Howard Finster quit his original preaching profession altogether once he discovered that by Sunday evening his parishioners had no clue what he'd preached about that morning. Given my own poor memory, however, I'm not that exacting. Life moves so fast, and my mind so slowly, most of the sermons I preach go in one side of my heart and out the other. I don't remember what I preached *last* week, never mind three years ago. So when I pulled out my sermon from three years ago, I was curious to see what I had to say.

The title of the sermon was "The Wisdom of the Wilderness." It was the first Sunday of Lent then, too, and what jumped out at me then from this passage in Mark is the same thing that jumps out at me now – Mark's fleeting reference to Jesus' time in the wilderness. You have to listen closely for the reference; Mark moves fast. In Mark, Jesus is prophesied, baptized, crowned and rushed into and out of the wilderness pretty much before breakfast, and ready to report for work by 9:00.

But the wilderness is still there in Mark, the way it is in all the Synoptics, and not as any sort of elective activity, either. As soon as God claims Jesus as God's Beloved One, God *commands* Jesus' departure into the wilderness, *drives* him there through the agency of the Holy Spirit. As though maybe Jesus didn't want to go. As though maybe God didn't care whether Jesus wanted to go or not. As though the wilderness were

important to prepare Jesus for his ministry. Scripture never tells us why, or even, in Mark's gospel, what happens there, except that Jesus is there for forty days (which is the Bible's way of saying a long time) and devils and angels attend him.

Imagine a dry, desolate desert in which Jesus sits under the glare of the sun, the chill of the night, bored, uncomfortable, and alone but for the beasts and the bugs, and the odd appearance of the Tempter and some angels, a lonely, unpleasant interlude of competing forces and conflicting messages, designed to...what? Test Jesus? Break him? Harden him? Prepare him? We are not told. Only that Jesus must go to the wilderness and endure its rigors before he begins his ministry.

In my earlier sermon, I speculated that the mysterious time Jesus spends in the wilderness equates to some sort of initiation, some kind of ritual of formation that shapes, orients, even directs Jesus toward who he is, who God is, and what God wants him to do.

I reference William Bridges' popular book, *Transitions*, in which he alludes to the work of Dutch anthropologist, Arnold van Gennep, who examined in a variety of cultures both the physical and the spiritual components of wilderness experiences. Can Gennep call such experiences, "chaotic gaps;" chaotic gaps in existence from which new beginnings emerge.<sup>1</sup>

The wilderness experience itself might take any number of forms, but its effect is the same: to mix things up, to break them down, or open, to challenge, even shatter routine in order to create a chaotic gap in the usual flow of life from which something new might emerge. Indeed, van Gennep suggests that new beginnings rarely occur without such chaotic gaps.

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

This pattern exerts itself every time we experience change, with every stage of growth and development, every material alteration of circumstance -- birth, death, adolescence, graduation, marriage, divorce, move, loss of our job – each is followed by disorienting chaos, the raw material, argues Bridges, from which new beginnings emerge.

This organic pattern of the disintegration of the norm until a new norm emerges is how life happens. Yet we are so *impatient* with it! I am so impatient with it! And why not? Who likes disruptive, unmanageable, open-ended gaps in our lives? Or feeling powerless, out of control, and unclear about what's comes next? Or *if* anything's coming next! Who likes to wander around untethered by purpose, productivity, and structure, all the time engaging demons of anxiety and fear? In short, who likes the wilderness? Even Jesus has to be *driven* into it.

Still, however unpleasant, the concept of chaos as the nursery of new beginnings is hardly a new one. In the book of Genesis, new beginnings emerge from chaos as God forms creation from the “formless void.” In the gospels, God reaches into the chaotic mystery of death in order to resurrect the risen Christ. Elaborate rites of passage have been designed by a variety of cultures to contain the inevitable chaos of major life changes. Even the field of mathematics has long since discovered an underlying order within some apparently random data.<sup>2</sup>

Like it or not, life begins with chaos and constantly reinvents itself via messy chaotic interludes. Is it any wonder that Jesus' ministry could not begin until after he'd sojourned among the lonesome, conflicting forces of a God-demanded wilderness?

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.imho.com/grae/chaos/chaos.html>

That God is at work in such times is an important word to hear as you and I enter this season of reflection and repentance in preparation for Christ's coming glory.

It's an important word to hear as we face together the frightening chaos and uncertainty of these economic times.

That God works in the wilderness, forming, shaping and directing us toward who we are, who God is, and what God wants us to do is an important word to hear as we move toward the future God has for this church.

It is also an important word to hear as we reflect on our last three years together.

Not that my whole time here has been one long wilderness experience! On the contrary, if I've learned anything, it's that longer periods of shared ups and downs amplify my affection and investment in this community; the flashing needles of time and persistence only knitting us closer.

But this church experienced periods of wilderness before I came, we've experienced a few together since, and I don't imagine we're done yet. Quite apart from the season of Lent, we may even be in a wilderness of a sort now as we examine the how we go about things, experiment with new ways, and take some risks. Our vision statement of 200 members by 2012 is an example of a risk, though it's one that energizes me. Others include considering different ways of organizing ourselves, or of structuring our growth as disciples, or of reaching out, or of reaching to God, or toward reaching to one another.

Change of the sort that's in the air now can feel wilderness-like: confusing, unpredictable; competing claims, conflicting forces, devils and angels trading costumes, until you wonder what's true and what's right and what's permanent, and what happened to the good old days?

If you're like me, such change will both excite you and drive you nuts. Stoke your imagination and challenge your values. Open some doors and slam a few others. Raise hopes, and dash 'em in the same conversation. Amaze you with creative breakthroughs; discourage you unrelenting resistance.

But it's a juicy time, the wilderness, don't you think? A chaotic time when God is at work forming and shaping and directing and revealing, and pulling jokes, too, on those of us who imagine we know what's going on. In fact, I have a hunch God enjoys the wilderness more than just about any place else. The wilderness, where anything goes and all bets are off, where new things get shaped and propelled that surprise the hell out of anybody standing around imagining that everything's business as usual, is God's playground, where we can either be miserable or learn how to play along.

What I imagine Jesus learned from *his* wilderness is how to invest oneself passionately but still hold outcomes loosely. How to follow God's lead but not get too attached to where the path ends. That is, how to trust God no matter what. I'd like to learn that. It's just that Jesus' "no matter what" led to his death on a cross, and if we follow him, that's likely where we'll end up, too. It's on this path, though, that God will shape us, orient us, even direct us toward who we are, who God is, and what God wants us to do. What happens after that, God only knows, but you can bet it'll be something new.

To the glory of God. Amen.