

SERMON TITLE: "In the Wilderness"

SERMON TEXT: Mark 1:9-13

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: February 18, 2018, at First UMC—Boy Scout Sunday (Troop #577 with us)

## **INTRODUCTION**

Since many of you have asked about my recent vacation, I thought I'd show you a few pictures. My husband and I drove to southwestern Oregon to visit Steve's mom and his brother and sister-in-law.<sup>1</sup> The weather was very accommodating for travel, and so we also went to the Pacific Ocean.<sup>2</sup> Our day on the beach was quite warm for early February and only a little windy. We saw daffodils and some trees already blooming, and the rolling hills had already greened up nicely for the grazing cattle and sheep.<sup>3</sup> The evergreen fir and pine forests of the Cascade Mountain Range and the grassy hills of western Oregon were quite a contrast to the barren and brown open spaces of eastern Oregon and southern Idaho that we had to drive through to get there and back.<sup>4</sup> But it's probably that less-colorful part of our journey that connects better with the biblical landscape of today's gospel story.

In some translations of the Bible, we read that Jesus went out into the "desert" for 40 days. In other translations, like the New Revised Standard Version of our pew Bibles, we hear the word "wilderness." To me, those words conjure up different ideas—with sand, cactus, and parched-earth on the one hand and wet, green, mountain forests on the other hand. I suspect that Jesus' desert wilderness was something in between—a wild, deserted space without much growing there. But whatever the geography was like for Jesus, we know that the wilderness was an important spiritual time. On this first Sunday in Lent, let's think about Jesus' experience and what we can expect when we find ourselves in the wilderness.

## **1—WE'LL ALL EXPERIENCE WILDERNESS**

Maybe the first learning from this gospel story is that, at some times or others, we'll all experience wilderness. It's a normal part of human life. We might like to think that because we're

smart, good-looking, law-abiding, and innately talented, we could skip over the hard, depressing, anxiety-ridden, boring, and late-winter times of life, and arrive quickly at the green oases and spring flowers. We might like to think that only losers ever have to go through times of adversity—surely not God’s faithful chosen children! But this gospel story indicates otherwise. This story—which appears not only here in Mark, but in more detail in Matthew and Luke—indicates that even the beloved Son of God had to go through this difficult time of testing, temptation, and trouble. Besides being divine, Jesus was also fully human, and that meant that he had struggles just like we all do. In fact, the New Testament letter to the Hebrews indicates that Jesus is “able to sympathize with our weaknesses” and offer us mercy because he was tested like us “in every respect” (4:15). Even though he was God’s “son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.” It was the perfection gained through his suffering that later allowed Jesus to become our “source of eternal salvation” (5:8-9).

On Wednesday night, some of us came here to worship God and to receive ashes on our foreheads in the shape of a cross. Ash Wednesday is the beginning of the Christian season of Lent. For 40 days plus six Sundays, we recall the 40 long and hard days that Jesus spent fasting and facing temptation out in the wilderness. As we placed ashes on our heads, we reminded ourselves of our mortality--ashes to ashes, dust to dust—and our common humanity. No matter who we are, we all live in human flesh and, thus, we’re all subject to human frailty, suffering, grief, and death. Whether suffering the consequences of our own sinfulness, the unkind or violent acts of other people, or natural occurrences beyond our control, difficult things happen to us sometimes.

This Lenten reminder is helpful to us, so that—whenever we might find ourselves facing hardship, depression, stress, temptation, and other kinds of frustrations—we know that it isn’t because we’re unloved or judged worse than other people. It isn’t because we aren’t valuable or worthy. It isn’t because God has forgotten about us or doesn’t care. Even though it feels like it at the time, we’re

definitely not alone. It might be OK to allow ourselves a little pity party, but not too much. The desert landscape is a natural part of the human life. At some times or others, we'll all experience wilderness.

## **2—GOD PREPARES US FOR THE WILDERNESS**

A second learning from this story of Jesus is that God prepares us for the wilderness. Mark 1:9-11 tells us that, just before Jesus went into the wilderness, he was at the Jordan River, where he was baptized by John. There, at his baptism, Jesus saw heaven open. He sensed the Holy Spirit coming down on him like a dove. He heard God's voice telling him, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

If you have to go into the wilderness, it sure would help to have that kind of affirmation and encouragement at the start of your journey. But we don't have to be the Son of God to come to the desert with some readiness. If we have experienced God's forgiving mercy, if we have been baptized into God's family of faith, if we have studied the scriptures and communicated with God in prayer, if we have worshiped and communed with God's people, if we have been in relationship with God, then—like a sponge—we have soaked up the water of life. Then, even when we hit those dry desert patches, we can trust that God has prepared us for the wilderness.

And, even if we don't feel like **we** have had that kind of relationship with God, **God** has been faithful to us anyway. Even if **we** haven't held up our end of the bargain, **God** has been there nurturing us. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, taught that, before we are even born, God's prevenient grace is working on our behalf. Prevenient grace is that love of God which comes before we even know we need it. God's prevenient grace is that mercy which comes before we ever experience temptation and sin. Drawing us toward God, prevenient grace helps us find our way into a relationship with our divine Creator.

So, friends, whenever you find yourself in a wilderness place, please remember that you are God's beloved child. Whether you have been faithful to God or not, God has been faithful to you. God comes before. God prepares us for the wilderness.

### **3—GOD GOES WITH US IN THE WILDERNESS**

A third learning from this story of Jesus is that God goes with us in the wilderness. You will notice verse 12 says that "the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness." We could interpret that to mean the Holy Spirit sent Jesus away from God into a place that was not only physically hostile, but also spiritually barren. That God-forsaken feeling certainly is part of the wilderness experience. We who have lived through wilderness times know the emotional and spiritual emptiness that feels like God has abandoned us and we are alone in the fight for survival. You may recall Jesus on the cross quoting Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

If not even Jesus was immune to that feeling of isolation and despair, then undoubtedly we will be subject to those deserted feelings as well. But, like Jesus, we have the opportunity to wake up to the realization that God has not abandoned us. We aren't alone in the struggle. Mark 1:13 tells us that Jesus was visited by Satan and that there were wild beasts there in the wilderness with him. Those two notes don't give us much comfort or courage. But if we read all the way to the end of verse 13, we also see that "the angels waited on him." In other words, God's presence was there too. When we feel like we're up against the enemy and about to be devoured, we need to be aware that divine help is available. If we can allow ourselves to see them, God's angels are there ministering to us, tending to our needs, helping us find spiritual nourishment and strength, even in the wilderness.

I don't know if you paid much attention to the call to worship from Psalm 78. That scripture has similar ideas to what we read here in Mark chapter one. Psalm 78 tells the story of the Hebrew people wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. God had freed them from slavery in Egypt, but they weren't ready yet to enter into the Promised Land. In the desert wilderness, the Hebrews complained because

they didn't have enough to drink or eat. But God didn't let them die of thirst or starvation. God broke open a rock, and water gushed out. God rained down quail on them so they would have meat. And, in the mornings, the Hebrew people found manna on the ground. Psalm 78 describes that manna as "the grain of heaven" and "the bread of angels."

God never sends us into the desert alone. God provides the care we need. God goes with us in the wilderness.

### **CONCLUSION**

As I was preparing this sermon, I remembered the 2009 Disney movie "Up!" In that wonderful story, a nine-year old boy named Russell appears at the door of a house owned by elderly Mr. Fredricksen. *Dressed in his scout uniform, Russell tells Mr. Fredricksen that he is a Wilderness Explorer. Pointing to his almost full sash, Russell explains that he only has one more badge to earn before he can become a Senior Wilderness Explorer. That missing badge must be earned by assisting the elderly. So Russell wants to know how he can assist Mr. Fredricksen. Sad and gruff Mr. Fredricksen doesn't want to be bothered and tries repeatedly to shoo Russell away, but Russell is very persistent. Through some fantastical twists and turns, eventually, the two of them end up going together on a great and dangerous adventure through the sky and in the wildlands of South America. Russell definitely assists elderly Mr. Fredricksen, and Mr. Fredricksen assists Russell in becoming a Senior Wilderness Explorer.*<sup>5</sup>

None of us will ever experience the wilderness quite like Russell and Mr. Fredricksen did. And it's not likely that we'll experience it exactly the way Jesus did, either. But, for sure, we'll all experience human hardships and struggles at some time or other. When we do, hopefully, we'll remember that our loving God has prepared us in advance and that God and his angels will be there to assist us. That's what we can expect when we find ourselves in the wilderness.

<sup>5</sup>During worship, *in lieu of part of this paragraph*, I showed seconds :36-1:35 from this clip:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lsi-O8n8A7s>

1



2



3



4

