

1 Lent B, February 21, 2021.  
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**Beloved Wilderness**  
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The Gospel of Mark is the shortest of the Gospels and has the briefest account of Jesus' time in the wilderness after his baptism. However, despite its brevity, it is my favorite. In a few words, the author of Mark describes a time and a wilderness that is different from that described by the authors of Luke's and Matthew's Gospels. For Mark, the importance of the timing helps us understand what the wilderness meant for Jesus and can mean for us.

The author of Mark describes the time this took place by using three words: in those days. While it can be easy to overlook those words, they are not irrelevant. Perhaps, like me, you have heard them or a variation on the phrase they create lately. Most of the time when I hear someone say, "In those days," they are about to visit a memory through nostalgia. They are about to remember a time in the past in a way that might not be quite the same as they remember. "In those days, things were so much simpler." "In those days, everyone was happy with their lot or role in life and no one wanted too much." "In those days, the TV shows were funny and easy to understand." You get the idea, "in those days" is a phrase that can signal someone is about to tell us or we are about to share a memory of better days gone by; not because they really were better, but because that is how we choose to remember them. Mental health professionals have been observing during the pandemic people have been watching a lot more classic movies and television series because they represent that sort of nostalgia that can help buffer the existential crisis of the pandemic, systemic racism, the violent insurrection at the capitol on January 6 and its aftermath, and of course this week's news of the suffering of millions of people in Texas who are or were without power and water during a deep freeze. When it feels like the news is all bad, and tragically so, it can be helpful to take a break mentally and emotionally from all the trauma. However, the same experts warn spending too much time in nostalgia can lead to unhealth, as people can create a fantasy they chose to inhabit instead of facing reality. When this happens, a person can actually end up with long term emotional and mental issues, which will only add to their struggles and suffering instead of helping get through grief of loss and uncertainty.

With this warning in mind, it might be reassuring to remember Biblical scholars and commentators tell us that when the author of Mark's Gospel used the term "In those days" they did not mean better days long gone. Instead, it was a reference to the

five hundred years of silence between the Old and New Testaments; the five hundred years when God did not raise up any prophets to speak truth to power. For five hundred years the People of God had no prophet to remind them that as God's People God expected them to follow the ways of God. Without such voices, like the voices of Moses, Isaiah, Deborah, Elijah, and Nathan, scholars tell us the People of God felt lost and abandoned by God.

In those days, the silence was painful for the People of God. In those days, the silence felt like loss. In those days, the silence felt heavy, like grief.

In those days Jesus appeared and was baptized by the voice that broke the silence, John the Baptizer. In those days, as Jesus rose up out of those waters of baptism, the Spirit descended upon him, and a Voice from heaven declared Jesus is beloved of God, God's own Son, and should be listened to. Which means "those days" were done. A new day had begun. The silence had ended and now there is a voice to be heard.

Which is why it is interesting that instead of driving Jesus out to do a long speaking and healing tour, the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. Notice the Spirit didn't call Jesus to the wilderness. The Spirit did not invite Jesus into the wilderness. The Spirit didn't suggest it might be a good idea for Jesus to go into the wilderness. The Spirit demanded. The Spirit insisted. The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness whether he wanted to go there or not.

A lot has been written by scholars and commentators about the Biblical understanding of the wilderness. Most often these interpretations have, whether deserved or not, an urban bias that suggests populated cities would have been safer for people than non-populated wild places where thieves or thugs could attack someone and disappear without a trace. Parables like the Good Samaritan support that bias. But we also have to remember shepherds were in the wilderness with their flocks, so maybe it wasn't all bad. In Exodus, when the Israelites wandered the wilderness for 40 years, they were not under constant threat, instead with God's guidance through Moses they learned where to find water and were fed manna from heaven. During those 40 years they learned how to connect with and understand the land so they would know how to live on the land God promised them. For the People of God, the wilderness was where they spent the first 40 years of their freedom learning how to be close to God, learning how to recognize and mark and celebrate when God was close to them. And they learned how to be a community of people who listened to and followed God. Despite its hardships, there was a lot of goodness in the wilderness for the People of God.

As someone who grew up in a beautiful rural part of the Midwest, I love the wilderness. To me it is not a place of danger, it is a place of beauty and connection. It is where I feel close to the earth and close to God. The wild animals are part of that connection and growing up with wild animals in my back yard, I learned to respect them, not fear them. I had no illusion they were pets for my company or pleasure, but essential parts of what makes the world beautiful.

So, when I read the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, I interpret it to mean Jesus entered into an intentional time of learning like the People of God before him about the gifts of the wilderness. Gifts he must have appreciated because throughout his life and ministry the Gospels remind us Jesus often went away by himself to private, deserted, wild places to pray. Perhaps because of what he learned and experienced in the wilderness, being part of something beloved.

The wilderness of Mark's Gospel does not seem to be a barren and desolate desert. It is populated with beasts, wild animals. Which means there must have been vegetation of some sort, food for animals to eat that other animals eat. There must have been water for all that wildlife to drink. So Jesus was not alone. He was with the beasts, who may not have been a threat. They were just part of the community. The author of Mark also wrote that in the wilderness there was Satan, the tempter. One of the reasons why Mark's version of Jesus' time in the wilderness is my favorite is Satan is mentioned only as part of the wilderness, part of the community. There is no spiritual showdown between Satan and Jesus like there is in Luke and Matthew's versions of this account. We don't get to know what the temptations were, and we don't get to see Jesus effortlessly swat them away. Instead, we are just told during his time in the wilderness there were temptations. They are part of that community, and that won't be the only place Jesus will encounter temptations. They are part of all communities and places. They are part of life.

The author of Mark tells us there was another layer of community for Jesus in the wilderness: there were angels who provided care. We don't know what specific kind of nourishment or care they gave Jesus just like we aren't told what specific temptations Satan gave, so it probably doesn't matter as much as the reality of their presence. All this means Jesus was not alone in the wilderness. He was in a diverse, complex community that perhaps represented the Beloved Community, where there is room for all that God made and loves, even if we might not like some parts of that community.

In just two sentences, the author of Mark has given us a rich picture of the wilderness where Jesus connected to the earth, its creatures, to God, to the tempter, and to the angels. After spending forty days in that community— which scholars remind us were not 40 literal days, just a long time, quite a bit shorter than the 40 years the Israelites spent in their wilderness – Jesus was ready to take up the message of John the Baptist after his arrest and call people to turn to God and listen to his voice which now filled the silence that John’s voice had ended. The message that God was up to something new and wonderful, that God’s kingdom was coming very near in the person of Jesus. Those better days are not behind us, they are not in some fantasy utopia in the out of reach future, they are here with us right now in the love of God that is Jesus, and we can all repent, turn, and follow Jesus.

On the first Sunday in Lent, the season of penitence, we are always given an account of Jesus in the wilderness in the Gospel reading and preachers often compare Lent to a wilderness of our making, one where we give up some luxury or bad habit or take on a discipline in order to turn again toward God. But this year, it may seem to some of us that Lent has been going on for almost a year. We’ve already had to give up so much, including gathering together for worship, going out to eat, gathering with family. Some of us may have lost loved ones to the virus. And we’ve had to take on so much: wearing face masks when we go out in public, keeping at least six feet from people, even friends. We’ve had to learn about the Covid-19 virus.

Perhaps this year it is good that we are given Mark’s version of the wilderness because it could be a help as we find ourselves still in a pandemic that has brought so much pain and loss and grief to light. So much so that it can sometimes be hard to look at, and might tempt us to look to days gone by and imagine them to be better than they were, not just to give us a restful breath from all the trauma and grief of reality, but to build a fantasy to hide away in. Perhaps when faced with such a temptation we might reflect on Mark’s wilderness and find in that interpretation an invitation to look at reality in a new way: one where instead of seeing desolation and isolation, we can look for company, even if it is in the birds outside our window, or the tracks of other beasts in the snow who passed by our houses when we weren’t looking. We can recognize temptations for what they are, and instead of giving in to temptations that will harm us and our community, look instead for those angels that are surely here with us too. Those helpers, those note writers, those people who make our telephones ring or send those cheering emails or text messages, or who put those positive postings on social media. Those angels who help us learn to see and connect with the beauty around us and in so doing might help us recognize there can still be connection, healing, and joy

even in the wilderness. And maybe, just maybe inspire us to be angels to each other and to voice the message to those who are growing weary that we aren't alone, God is up to something, and through this, something even better, something like resurrection life for all people might even now be growing and emerging in this wilderness, something closer to God's Community of the Beloved where there is room for all of us.