

Sermon: Walking Into Wilderness**Scripture: Mark 1:9-15****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: February 18, 2024**

Our theme over the next 6 weeks of Lent is walking with Jesus towards Jerusalem which means, among other things,

walking with him into the wilderness,

it means taking up our crosses and walking with him,

it means healing in our walk with him,

it means not walking away from him when his message

becomes disruptive to ourselves and others,

it means our walking are feet washed by him and we

must be willing to wash others, and

it means walking (with hope) towards death.

To walk with Jesus we listen to how the Bible speaks of him in the various moments of his earthly life and consider what we can learn from those moments to inform our own lives. But it's not just that. Because we say at the end of his journey after his crucifixion was his resurrection and so we also believe in faith that walking with Jesus is not just an exercise in historical remembering for what we can learn but that his Holy Spirit is a real presence today, here and now, in my life, in your life, in our collective lives and so Christ continues to walk with us and we with him as his life continues transform the world... and us within it.

What's helpful about scripture, reading about and reflecting on the stories, the teachings, the actions of the man, Jesus, is that it hones our minds and heightens our senses to notice, to recognize, the presence and movement of His

Holy Spirit when it is among us... and conversely to recognize when it is not. That we can lie, deny, cheat and hurt, mistreat and destroy means there are times when His Holy Spirit is skirted or denied and taken out of the equation. Our work as Christians is to notice and lean into and be instruments of the movement of His Holy Spirit in this world. I'm not saying we as Christians are the only ones who can and do accomplish that or that we necessarily do a very good job of that, but that IS the idea.

So there is value in returning back to the scriptures and taking note of how Jesus is spoken of, imagining Jesus in our mind's eye, our heart's eye and attuning ourselves in that way.

We begin this journey toward the cross and Easter as we begin every Lent with this odd coming out moment when Jesus begins his public ministry, a ministry that is to last a mere 3 years. We do not know much of what has happened to Jesus for the 30 years prior to this moment but maybe only that he has lead a normal human life, growing up and doing the things normal boys do in the region of Galilee at the turn of the millennia - playing, fishing, swimming, learning from his carpenter father, fascinated by many things in the natural world, troubled by many things in the human world, learning his way. We can imagine he had an uncanny brilliance coupled with an unusual openness of heart and that he wondered and struggled as all young people do with his identity, his belonging, and his purpose. We can guess that he had a dawning sense of his life across his early years that he had a unique perspective on God and religion and the human condition which made him feel at odds from most everyone around him. And that he wondered what that meant for his life, that there might be something asked of

him that was distinct from what was being asked of anyone else around him, we can only assume.

The Gospel writers all write of this pivotal moment upon which everything else hinged when Jesus apparently decided to go out and listen to John the Baptist, a cousin of his actually, but not one he had much acquaintance with. Everyone was so moved by the experience of hearing John preach of repenting, of changing their lives in response to God's coming, which John said was on the horizon, a long-promised coming of the Messiah for the rescuing of oppressed Israel. So Jesus went out there with everyone else to see what all the hubbub was about and it didn't take him long at all to also recognize something special there. He too was profoundly moved by John... it was like a resonating bell going off within him that in something of a daze drew him into the river waters as well. And John saw who it was even before Jesus knew who he was.

“Am I to baptize you?”

And as John lowered him into the water and lifted him up, Jesus experienced this moment of his identity being confirmed, this overwhelming sense that God had chosen him, alighted on him, and proclaimed him as His Son.

I wonder if Jesus was stunned by this moment as he came up out the waters of the Jordon – not like “yes, I knew it all along, I am the beloved son of God” but more like “oh man (insert expletive there!), what is going on?!” And while it was powerful and moving, I wonder if it was also frightening.

His identity was revealed, his sense of things confirmed that he had some special call, but that in no way meant that it was crystal clear to him then what his purpose was and what it actually meant that he was the beloved son of God or what would be next for him. That would have to unfold over the coming months.

But for the moment in his stupor, as the Gospel of Mark describes it, he was “sent out by the Spirit into the wilderness” and he went stumbling out in fear and trembling for what he’d just experienced and wondering what it all meant.

As he walked into the wilderness, Mark writes, “he was tempted by Satan and tended by angels”. But I doubt he encountered them as physically present anymore than we do and that it was just the natural human torture of the push and pull of doing the right thing when the wrong thing is so easy and at times appealing. Mark doesn’t write exactly what the temptations were, like Matthew and Luke do, but I would imagine the heart of it was to either avoid and deny the call of God in his life and/or to use this call, this apparent favored status, this power from God for his own ends and his own glory and uplift rather than for whatever God intended it for. It was such a profound and difficult experience for Jesus out there that later when the disciples asked him to give them words that they could pray to God on a regular basis he included in that prayer – “ask God not to lead you into temptation but to deliver you from evil.”

I imagine Jesus sensed out there in the wilderness that God was calling him to was going to be immensely disruptive to his life that he knew up to that point. Maybe he sensed with this call that his friends and even his family were never going to understand it. They would probably even think he was losing his mind for what he would be proclaiming, so problematic would it be to how the Judeo-Greco-Roman world was organized at that point. Having that sense of the disruption and loneliness it would entail, that alone would have left me saying “maybe there are other ways for me to respond to this call, less disruptive approaches where I could maintain my old life, God? Maybe?”

Agonizing out there in the wilderness separated as he was from any and all comforts of his old life, his soul thirsty like dry weary land without water. Maybe he could have convinced himself otherwise if he was back at home or chillin' with his buddies, but out there in the emptiness, the wilderness, alone with his thoughts, none of his usual ways of distracting himself were there to avoid what was being asked of him.

And forevermore this is something we know of human nature, the human condition, that there are directions we are called, inspirations toward what is good and true and right in our lives that don't necessarily involve benefit and blessing to ourselves but is still what is needed and what we are called to. And we too must beware the temptation to avoid or deny or rationalize away what this disruptive God is asking of us. Jesus is forever our guide and support for leaning into our calls however threatening or difficult they may seem.

It's the appropriate imagery for Lent, a time when we make some choices that might turn our everyday lives into a more paired-down wilderness so that we can do two things better: 1. recognize God's voice and 2. Reduce the noisy other voices both within us and outside us that obscure God's voice. We give our souls some space and time to be thirsty for God like dry weary land without water without rushing to fill them up and distract ourselves.

At the very end of Luke's account of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness, it says that after all this, the devil left him until an opportune time. And that opportune time comes, if you'll remember, when he finally shares with the disciples his own revelation that his calling will necessarily bring him to his death. Peter says "no way, Lord, I will never let them kill you." And Jesus almost

desperate not to allow another option into his head snaps at Peter – get behind me Satan! – silencing Peter and the whole room.

It is not easy to hear clearly God's voice in our lives and even harder to maintain faithfulness to the voice once we've heard it. Sometimes it takes a wilderness, a stripping away of all the usual noise and accouterments of our lives to both hear what needs to be heard and gather the courage to respond faithfully.

And so with Jesus we walk into the wilderness and with him we listen and we grapple with who we are, the meaning of our lives and the calls we are sensing given our identity as God's beloved.

But we don't stay there do we? The walk into the wilderness is what is needed so that we can more faithfully enter back into our everyday lives and enact what we are hearing we are called to. It is hard to hear God, to hear the promptings of the Holy Spirit unless we take some time apart but the time apart is meant to make more true our lives out among others.

In this beautiful little book called "The Great Outlaw" which is a fictional account of Jesus' life based on the scriptures but imaginatively linked with the legend of Robin Hood, the author does a beautiful job of inviting the reader into Jesus' struggle and vulnerability there in the wilderness. But once Jesus gets through the 40 days, the author ends his chapter in this way: "That evening some stray shepherds on the western slopes saw a strong young man running swiftly down towards Jordon. The Great Outlaw was off in quest of his Company!" Jesus ends his wilderness sojourn in pursuit of a community, of those willing to walk with him up to Jerusalem.