

## Braving the Wilderness *Lost and Found*

Mark 1:9-13

February 18, 2024

For many years, the most popular humanities course at Duke University was a small group seminar in the English Department taught by the late Southern novelist Reynolds Price. The course was simply titled *The Gospels*. After studying the Gospels of Mark and John, which Price described as “documents largely unprecedented in world literature,” students were asked to begin the one assignment the syllabus required: an *original* gospel of 30-50 pages, based on the readings and discussion of the seminar. Now this class was in the English Department, not the Religion Department, and so we would be graded on the quality of our story, how compelling a narrative we could construct. Two decades later, I still remember it as the most challenging assignment I’ve ever been given. Now, admittedly, some of that was length—I’d never written anything close to fifty pages before on anything. But the content was my deeper concern. How do you write an original gospel? How do you summarize the life of Jesus in your own words?

This difficult assignment was precisely what faced the man we call Mark as he sat down to record his story of the life of Jesus, quite possibly the first person in history to do so. He began without precedent or guide, simply convinced that the story must be told.

Mark’s story is succinct; his pace is brisk. No miraculous birth in Bethlehem. No detailed description of Jesus’ family tree. At the outset of the story, readers are cast into the wilderness where a strange-looking figure appears. Mark calls him John the baptizer. He is preaching, preaching repentance. He is demanding, demanding change. He is offering, offering forgiveness and a fresh start. Just as this prophet John predicts the coming of the Messiah,

immediately Jesus arrives on the scene. At this point, Mark proceeds at an almost breathless pace. He barely pauses to describe characters or setting, so focused is he on the plot itself, so compelled to tell the good news, the gospel story.

Jesus wades into the Jordan River. The scene is stuffed with symbolism. Jesus is baptized by John. The heavens are ripped apart. The Spirit descends like a dove. A voice from the sky declares, “You are my Son, the Beloved.”

Now just imagine how Jesus might have seized the moment to start a movement. After all, the heavens were torn apart. A spirit descending. A divine voice booming. It’s the perfect launch party for a global tour. Jesus could have built a brand, become an influencer, consolidated his power. It would have been a good story, a compelling narrative for an original gospel. But it’s not the one Mark tells. Not by a long shot. Here is what happens instead. The same Spirit who descended at the baptism drives Jesus out into the wilderness, where he will spend forty days, his only company wild beasts and angels, face to face with temptation.

The ministry of Jesus begins not on stage, but in the wilderness. The wilderness. A setting of trial, risk, and danger. The wilderness. A vast untamed landscape where our power is limited, where our defenses are useless. The wilderness. A place of solitude where we are confronted with our own deepest selves, including the parts of us we’d rather edit out or hide away.

This morning, we stand at the beginning of Lent in the Christian year. We will spend this holy season of repentance and reflection in the wilderness. For six

weeks, we'll be immersed in the stories of scripture that center spiritual and physical wastelands, and you might know there are many from which to choose. This is because, in the pages of scripture, God's people often find themselves wandering. In the gospels, followers of Jesus are frequently lost. The journey of faith takes us through—not around—the wilderness.

To begin that journey, we must take a risk. What I mean is this: the wilderness is not usually a place we visit by choice. After his baptism, Mark does not tell us that Jesus decided to go on a personal retreat. The Spirit drove him into the wilderness. Remember: where the Spirit of God sends us, the Spirit of God walks with us. So, we can be sure that there is something sacred for us in this wild place. But that terrible gift is rarely obvious to us. Not at first.

So, here's the risk. We must release our death grip on the control panel. That's the first step, and it's a doozy. I'll speak for myself. What I fear most in the wilderness is its incessant reminder that I am not in charge. Perhaps you are a bit like me. You struggle and you strive to stay on top of things, on top of everything, to maintain order, to display some degree of mastery over your own life. And then, you are driven into the wilderness, often against your will. The ground shifts beneath your feet. A daunting diagnosis. A painful and unexpected loss. A broken relationship. A change you did not desire. The ground shifts beneath your feet, and suddenly you are fragile, not in control. Your power is limited, not limitless. Your humanity is on full display. You are in the wilderness.

Mark tells us Jesus spent forty days tempted by Satan. What is this temptation? I think you know. It's the very first one scripture records, all the way back in the beginning. It is the temptation to be like God. More to the point, the temptation to think, to really believe, that we *are* gods. Both Matthew and Luke fill in Mark's brief account, describing in detail the temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness. There were three of them, each urging Jesus to take control of the situation, to display his divine power to tame

the wilderness. Each one of them modeled after the oldest temptation in the book, all the way back in Eden when the serpent holds out that forbidden fruit with this promise, "God knows that if you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will become like gods." The temptation was more than our ancient parents could resist. They were hooked by that line. So are we. They wanted to be divine, and we want the same thing.

We want to tame the wilderness. We are tempted to take complete control over whatever we can get our hands on. You know this about me—I love to clean. In fact, whenever I am asked to describe my favorite hobby, I'm tempted to begin with that one. Particularly passionate about cleaning floors. I think it's because it's the opposite of my day job. There is something so satisfying about taking a rectangular, orderly space of wood or carpet or stone and then watching how it becomes new again as I pass over it with a vacuum cleaner, or a broom, or a mop. Mowing the lawn works the same way. You can see the results of your work right there in front of you. I think my love for that particular chore is rooted in my desire to have a little control over at least one small thing in my life, but the truth is that principle is expandable. If only I was in charge, I would use my power for good. I would clean things up around here, get things organized. Oh, how that craving for control eats away at us. We try to control our children—good luck. We try to control our parents, our schedules, our future, our past.

Jesus is driven into the wilderness for forty days. He is promised power beyond description. Satan whispers in his ear and then shouts from the mountaintop. Jesus, build a brand. Become an influencer. Show them all what a boss you are. Tame the wilderness. The temptation is always with us. It takes so many different forms; the devil indeed wears many disguises.

I don't know which wilderness you find yourself traveling through this morning, what kind of baggage you carried in here, but I do know that you are

burdened. This week, take some time to acknowledge, to name, the temptations that torment or trouble you. Don't judge yourself for having them—we all do. Don't try to push them aside—you can't outrun them. Never works. In the wilderness of Lent, just release your grip. Just open your hands, and then pray for the courage to brave this uncertain land. We understand the proverb scribbled on the wall of an addiction recovery center in a David Foster Wallace novel. The proverb says, "Everything I've ever let go of has claw marks on it."

Trust the Spirit enough to release your grip. And then you're ready, ready to journey through, not around, this wilderness.

Finally, here's the good news: there is a promise at the heart of this morning's story and this sacred season. It is a detail that even Mark, in his brevity, is sure to include. The voice from heaven speaks the language of love.

*You are my Son, my Beloved; I am pleased with you.*

I imagine that as Jesus is driven in to the wilderness, those words echo in his heart. I imagine those words are in his mind as he turns down temptation after temptation. *Beloved. I am beloved. Loved. I am loved. Love. God is love.* This promise is enough for the journey.

If you were listening closely, you heard it this morning spoken of two children of God in our congregation. It is the baptismal promise. Della, you are loved. Riley, you are loved. You are claimed. The promise allows you to brave the wilderness, gives you the strength to let go. You do not need to control the world or even your own life, because all of it—*all of it*—is held in the arms of God, the same arms that hold you.

So, as we begin this journey through the wilderness, let the truth of your baptism echo in your heart:

*My child.*

*Beloved.*

*Loved.*

*Amen.*