

## **Lent 1B**

### **Mark 1.9-15**

**Sunday, February 21 2021**

When you see rescue helicopters hovering above a plateau in the Absaroka-Beartooth wilderness of southern Montana, you know that things probably will not end well. This was the image that I and a number of friends had years ago. We were on the opposing plateau across the Boulder River drainage, beginning a five day backpack. Prior to leaving, we heard the news of a solo backpacker who failed to return at the planned end of his hike. Helicopters darted to and fro across the drainage, above the mountains. They lingered there for days. By the time we finished our trek, it was clear that the young man would never be found. Beginning the journey home, I was struck by the image of the mountains in the rear view mirror. The Absaroka-Beartooths--an ominous monolith--filled the mirror. It looked as if the towering amalgam of stone and forest was about to fall all over the Beartooth Valley and swallow everyone up. Or was it that the monolith was unmoved and unfeeling? Almost as if to say, "Don't ever test me." It was, to say the least, unnerving. In that moment, I remember thinking, "I'm not sure that I want to go back there."

Wilderness can do that to you. Wilderness is dangerous. Wilderness reminds us of the limits and frailty of our humanity.

Thus, it is interesting and telling that our Lenten season begins with a narrative about Jesus, his baptism by John, and then his immediate movement into none other than *the wilderness*. So much for easing into things! Indeed, we might sense relatively quickly that this is not your garden-variety, namby pamby gospel narrative. Even with the beautiful language of Jesus's epiphany at his baptism--the heavens opening and the Divine proclamation to Jesus, "You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased."--even with this, we should sense that not everything is hunky dory. There is an edge to the story, a roughness that those seeking a milder and mannered Jesus may not expect or like.

For instance, the heavens at Jesus' baptism don't just placidly open up, but, as the text notes, the heavens are torn apart. The only other time that this word is used in Mark's gospel is at the very end of Mark when the curtain in the temple is torn in two after Jesus's crucifixion. Both signify in their own way that God is on the loose. In the world. Furthermore, the spirit sending Jesus into the wilderness doesn't do so with a love tap. Rather, we hear that the spirit *drove* him into the wilderness, or, better yet, throws Jesus out. The language connotes what you expect from a wild western movie, people flying out of a bar amidst a brawl. And then, to top things off, Jesus reaches the wilderness where he's met by the adversary, the tempter, Satan. As one commentator noted, a possible theme for this story could be "Life after Baptism" -- it's a life full of testing. Uh huh!

Which is a helpful reminder to us this day, throughout this Lenten season, and, certainly, throughout our lives. For those expecting that life in God is simple, sweet, and sanguine, they have a whole other thing coming. While Jesus's experience in baptism is the prototype for our own baptism-- God declaring to each one of us we are beloved sons and daughters--his is also the prototype for our own wilderness encounters. To be sure, we do not go seeking struggle or difficulty or suffering. Indeed, we need not look for them. Struggle, difficulty, and suffering will always find us whether we are ready for them or not. We know that the wilderness can be scary and downright dangerous, similar to the reality of that time in the Absaroka-Beartooth range. Perhaps, what this text does, in part, is to remind us that when we find ourselves in those wilderness experiences, we, ultimately, are not alone.

More importantly, the wilderness is not apart from God. It is not God forsaken. The promise embedded in today's Gospel narrative is that the holy resides with us precisely in those places that seem the furthest from God. Far from something that we should run away from or fear, these experiences may offer light and insight if we are willing to listen and to stay long enough to understand. Which is an extremely difficult spiritual discipline. Staying and listening. The wilderness of the pandemic of this last year is a stark and painful reminder of that reality. More often than not, we either reject the reality we face and crowd out what we don't want to hear, or we go seeking for some solution, some answer that will tie everything up neatly in a bow. When, in fact, we are in the wilderness. It is hard. There isn't a ready solution. Nor is there an elixir that

will take away all the problems. Thus, an invitation may be ours to listen and attend to what it is God may be saying and where it is that God may be meeting us. Even, or more precisely, exactly in the wilderness.

You see, Mark implies that Jesus has already overcome Satan in the very beginning of the Gospel. So, when he comes out of the wilderness and proclaims that the Kingdom of Heaven has come near, repent, and believe the good news, he embodies the very thing that he is saying. The reign of God is near. Indeed, it is here. Thus, turn around. Stop running away from the life God gives you. Turn around, lean into the presence that is there with you and for you. Remember, the One who declares to you that you are beloved son and daughter of God is also the One who abides with you amidst the wilderness and will ultimately lead you out. All of this can seem a bit abstract at times, particularly when we are struggling. Hence, the better translation of, “believe the good news,” is “*trust* the good news.” We are not given ironclad certainties. Rather, we are invited into the fullness of life and relationship. Not intellectual assent, but hope. Not beyond the shadow of a doubt, but faith. Not the ease and serenity of no more problems, but trust even in the wilderness.

Theologian Howard Thurman retells a story apt for us on this first Sunday in Lent. He writes:

One night I was awakened by my mother, who asked if I would like to see the comet [Halley’s Comet]. I got up, dressed quickly, and went out with her into the back yard. There I saw in the heavens the awesome tail of the comet and stood transfixed. With deep anxiety I asked, without taking my eyes off it, “What will happen to us when that thing falls out of the sky?” There was a long silence during which I felt the gentle pressure of her fingers on my shoulders; then I looked into her face and saw what I had seen on another occasion, when without knocking I had rushed into her room and found her in prayer. At last she said, “Nothing will happen to us, Howard. God will take care of us.” In that moment something was touched and kindled in me, a quiet reassurance that has never quite deserted me. As I look back on it, what I sensed then was the fact that what stirred in me was one with what created and controlled the comet. It was this inarticulate awareness that silenced my fear and stilled my panic.

One with what created and controlled the comet. One with the one who came from Nazareth of Galilee. One with the one coming up out of the water. One with the one in the wilderness 40 days. One with the one in the wilderness and beyond. One with the one who came to Galilee proclaiming, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and trust in the good news.” One with the one journeying to the cross. One with the one living beyond the cross. So that you might be one with that one now and always and forever.