

Wild and Free

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
February 21, 2021

First Sunday of Lent – Year B

Mark 1:9-15



Kim toys from time to time with the idea of hiking the full length of the Appalachian Trail, from Georgia to Maine. I have other others in the church talk about this as well. I am less inclined to want to do it. Why? The weather. The wild animals. The lack of bathrooms. No showers. And how do you get everything you need for months on your back? What if I forget something crucial?

Our daughter recently did a three-day hike through Assateague National Park from Maryland to Virginia. She loved it. But when I looked at her, snow-covered beaches as the background, carrying a pack that looked to weigh more than her, I became tired. Just from looking at her. But I did learn something from her, something about Lent, as she prepared to leave for her journey. She told us she was leaving her phone behind. She didn't want the distraction, she said. It seems when you are going into the wilderness, you must be really mindful of what you take up on your back, and what you set down.

The wilderness is the primary metaphor for Lent in large part because of Jesus' experience there.

In Mark, Jesus emerges from the waters of baptism, the heavens are ripped open. The Greek word is "schizomenous." It's where we get the word schizophrenia. It means torn in two. The word will be used only one other time in this gospel, when at Jesus' death the curtain of the temple is torn in two. The Spirit descends not "on" to Jesus in this Gospel, but literally "into" Jesus. Jesus is possessed by the Spirit, which then "drives" him into the wilderness. The Greek word is the same word that is used when Jesus drives out demons.

When he gets out into the wilderness, Mark uses few words. Try not to import Matthew and Luke into the story, just let Mark tell it. He is there forty days. He is tempted by Satan. He is with the wild beasts. He is in the care of angels. That's it.

Lent is a forty-day period (not counting Sundays) that is meant to mirror Israel's forty year wandering in the desert and Jesus' forty-day temptation in the wilderness. Lent

is in many ways a wilderness we are invited – or maybe compelled? – to enter. And Mark's scarcity of detail gives us ample room to explore this wilderness for ourselves. We know only these things:

We are God's beloved children.
Satan is there, tempting us to forsake that identity.
There are wild animals.
There are angels.

The wilderness is not to be avoided. There may be bad things there that should not be minimized, but it is also a place where the opportunity presents itself to come to know God, and oneself, and one's calling. Jacob wrestles God in the wilderness and his name is changed to Israel. Moses and the people of Israel receive the Law of God in the wilderness. It is a place that promises transformation.

Let us pack only what we need for the journey. There is so much baggage many of us are carrying around, so much weight that can keep us from taking even the first step. We talk a lot about giving things up for Lent, like chocolate and alcohol and such. Let us also consider giving up bitterness. Let us lay down resentment. Let us be done with the weight of guilt. Let us leave behind injustice. Let us give up the need to control. I don't know what it is for you – I'm quite familiar with what it is for me – I know what it is that I simply must lay down if I am going to make this journey into the Lenten wilderness and come out the other side transformed.

Lent does not usually arrive in this part of the world with a winter storm that leaves inches of snow atop inches of ice. But I wonder if the winter landscape outside our doors is not more fitting for Lent than it would be for Advent or Christmas. Maybe we should have been dreaming of a white Lent all along. It muffles the noise. It sharpens the senses. It is perhaps the closest any of us would otherwise get to a wilderness, right on our undrivable streets. Maybe there aren't wild animals, but the snow and ice on top of the pandemic force us – drive us, we might say – into dependence, on God, to be sure, but also on one another, the angels among us.

Jesus is not alone. God sends angels to tend to him in the wilderness, signs of God's presence, and neither are we.

They may or may not have wings, these angels. Sometimes they have a kind word. Sometimes a casserole. They bind up your soul wounds. They draw pictures in crayon on makeshift greeting cards and send them to those eager for joy. They call you on the phone to share a word of encouragement or a listening ear from your community of faith.

They prepare food for COVID front-line workers at Williamson Medical Center. They stay by your side when all others have abandoned you in your failures and brokenness. They teach in our schools and clerk in our grocery stores and are too often not paid or thanked to the level commensurate with their service. They advocate in solidarity with the voiceless and marginalized. They soothe the wilderness's threatened and sometimes actual violence with peace and justice and love.

I have a friend whose daughter is suffering with severe depression. One day, a woman from the church they attend showed up with a small blank notebook for his daughter. She told her to write down everything that she was absolutely sure was true, especially about herself--that she had no doubt about. Then, when she finds herself doubting everything, when her brain is sick and playing tricks on her, she can turn to her "this I know" book to remember the truth. My friend saw this person as a messenger from God, an angel to remind them all that no matter what, our true baptismal identity can never be taken away.

It was those ancient theologians, the band INXS, who sang in 1987, "Cause we all have wings, but some of us don't know why." The wilderness may be just the place to discover that why of our belovedness, the "this I know" of our true selves before God.

The snow is melting, but the Lenten wilderness is still before us. God beckons us to join the Son, to name our truths forged in the resisting of temptation, to notice who we are with on the journey, to accept the waiting of angels upon us, to, with God's help, be the angel for others, above all, to know ourselves and this world as beloved. Jesus emerged from the wilderness into vocation and we shall too, we shall emerge transformed in order to transform the world, to the glory of God alone. Let us continue to observe a holy Lent. Amen.