

**“Wilderness Faith”**  
+ 1 Lent B +  
Genesis 9:8-17; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15  
February 22 ,2015

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! The texts for this morning’s message are the lessons for this day.

I never bought **Cliff Notes** when I was a student. I didn’t trust someone else’s highlights of an important piece of literature – and I love to read. I did, however, look forward to the arrival of the Readers Digest Condensed books my Mom ordered. More novels in less time – I devoured them. Sometimes a condensed version is good – other times it leaves you wondering what you missed. Today’s Gospel from Mark is super condensed – oh, the other readings for today tie in to the water used by John on Jesus at the Jordan add all the water in the world with Noah and the Flood and Peter talking about baptism – then the desert temptation and a few short verses later John is in prison.

What leaped out at me as I read through notes and commentaries on this text was something I’d never considered before: the same Spirit that descends upon Jesus at his baptism is the Spirit that drives Him into the wilderness.

How strange is it that immediately after his Baptism Jesus is driven – not just led, mind you, but driven – into the wilderness by the same Spirit that just earlier had descended upon him and conferred to him God’s profound blessing as the voice of God thundered, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” (Mark1:11)

To be honest, I had only noticed half of that prior to this week. That is, I noticed that Jesus’ baptism came immediately before His temptation and concluded that proclaiming his identity as God’s Son/the Beloved/Messiah was essential to weathering the temptations and struggles to come. I have given countless sermons pointing people to the passages promising that the personhood – the identity/cleansing/renewing being owned as God’s child in our baptism is what guides us through the challenges and struggles we face as individuals and as God’s people in this particular family of faith in our journey as well. And I still stand by that. But this year it struck me that it is Spirit that drives Jesus into the wilderness, that place of challenge and struggle and purification and testing and temptation.

Why? Did Jesus need to be in the wilderness for some reason? Did this wilderness period provide something essential to his ministry or accomplish some end that isn't immediately apparent? The definitive answer is: we don't know for sure, as, of course, Mark in his terse, Hemingwayesque Gospel, doesn't say.

I would contend, however, that while Jesus lived in our broken world as one of us where, even with chaos theory somewhat explained we know there are random variables, that especially in the instances cited in Holy Writ, the Holy Spirit's tempting wasn't random, that the Holy Spirit drove Jesus to the wilderness with some purpose. And if we can imagine that, then might we also look at some of the wilderness places we have chosen to go recently or at other times in our lives and wonder the same.

Ah, but there's the rub, isn't it. Truth be told, we rarely volunteer to go to wilderness places. We don't often look for opportunities to struggle. This is probably why Mark reports that the Spirit drove Jesus rather than simply make a suggestion. The same is true with our periods of trial, temptation, struggle and change individually and as a congregation. We learn from what we experience, draw on that and use it in preparation for and coming face to face with new opportunities for growth in faith as individuals gathering around God's Word and Sacraments – as Jehovah has done for more than 90 years and plans to continue and in the face of ministry opportunities like the ones presently before Jehovah as a congregation.

We didn't seek out the opportunity for this building to continue as Jehovah's worship and ministry home with the large portions of the building becoming a Community Center with collaborative and changing-to-meet-the-needs-that-come-forth. This opportunity came to us. Even when the choices and challenges in front of us are of our own making, like the plans for Jehovah's Infant/Child Care/PreK they all require change and hard work. The Mekane Yesus, our daughter congregation will remain with us in ministry in this building, and, for the time being and perhaps for a longer period, the WHEREhouse, as well. Each opportunity before us guarantees pain, loss of stasis and daring new hope for fruitfulness in God's Kingdom that we cannot fully foresee with the best laid plans.

This text – and the Holy Spirit driving Jesus into the wilderness must cause us to ask, can we allow ourselves to consider that the Spirit might be driving us into the pain of change? When the Israelites finally came to the Promised Land Moses told them to go in and take the land God was giving to them. The leaders demanded search parties and reports, balked in fear even though God had cared for them miraculously with manna from heaven and quail to fill their stomachs. Jehovah has been and continues to be greatly blessed – there is no doubt that Our God our Help in Ages Past is Our Hope for NOW and for the Years to Come!

At this point, I want to be absolutely clear: I am not suggesting that God in any way ever causes us misery or suffering. Paul told the Corinthians ours is “the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God.”

We can learn from mistakes – from the results of sin that surround us – the results of our own sin but know always that our Holy God who sent His Sinless Son does not lead us into **sin** to teach us something, and definitely not to purposely punish us or put us in our place. Notice that it is not the Holy Spirit who tempts Jesus, but rather drives Jesus to the wilderness. Similarly, I don't believe that God even wants us to suffer, let alone causes us to. But I do wonder if we can imagine that perhaps God is at work both for us and through us during our wilderness times. Tough questions for tough times should never be asked lightly, especially when the struggles we face personally or as a group are major.

I also want to make it clear that I never advise people to stay in situations of danger, personal degradation or abuse. Far from it – I believe God wants only good things for God's children and God stands with us in our struggles – works through our struggles to lead us into good things – into blessing.

And yet struggle, trial, even misery – wilderness times – they certainly abound. I believe it is very prudent to look at the struggles facing us in light of this passage from Mark and ask, “Even though I did not wish for this, how might God be at work through this difficult period? What can I get out of this? How might God use me to help someone else? Even though we did not ask for this UpWorks opportunity, how might God be at work through this? How might our neighborhood benefit – how can the Gospel of Salvation through Jesus Christ alone be most

powerfully shared in witness, in mercy, in acts of love? How can we best use this place to accomplish the work of God's Kingdom?" Those are questions we asked as we were presented with the Infant/Child Care/PreK. The answer was that it was, and remains a good way to connect our neighborhood, children and their families to Christ.

Oh so many questions, but these questions aren't meant so much to redeem struggle and suffering – God's grace redeems all in our lives – God's washing renews us – God's presence in our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit is never in question even in the wilderness times that leave us feeling stretched beyond our abilities. Struggles, questions, thankfulness for God's provision, love for our God and worship for Who our God is and what God has done draws us to worship. At the font, the Lord's Table and in Worship and the Fellowship of believers we are always reminded that the same Spirit of God that descended upon Jesus at Baptism and drove Jesus out into the wilderness, the angels that ministered to Him – all that and the power that raised Jesus from the dead remains at work in our lives.

God will not abandon us during our sojourns in the wilderness but might even, from time to time, drive us there for our benefit or that of someone around us. God is, after all, in the business of taking that which seems only to cause death and bring from it Resurrection Life. AMEN.

Now may our heavenly father, renew in us the gifts of our baptism as we walk in the wilderness with Him. Amen.