

February 21st, 2021

Mark 1:9-13

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“In the Wilderness”

What is your least favorite month of the year? Mine is February! No offense to all those who were born in February! I think my tendency to almost despise February comes from my childhood. I grew up in Russia, and February was always cold, grey, and snowy. Pretty much like what we have going on this winter in Ohio. And I know snow usually looks so pretty. Now here in the suburbs of Central Ohio, the snow is white and so brilliant and romantic. But when the snow sits on the ground for four months and there is no new snowfall, in a major city with the main means of transportation of buses and trams, the snow becomes brown and grey slush, and there is nothing romantic about that. According to the Russian calendar, February is the last month of winter. As you might imagine, that calendar does not really align itself with what is really happening outside, because the snow stays on the ground until the end of March and it continues to be cold. So one reason why I don't like February is the weather. Then there was never anything exciting going on in February. No holidays, birthdays, no vacation. So despite February being the last month of winter and that would create hope for spring to come, February would always dread so slowly that it seemed like winter would never end.

Have you had a season in your life that felt like February? Dreary, stagnant, dry. Everything seems to fall apart. God seems distant. There is no drive or impulse to even begin the day. And it seems like this season would never end. Of course you had this experience, look at our last year together in the pandemic. But in the Christian tradition in a broader term, this experience is called wilderness or desert. It is not a fun place to be. It is a trying place. If we imagine wilderness, there is not much there. No water, no food, except for wild beasts lurking in the background. It is a place of a total dependence on God.

Now the image of the wilderness was a prominent place throughout the Hebrew Bible and the Israelite history we see how some major things happen in the wilderness. Some of the prominent ones are God revealing Godself to Moses through the burning bush. Of course when the Israelites journeyed in the desert for forty years and were formed into the people of God. And then we remember the story of Elijah who was hiding in the desert from Jezebel, and for whom the desert became a space of rescue and a new beginning. And of course, that is where we find Jesus in the first chapter of Mark's gospel, in the wilderness. He was forced to go there by the Spirit and spent 40 days there. But before he goes to be tempted in the wilderness, Jesus gets baptized. There is such profound movement in this passage, movement from baptismal waters of life, light, hearing God's voice naming him as the beloved, to emptiness and thirst, darkness, temptation, hearing the voice of satan, after which Jesus begins his ministry. Baptism is so important here to name Jesus as the beloved son of God before he goes into the time of trial and

wilderness so that the identity of his belovedness can be a part of who he is even in dark and trying times.

What is most perplexing in this scripture passage to me is that Jesus was forced into wilderness. I repeat, He was forced. The only reasoning I can come up with is that Jesus was fully human. And as a human, I don't think any of us would just willingly go to this place of wilderness to spend this intense time with ourselves, temptation and our own staff. So it is the Holy Spirit that takes Jesus there to spend time alone with his own thoughts, feelings and desires, to face himself and his temptations. Mark's Gospel does not give us details of Jesus' temptations but we can see them in Matthew's and Luke's gospels. But what I like about it, by not naming the temptations of Jesus here Mark gives us space to ponder our own temptations and our own ways that we put God to a test. Places in our lives that move us away from cherishing and nourishing the belovedness that we have in Christ into self-destructive patterns that are not only harmful for us but for others. Patterns that coerce us to seeing others as objects for fulfilling our own purposes.

This week we began a season of Lent with our Ash Wednesday service where we were reminded of our humanness, our limitations and that without God we are dust. I am not sure if you know but Lent has its roots in the themes of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness, where Jesus prayed, fasted and faced temptations of Satan before Jesus began his ministry of radical love. Though we will never move into a place of wilderness and facing our temptations and limitations by ourselves, the church calendar, the flow of yearly life in the community of Christ, move us intentionally into this place. So we are left to ponder and ask, What temptations do we need to face? What powers do we give ourselves away to? Who are we trusting? Whose agenda are we buying into? What demons do we need to confront, not just as individuals but as the Church, as a society.

As I am thinking about this forced movement of Jesus into the wilderness, during this month when we celebrate Black History, I can't help but think about a certain group of people for whom "Lent was life," as dean of Duke Chapel, Luke Powery calls it. People who were forced into a place of wilderness, suffering, and oppression. Africans were taken into slavery and were sold as property. They were seen as objects that could be used to bring profit and pleasure. Women were used to "breed" yes that is the word that was used to describe this, "breed more people" to bring even more profit without giving them a break between pregnancies. Women were sexually abused and were seen as objects of sexual satisfaction. African Americans were seen as less than human, let alone the beloved children of God. This time of bondage, suffering, and extreme struggle are spiritually seen by African Americans as a time of wilderness. But as I went to look for more information about this I came across a few articles that talked about how nowadays Black and African Americans do not feel particularly brave to go into the wilderness because of the dangerous past. *T'shari White*, <https://nomadsmagazine.com/nomads-wp/culture/black-americans-and-wilderness/>,

Shelton

Johnson,

https://www.earthisland.org/journal/index.php/magazine/entry/reclaiming_the_wilderness/, both write how being in the wild, open space, like parks and nature preserves is not very inviting for Black Americans. First, there were many lynchings that happened in the wild, in the country. Second, because of segregation, Blacks were not allowed to go into the National Parks or were allotted specific areas. Now National Parks are open to all, but even then there are cases of racism and bigotry that do not welcome Black Americans and so they do not feel comfortable exploring nature and spending time in National Parks. I love nature and how much it can bring to me. What this small bit of information helps us realize is that the roots of slavery and Jim Crows law go deep and they still have an effect on our Black brothers and sisters' lives now. This is such a small facet of life for African Americans. Can you imagine what other spheres of life looks like?

Often, Lent is seen as a season to focus on our personal holiness, our spirituality, our own relationship with God. And it seems right and good to do so. However, we know that our spirituality and our spiritual formation does not only involve us, but it directly touches the lives of others around us and our interaction with the larger world. I started reading the classical book on Spiritual Formation by Robert Mulholland "Invitation to a Journey" and in there not to my surprise, for I am a Methodist Pastor and aware of the balance between personal and social holiness preached by Josh Wesley, I discovered that our spiritual formation is tightly connected to the work of justice and healing in this world. Our own wholeness and growth into the likeness of Christ is intertwined with the wholeness of others in the world.

So invitation is then this Lent to learn about someone else's wilderness and suffering. relate our wilderness to their wilderness., whether that be stories of our black brothers and sisters in our current times, or going back and reading stories from hundreds years ago. Whether it is to watch the news and read stories of our brothers and sisters in Texas who are going through their own wilderness. May this season of intentional wilderness invite us into places of deep connection with God and with our fellow human beings. May we see the belovedness in ourselves and others. May find our human commonality as beloved children of God. There is nothing better and no better place to do that than the celebration of communion together.