

Lent I B  
Mark 1:9-15  
February 18, 2024

*“Never Alone”*

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*<sup>9</sup>In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup>And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” <sup>12</sup>And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. <sup>13</sup>He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*

*<sup>14</sup>Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, <sup>15</sup>and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”*

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When 72-year-old Ann Rodgers got in her car the morning of March 31, 2016, she planned to drive to Phoenix from Tucson, Arizona. She took an unfortunate wrong turn on her way, ran out of gas, and found herself in the desert with no cell phone reception. What should have been a two-hour drive, turned into a 9-day fight for life in the Western Wilderness. Ann survived by eating plants, drinking from a stream, and catching and roasting a turtle. When rescuers finally located her, she was dehydrated, suffering from exposure and five pounds lighter, but she was still alive. If only she could have known to pack for an extended camping trip! She spent a day in the hospital and then got on with life. An artist, Ann was ready to get to work with fresh inspiration. “I could definitely paint for

the next 20 years all the incredibly beautiful canyons, trees, rivers and rocks that I saw,” she said of her experience.<sup>1</sup>

In some ways, Jesus’ story from our reading in Mark’s gospel parallels Ann’s. He awoke one morning and, I’m assuming it was sunny and warm and felt like a good day to get baptized. He headed out to see his cousin John who had been preaching and baptizing folks in the Jordan River. Jesus waded out to him and took the plunge. As he came out of the water, Mark tells us that Jesus saw heaven ripped open and the spirit descending like a dove. Then, he heard a voice from heaven say, “You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And then the spirit violently drove him into the wilderness, a wilderness not unlike what Ann experienced, where he spent the next forty days. If only he could have known to pack a bag that morning for an extended camping trip!

Mark’s telling of these events is spare, direct, and to the point. Jesus was about 30 years old, but Mark offers nothing of his life before that fateful baptism day. This was the day Jesus became interesting. This was the day that it all began, but it likely started as any ordinary day would have. Jesus may have awoken with the sun and laid in bed for a while thinking about whatever carpentry projects, he had waiting for him. And then, for some reason, his thoughts may have drifted to the coming Kingdom of God. After all, people were talking about it, saying it would be soon. Heck, even cousin John was swirling with apocalyptic fervor. Maybe there was something to all this. Maybe before starting work he would go and be baptized in the river...

We don’t honestly know what Jesus thought that morning, or any morning before that. We only know that he couldn’t have been prepared for what happened after he came up out of the water: the dove, the voice, the wilderness. And then he emerges from the wilderness, like Ann did, ready

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<sup>1</sup> Yanan Wang. “The wondrous survival of a 72-year-old woman and her dog, lost 9 days in the Western wilderness,” *Washingtonpost.com*, April 13, 2016: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/04/13/the-wondrous-survival-of-a-72-year-old-woman-and-her-dog-lost-9-days-in-the-western-wilderness/>.

to get to work. But, Jesus wasn't going back to hammers and planes and wood. His life was going in an entirely different direction.

Truth be told, I think we can likely all find ourselves somewhere in this story. We've woken up in the morning with plans for the day and found ourselves pivoting to go in an entirely different, sometimes unwelcome, direction. We've been forcibly driven into some sort of proverbial wilderness to contend with illness, or financial distress, or family troubles, or work issues, or school or relationship challenges. Eventually we emerge from the wilderness, changed in some way. And sometimes, we experience something—a brush with death, a mountaintop revelation, a cathartic moment—and we completely reorient our lives. Wherever you find yourself this morning in the story, it's good to know that you aren't alone. *We* aren't alone. Ever.

On this first Sunday in the season of Lent, as we consider the wilderness that we have emerged from, are currently in, or will be propelled toward in the future, I'm reminded of the author's promise in the Letter to the Hebrews, that "we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses." One of the promises of baptism is that it unites us with the Church of all times and places. In the waters of baptism, we join countless billions in a communion of saints that spans more than two millennia and seven continents, and yes, there have been baptisms on Antarctica!

I don't know about you, but I find comfort in knowing that while any wilderness I find myself in is scary and unaccommodating and filled with temptations and torments and wild beasts, I'm not really alone. I'm connected to a great cloud of witnesses, some of whom have no doubt been in that very wilderness before me. The truth is, we're called to be that communion of saints for one another too.

As we here at New England Church enter a season of change and growth and new possibility, I invite you to be attentive to the ministry of relationship with one another. Be support for one another in the personal and collective experiences of wilderness. Be, for one another, that

communion of saints, that great cloud of witnesses of which we are all a part. On river banks, at baptismal fonts, in our church building or behind computer screens; in good times and tough times; on mountain tops, in valleys, or in the wilderness, we are never alone. Remember that. Remember to be that great cloud of witnesses, that communion of saints for one another. It makes all wilderness experiences easier to bare. May it be so. Amen.