February 18, 2024

Barbara Ewy

Mark 1:9-15

A Way Through the Wildernes

Many years ago, as a young adult, I worked at Rocky Mountain Mennonite Camp in Colorado. Rocky Mountain is known as a hiking camp. Climbing the nearby mountain peaks is a typical camp activity. That particular day was between camps, a day off. I remembered that years ago, as a camper myself, we had gone on a hike to some solution pools high up on a rock. These solution pools were a series of small depressions in the rock where water collected. Sometimes we could even find small life forms in the pools. I thought it would make a good hike for the current campers, but no one on the current staff knew exactly where they were. Because it was a day off and we were each doing our own thing. I decided to try to find them. I remembered the correct direction and I thought I knew about how far I needed to go. I set off to find them, and I was successful. They were still there and it would be a good hike for our campers. To return to the camp I knew I could cut across the ridge and go down the trail from Old Baldy, a well-known peak that the camp regularly hiked. I was not afraid of getting lost. I knew the landmarks. But I broke two of the cardinal rules that day. I hiked alone and I had not told anyone where I was going, not even the direction I was going. As I cut across the ridge I stepped on a rotted log and it gave way under me. I felt a sharp stab of pain in my ankle and realized if I had truly damaged it, I was in trouble. No one knew where I was or where to look if I didn’t show up. I was fortunate. Although my ankle was a bit sore, I was able to walk. I made it back to camp slowly, carefully, safely.

The wilderness is not a safe place. Most of us have seen the Mojave, a forbidding place of sand, rock formations, and little water. To travel there requires preparation. Although the highway is traveled by many passing through, away from the road there is isolation and hardship. The desert, or indeed any wilderness, does not offer an easy life. Few people choose to live there.

The Gospel of Mark begins in the wilderness, referring to both Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3. “I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” John the Baptist resides in the wilderness, where he is proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Many come to him from Judea and Jerusalem, renewing their covenant with God.

Jesus also comes for baptism. Mark tells of this in three short verses. “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 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. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Mark continues, “And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.”

In the Believers Commentary for Mark, Timothy Geddert says this about the Greek word that is translated as “immediately.” Almost half of its use in the New Testament occurs in Mark, and nearly all of its use in Mark is in the first half of the book. To me that implies a sense of urgency. There is no dawdling, no delay, no time to wait or reflect or decide on the best course of action. The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness.

But Mark does not give us many details about what happens when Jesus is in the wilderness. He tells us that Jesus was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts and angels waited on him. That is all Mark tells us. He doesn’t tell us what the temptations are. He doesn’t tell us what Satan says or does. He doesn’t tell us any details about the wild beasts. He doesn’t tell us how many angels or how they cared for him. Mark doesn’t go into the detail that Matthew and Luke provide. Mark tells us none of this.

It is the wilderness itself that is important to Mark. Forty days reminds us of the forty years that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness. For them it was a time both of temptation and covenant, isolation and intimacy with God, sin and forgivenss. The wilderness was the path, the road, the way that God led them. It was not an easy way; some fell away. The people had to learn their dependence on God for food, for water, for life itself. They had to learn to survive.

In her book *Into the Mess and Other Jesus Stories,* Debie Thomas says “Jesus doesn’t choose the wilderness, but he consents to stay there. He consents to learn what only the desert—not his family, not the temple, not his traditions, not even the Scriptures themselves—can teach.” She highlights three things about this experience. The first is that the wilderness we do not choose is holy ground. She suggests that it is God’s divine mercy that teaches us to cherish the low points, the hard low times that we do not choose, that we can be both loved and uncomfortable at the same time. “In the wilderness,” she writes, “the love that survives is hardcore—flinty, not soft; salvific, not sentimental.” It can take a long time, forty years, a lifetime.

Second she notes that Jesus stays with the wild beasts. He doesn’t hunt, trap, photograph, kill or even tame them. He simply learns to live with them. Wild beasts are unpredictable. We don’t control them. Living with the wild beasts takes us out of our comfort zones, removes the safe boundaries we place around ourselves, takes away our control, teaches us to allow God’s Spirit to lead us to places we have never been, on paths we do not know. For Jesus, this taught him to cross boundaries and traditions, both cultural and religious. He healed on the Sabbath. He touched lepers. He ate with tax collectors and sinners. He cast out demons. But this came later. Being with the wild beasts, living with them in their wildness, taught Jesus to be with the outsiders, the least, the ones society and religion cast out. Thomas says Jesus became something of a ‘wild beast’ himself, refusing to be tamed by those who claim to have the divine figured out. He refused to “squeeze the God he loves into a box of abstract certainties.”

Third, Thomas notes the presence of angels. They aren’t there to “save” him. They don’t keep him from getting hurt. They merely tend him. They accompany him. In the loneliness and isolation of the wilderness, they are with him. Mark doesn’t tell us what the angels look like, or what form they take, or what they say or do. Mark simply tells us that they tend to him. They care for him. Thomas writes, “There are angels in the wilderness. They don’t always come with cures. They don’t hand us the control we crave. But they come as messengers of unfailing love. They come because the God who knows that we are dust, the God who drove Jesus into the wilderness so that for all eternity our Messiah would understand human pain from the inside—keeps sending them.”

Lent begins in the wilderness. Jesus’ way is a way through the wilderness. The prophets identified the way. John prepared the way. Jesus taught the way. The early church was called the people of the way. Mark’s Gospel identifies that way as the way of the cross. We can see it already in the first chapter of Mark. “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news.”

I don’t know the source, but I saw this timely quotation on facebook: “It is not the task of the church to ‘Make America Great Again.’ The contemporary task of the church is to make Christianity countercultural again. And once we untether Jesus from the interests of empire, we begin to see just how countercultural and radical Jesus’ ideas actually are. Enemies? Love them. Violence? Renounce it. Money? Share it. Foreigners? Welcome them. Sinners? Forgive them. These are the kind of radical ideas that will always be opposed by the principalities and powers but which the followers of Jesus are called to embrace, announce, and enact.” (end quote). This is the way of the wilderness, the way of the cross.

John the forerunner, was arrested. The Greek word means “handed over., delivered up, betrayed.” Mark uses the same word 14 times, referring to Jesus’ passion. He uses it three more times, referring to the disciples. Geddert writes, “The way is the way of obedience, even in the face of rejection and death.” Jesus’ way is countercultural.

Sometimes our world seems chaotic, a metaphorical wilderness. There is war in Ukraine and Palestine, and other places we hear less about. Our country is divided politically. We don’t know what will happen with the next election. Violence erupts when we least expect it—at Super Bowl victory rallies, in school hallways, at the grocery store. Migration overwhelms our borders. Our congressional leadership seems broken. The high cost of housing places people in shelters and on the streets. Not to mention our personal struggles, domestic violence, alcoholism, drug abuse, poverty, depression, mental illness. Sometimes we feel helpless, lost in a world we cannot control.

But God’s message is good news. The way of the cross is not easy, but it is the only way through the wilderness, the only way to life. And we do not walk that way alone. At Jesus’ baptism the heavens were torn apart and a voice declared, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Mark only uses the Greek word translated as “torn apart” two times. The second is in chapter 15 verse 38, when the temple curtain is torn apart from top to bottom at Jesus’ death. We, too, are God’s beloved children. God covenants with us, promising not an easy or comfortable life, not riches or wealth or prestige, but instead to be with us, to share our joys and sorrows, to love us with an unfailing love. Nor does God expect us to walk through life alone. God provides us with community, brothers and sisters who walk alongside us, caring for us, sharing our burdens and our joys. We walk through the wilderness of life, knowing that we are not alone, and assured that we are loved.