

**Into the Wilderness and
It Is Not Always About the Geography
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Anne Fisher
February 21, 2021
Mark 1:9–15**

Today, on this first Sunday in Lent we are driven into the wilderness. In Mark, it is a wilderness that is lacking in description, prose or dialogue. What little we know about wilderness is not a pretty picture. It appears that Jesus has no choice but to go there. While he is there, he is tempted. To make matters worse there are wild beasts, which indicates danger. However, all is not totally lost in this lonely spot; the angels wait on him. That is the end of the story. There you have it, the world's shortest sermon. But... I will go on!!!

The scripture today begins with Jesus' baptism and ends with the start of Jesus' ministry. A lot is crowded into a few short verses. A reading from Mark chapter 1.

Mark 1: 9–15

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." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

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 in the good news.”

This is the word of the Lord.

When our daughters were very young, we rented an RV and took my parents on a family trip to the Southwest. One of our stops was the Presbyterian Retreat Center of Ghost Ranch in Abique NM. We had heard great things about Ghost Ranch and looked forward to finally seeing it. When we entered the ground, it did not take us long to realize we were “Not in Kansas anymore!” I grew up in Western Pennsylvania where there are wooded hills and lush green fields. The southwestern desert is far from what any of us knew as home. As we entered the gates, we saw how desolate Ghost Ranch was with its sage brush and twisted Joshua trees. My lifelong Presbyterian father could not contain himself. “What is the Presbyterian church thinking owning such a wasteland as this? Why are we putting money into this place?” I think if he had been the one driving, he would have turned around and put Ghost Ranch in his rearview mirror! For my father’s sensibilities, Ghost Ranch was about as barren a wasteland as you can get.

The wilderness is not always about geography. The wilderness is a place in our heart where we don’t want to linger. The wilderness is where we want to put it in our rearview mirror as soon as we can. It is a place in our lives where we can easily get lost and not have an exit plan. The wilderness can be looking at our balance sheets where we see our savings slipping away. Our relationships can feel barren and lacking depth and nourishment. There are times when we feel isolated, abandoned, without the resources to see us

through. There is danger in the wilderness. We are in danger of the wild beasts who threaten to pull us down, ridicule us and make us feel weak and lacking.

The Gospel of Mark begins with “A voice crying out of the wilderness.” John the Baptizer bursts forth from the wilderness with a message “Prepare, get ready,” things are about to get very interesting very soon!”

On the edge of the wilderness Jesus is baptized. The baptism is a moment of glory and praise. The heavens are torn apart and a voice comes from the clouds saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!” Ah this is good; like God’s creation, God sees Jesus and is well pleased. A holy moment is occurring.

Typical of Mark the tone changes quickly. Jesus is immediately driven into the wilderness where the lush cooling waters are not found and where the heavens do not open up and an affirming voice is not heard. It happens so quickly to Jesus. Isn’t that how it often happens? One minute we are affirmed and feel a right with the world and the next we are flung into a wasteland.

The good news is that Jesus is not defeated by the wilderness. Jesus emerges from the wilderness with words we need to hear. He comes from the barren wasteland ready to tell the people that the kingdom of God is at hand. He does not dwell on of his isolation and loneliness, but has a message to share. Jesus’ time in the wilderness is in all the Gospels. It is part of who Jesus is and who he becomes. He would not be the same without it.

When our family had our very energetic Weimaraner dog, Gretta, it was evident that she needed to have significant walks every day in order to be a good pet. Over the 14 years we had her, she did a

good job of exercising her humans regularly. We grew to enjoy walking Gretta through a nature trail near our home in Illinois. One of the advantages of going the same route every time is to see the subtle changes of the seasons. I love spring time when I see the blossoms slowly come out. As we walk, there is the promise of something is going to happen. I love summer in its verdant excess of grasses and shade trees, things are growing in abundance. I enjoy fall with its fruits of wild grapes and multi-colored leaves.

Around November, before the snow comes, there is that dead barren time. It is when the skies are gray and the leaves are brown. There is not much to see. It is desolate. It is difficult to get motivated to walk at that time of the year. It is in the barren wilderness time of November that we discover we can see further into the woods because our view is not hindered by the leaves and tall grasses. It is in the barren wilderness of November that we see the deer, fox and owls because they are not hidden by the overgrowth. It is in that time that we have to push ourselves and to dig deeper to go for those walks but then we are surprised by seeing things we might have overlooked in the more plentiful times.

We entered the wilderness about a year ago when the word pandemic was fresh on our lips. We entered the wilderness thinking how long can this last, a few months, surely by fall we would be back to normal. As we continue in the wilderness, we do see things differently, we notice things that we would have failed to see had we been in the frenetic state of business as usual. It has been difficult, it has been hard, it has been discouraging and we have had to dig deeper to face each day.

There are times where we have to dig a deeper within ourselves to find the resources in which to navigate through the difficult times. It is in those times that we have to find the generosity of spirit, and find ways to help others who do not have the basics or the abundance to fall back on. Our wilderness times are the times when we find the resources we did not think we possessed in order to cope and survive. Those barren wilderness times in our lives appear to be worthless and yet, they can be times to discover what we have not from our own plenty, but to recognize those who minister to us for the angels that they are.

Jesus had one more impediment in his time in the wilderness. He had temptation as his companion. Unlike the other gospels, in Mark, we do not know exactly what his temptation was. Was it the temptation to walk away and abandon the message that God's kingdom is at hand? Perhaps it was the temptation to take the glory of the baptism and have that be enough. Mark sums it up by saying he was tempted by Satan. Jesus is with the one who instills doubt and resentment, anger, self-absorption and every other destructive trait we can think of.

When we are driven into the wilderness by circumstances of our lives, when we feel overwhelmed and helpless, when we hear of 500,000 people who have died of COVID-19 in our country alone not to mention the world population, when we hear of yet another shooting, another bombing, another time of needless suffering and pain and loss, we see that barren wasteland and wonder what is our purpose, why are we here? We know as a society, we are in the wilderness spending our time casting about for quick solutions, taking sides as to who is to blame, feeling helpless and defeated. It can be disorienting and we can feel abandoned. The temptations are there to turn inward or turn away. But even when we are most

lost, we are not out of God's sight. God's promise is to walk with us as we choose to walk with God.

All is not lost, we are not lost. Even when Jesus is lost in the temptations of Satan, the angels find their way to minister to him.

Will it not be so when we are driven into the wilderness? There are flickers of light moments of grace even in the most desolate of spots.

I do not think I ever convinced my father that Ghost Ranch was a good investment by the Presbyterian Church, but it turned out to be one of my most cherished landscapes. As you drive in through the barren scrubs you turn a corner and right in front of you is an indescribable beauty of rock cliffs rising out of the desert. In the evening when the sun shines on the cliffs, it looks as if the landscape is shining like pure gold. It is a sight of true beauty coming from the barren wasteland. When I was in that place, I knew God was close at hand.

As we begin our Lenten season, let us dig deep within ourselves. Let us make room for our faith to grow even in the driest times. If you are experiencing a wilderness time now, look for the angels that you have yet to notice and allow them to care for you. Let others reach out to you and help you through this difficult time. Wherever you may find yourself, know that you are not alone.

The wilderness times are as much a part of us as the holy moments of baptism and the heavens opening up to say, "This is my son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased." In the deepest forsaken place, remember we are not forgotten and the angels are there ready to minister to us if we allow them. Thanks be to God and the promise of God's presence. Amen.