

Driven By The Spirit
Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15

On Wednesday, Ash Wednesday began the Season of Lent in the Christian calendar. Forty days of wilderness wondering as we, like Jesus, search our souls, are tempted, and move toward Holy Week as renewed and new Christ followers. Lent can be a time to take stock of our lives, to come clean about the things that tempt us and the things that scare us. Part of our Lenten discipline can be to acknowledge, in the words of the old prayer, "the harm we have done and the good we have left undone" – or in the words of *Step 10 of every 12-Step* program, "to do a fearless moral inventory."

Each of us is tempted, tempted to give in to the temptations of evil that face us. Just like Jesus, we are often driven into the wilderness of this world, but what may be the greatest gift of this scripture from Mark is to call attention to our greatest temptation – the temptation to think that God is not present.

In an absolutely glorious service on November 16, 2003, I was ordained as Minister of Word and Sacrament in the PC(USA) at Pine Ridge Presbyterian Church located outside Pilot Mountain. The church was packed with people from every walk of my life. Rev. Dr. Brad Braxton, my homeletics and Pauline professor, preached the sermon referencing the passage from 1 Kings that tells of the "wadi" or "dried up creek". I remember distinctly his looking at me and saying, "there will be times pastor, when the creek is all dried up, when waters do not easily flow in your life and you will need to remember that God is in the dried-up creeks of life."

Because I had been shaped by the people from all facets of my life, I broke from tradition and invited groups of people from family, youth, court, high school, college, divinity school, community, and church to come and lay hands on me as I was ordained. Additionally, each one was invited to make their finger impressions in the cold, wet clay of a large bowl, still on the Potter's wheel, that was later glazed and fired, as a reminder to me and others of the many hands that shaped me into God's servant, now called to ministry to God's people. It was a glorious service! And I was blessed in so many ways.

I had arranged with my church to take the week following my ordination off. On December 1, 2003, Monday, at 1:00 a.m., I awoke from my sleep with the worst pain I have ever experienced. The pain was radiating and I could not pinpoint its origin, but I knew something was terribly wrong. I thought I was having a heart attack and I cried out to God for help. After dialing 911 and giving the information to the dispatcher, I lay on my sofa and prayed out loud to God. My prayer? "God, after this long journey to ordained ministry, please do not leave me. Dear God, I have not preached as an ordained minister yet, please save me so that I can preach at least one sermon as an ordained minister. "

The pain was so horrendous that I lost consciousness before the rescue squad and ambulance arrived. I regained consciousness as they were putting me onto the bed to transport me to the hospital. Thus began my very own wilderness wondering.

Sometimes life thrusts us into a wilderness where we are both tested and strengthened. We seem to travel through wilderness after wilderness in these complex days. At least in this country, among those whom I observe, they say their lives are in shambles and they live and/or work (as if) in a jungle.

Anticipation is high when Jesus arrives at the Jordan River, where John has been preaching and baptizing. The dramatic climax of the scene is the baptism of Jesus, complete with descending dove and a voice from heaven that declares his divinity.

Jesus' baptism takes away any doubt that he is the Son of God. From this moment, his power should be unquestioned. Justice should roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. This moment of divine recognition should cause Caesar to hand over his crown or cower in fear. This wilderness baptism is the perfect beginning to a world-changing story. However, the same Spirit who descended at his baptism drives Jesus farther out into the wilderness, where he will spend forty days tempted by Satan, surrounded only by wild beasts and angels. No multitudes. No fan club. The ministry of Jesus, like the Gospel of Mark, begins in the wilderness.

And so we come to the beginning of Lent in the Christian year. We commence this sacred season of reflection and repentance, of spiritual discipline and renewal, in the wilderness. It is the place where pretense fades away and honest vulnerability becomes possible. In the wilderness, we are unable to keep up the public image of effortless perfection that plagues us. We are freed to confess the messy reality of our lives. We are tempted to forget the promises of God; we are threatened by the danger of the unknown. The wilderness, like it or not, is where we live our lives. It is the place between certainty and doubt, between hope and fear, between promises made and promises kept. In the wilderness, Jesus finds his voice and his vocation, and when he emerges forty days later; his words echo those of the Baptizer: the kingdom of God has come near; repent; believe.

Jesus' life was full of adversity and suffering and defeat. He did not replace all unjust earthly rulers or lift all the lowly and oppressed. Sometimes the two thousand years that have passed since seem to have brought little change as well. We read of needless deaths, unending violence, innocent suffering, justice denied. School shootings snuff out the young lives of promising young people with too much regularity. All around us are those who lack the basic necessities of life, who go hungry or live in fear, whose grieving is unceasing, whose isolation is unbearable.

In the wilderness of our lives, we hurt one another, break promises, accept lies as truth, and fail to love our neighbors. The kingdom has not yet arrived in its fullness; we can be sure of that.

Several years ago, I was attending a Sunday afternoon book club in Salisbury. The participants in the club were the pastors and lay leaders of local congregations: Episcopalians, Baptists, Methodists, Catholics, and Presbyterians. That day we found ourselves sharing personal stories of faith formation. How did you become a Christian? Where did your faith journey begin?

One by one, members of the group described how we had been raised by loving and faithful parents who brought us to Sunday school and church, told us the stories of Jesus, and helped us to grow in maturity of faith. Each story sounded something like that, until there was only one person left to speak. As tears formed in her eyes, she said, "I am a Christian because the Christian church saved my life." Suddenly, the chatty group fell silent. She described how she had been abandoned by her parents as an infant. Sent to a foster home, she was neglected and abused for the first six years of her life. At age seven, she was adopted by a local family. Not knowing what to expect, she spent the first night wide-awake in her new bed, afraid and anxious. The next morning, a Sunday, the family got up early, had breakfast, and got into the car. "It was my first time at church and I had no idea what to expect. We walked into the Sunday school classroom, and the teacher's face lit up. 'Welcome, Janet, we've been waiting for you.' Then she read the Bible story for the day. I will never forget the feeling. Jesus says to his disciples, 'Let the little children come to me. Do not stop them.' I knew, knew with all of my heart, that he was talking to me. I knew that I was home. I am a Christian because of that moment. A new beginning – the kingdom in the midst of the wilderness.

Assuming many of us were baptized as hapless infants, have we grown into that baptism? Let it really happen to us? As we set out on this Lenten journey, remember the truth of your baptism: you are claimed; you are chosen as God's beloved; you are empowered to set out in search of your voice and your vocation. The work is not easy in this wilderness called life. But the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God is this: in him the time has been fulfilled; the kingdom of God has come near. Our human lives have been invaded by the presence of the Divine and nothing will ever be the same. And *that* is where we begin.

I invite you to remember your baptism, to renew that covenant with God as we sing our hymn.