

WILDERNESS, WATER, AND THE CALL OF THE WILD

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This past Wednesday night we began a series on the Gospel according to Mark, and we're going to preach out of Mark on Sunday mornings as well so that some of the broad themes of this Gospel get shared with everyone.

Before I read the Scripture, I want to give you some background about this second book in the New Testament, and how it differs from the other 3 Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John.

First, who was Mark, and where did he come from? Although the Gospel itself does not identify the author, scholars have long attributed this Gospel to John Mark who is mentioned in the Book of Acts and some of the Epistles, or letters, of the New Testament.

Mark is a Roman name; John is Jewish. There is no mention made of his father, although his mother is identified as a widowed believer so perhaps his father had been a Roman. He probably came from a wealthy family because we're told that Mary owned a large house in Jerusalem where believers gathered for prayer. (Acts 12)

In the book of Colossians (4:10) we learn that Mark was a cousin to Barnabas. Barnabas is someone we know from the book of Acts, and a traveling companion of Paul. Mark first appears in Acts 12:25 when he is with Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey to Cyprus. A journey that Mark bails out of half-way through the experience. In Acts 15, we discover that Paul felt betrayed by Mark's desertion. So much so, that he and Barnabas argue about letting him join the next missionary journey. Paul refused to allow him on the team, so Barnabas takes Mark and sets off in one direction, and Paul invites Silas to join him in another direction. That's the last time we hear of Mark in the book of Acts.

But in Paul's letters to the churches, we hear of Mark three more times. In Philemon 24 Paul calls Mark his fellow worker. In the book of Colossians Paul states his appreciation of Mark. And in 2nd Timothy Paul says, "get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry." So, somewhere down the road, Paul and Mark reconciled their relationship and Mark became a trusted and valued companion to Paul, especially when Paul was imprisoned and facing death.

Peter also mentions Mark in I Peter 5. Peter refers to him as a son. The church father Papias, writing in 140 AD, says Peter and Mark worked closely together, with Peter supplying Mark with his accounts of the life of Jesus.

So, Mark is a young man that grew up in a Christian home, was surrounded by Jesus' disciples as an adult, and most likely even heard Jesus teach and preach on occasion.

Mark's style of writing in his Gospel is unique. First, although he writes from a Jewish perspective, he is writing for non-Jews. He is addressing early Gentile converts, probably ones being persecuted during the reign of Nero. Because his audience is Gentile, he rarely quotes from the Old Testament (compared to Matthew's Gospel for example), and if uses a Hebrew or Aramaic phrase, he will offer an explanation of its meaning.

Mark is a strong eye-witness narrative. He notes details of position, the number of people present, gestures and even emotions. It is very action oriented. The Greek word for *immediately* appears 40 times in his book.

For example:

Immediately he saw the heavens opening
Immediately the Spirit impelled him
Immediately they left their nets
Immediately he called them
Immediately he entered the Synagogue

Mark also spends a lot of time emphasizing the feelings of Jesus. He paints a picture of a Savior that is not always calm and serene. Using adjectives like frustrated, angry, amazed and deeply distressed, the humanity of Jesus is portrayed as strongly as Jesus' divinity in this book.

And finally, Mark's story is full of sounds. It is not a story that was to be silently read. The author assumed it would be told out-loud. Especially since the scribes of Mark's day would copy text without punctuation marks, capitals or spaces between words in order to not waste any of the precious space on the scroll. Therefore, the text was often memorized because trying to read it smoothly off a scroll was almost impossible. And another fact that played into the public telling was that during Mark's day, Jewish students were also forbidden to read sacred literature of Israel in Silence. It was always a community experience to be shared outloud.

Because of this, Pastor David had us begin to read the entire Gospel of Mark out loud together this past Wednesday. We got about half way through the book and are going to continue this Wednesday. I would encourage all of you who can't attend on Wednesdays, to do this at home. With a friend, your spouse, one of your kids, read the Gospel of Mark out loud together. I guarantee you that you will hear the Word of God in a fresh and exciting way.

We're just going to focus on the first 13 verses of Mark this morning. And I'm going to share from the New American Standard Version of the Bible.

MARK 1:1-13

The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

*“Behold, I send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;
The voice of one crying in the wilderness,
Make ready the way of the Lord, Make his paths straight.”*

John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.

John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey.

And he was preaching and saying, “After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thongs of His sandals.

I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

Immediately coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens opening, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon Him; and a voice came out of the heavens: “You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased.”

Immediately the Spirit impelled Him to go out into the wilderness.

And He was in the wilderness forty days being tempted by Satan; and He was with the wild beasts, and the angels were ministering to Him.

The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. For those of you who were there on Wednesday night, who remembers what the word “gospel” means? It means “Good News”. Mark tells his listeners right off the bat that this is a book about Good News. Now remember, his listeners are Christians under persecution. So, in effect, he’s saying,

“Everyone who is hurting, suffering, full of anxieties . . . I bring you Good News!”

“For all of you trapped in sin and its effects . . . I bring you Good News!”

This book is meant to bring you hope, and what is this hope rooted in? Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Mark states this right up front. There’s no question of where he’s going. He states it boldly and clearly.

And then he jumps right into the narrative. Mark has nothing to say about the first 30 years of Jesus’ life. He delves right into the beginning of his ministry. And we suddenly find ourselves immersed in the wilderness. He begins with a quote from Isaiah, that also incorporates a quote from Malachi 3:1 which might be indicated in a footnote of your Bible. And he uses this quote from the prophet Isaiah to set up the story of John in the wilderness preaching about the coming of Jesus. Why throw in that quote, especially when his listeners are Gentiles?

It gives the story a historical context. He tells the listeners, “Look, this isn’t something that just happened yesterday. This began long ago in the dreams of the prophets. But even beyond that, in the mind of God. There is a purpose to everything that is about to unfold. So pay attention!” And it also gives us the context for why John is in the wilderness. God sent him there to begin the story of Jesus.

WILDERNESS

So let’s talk about this wilderness for a few minutes. Now, some of your translations, instead of saying wilderness, may use the word “desert.” And while desert is not incorrect, as you’ll soon see, I think wilderness—in English—captures more accurately the scenery Mark was hoping to convey.

The area west of the Jordan River was dry, hot and desolate. It was 20 miles from and 3000 feet below Jerusalem. It is considered one of the most remote deserts in the world. It is a limestone desert full of warped and twisted formations that shimmer in the haze of the heat. In the Old Testament it is sometimes called “The Devastation.” It was considered unsafe, and was populated with thieves and wild animals, probably even lions.

This wilderness was not comfortable, not safe, and not secure.

And this is where God told John the Baptist to live and minister. Rather interesting, don't you think?

I mean, if someone came to me and said, “I want to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ in Southern Baja, where should I start?” I doubt if I'd tell them to go 20 miles outside of La Paz, in the remotest part of the desert they could find, and to start preaching.

But this is where John is: 20 miles away from Jerusalem in one of the most desolate places on earth. And what's even more amazing, Mark tells us that the people came to John! John wasn't commuting into the city everyday to share God's message. The people came to him confessing their sins and were baptized.

Why?

I think the answer might be two-fold.

First, God often has to take us from our comfortable, safe, secure places to somewhere remote and dangerous in order to really hear what he's trying to tell us. (Did you hear that?!)

This might be a physical relocation, or it might be an emotional/spiritual relocation. Most likely a combination of all three! God uses the difficulties or wilderness experiences in our lives to awaken our need for him. The message of hope rings differently in the wilderness than it does in the security of four walls and a roof over our heads.

Second, John was offering a message that went directly to people's hearts. Most people know deep down inside when they're lacking something, when they're searching for something beyond themselves. John's message brought them what they were seeking in the depth of their souls.

The average Jew in John's day certainly wasn't finding it in his or her present day synagogue where the Pharisees taught that to receive forgiveness from sin you had to follow an endless list of laws to the letter. Most people felt hopeless in their quest to find God. But John broke through all the religious hypocrisy of his day and went right to the heart of the matter: repent (turn around and go in a new direction) and God will offer forgiveness. You may be in the wilderness and deserve judgment, you may never live up to the laws of the Pharisees, but if you turn your back on sin, if you turn around, God will offer forgiveness and grace.

And this is why people were willing to travel a long, dangerous road from Jerusalem into the wilderness. They heard hope. They found grace.

WATER

Let's talk about John specifically for just a few minutes. Because he's every author's dream character!

A rather wild man. We might even call him Wild John. John of the camel hair and leather. John of the locusts and wild honey. John of the desert. John, the cousin of Jesus, who leaped in his mother's womb when he first recognized Jesus in Mary's womb.

And it is wild John whom God calls upon to Baptize Jesus, the Messiah.

Jesus left his comfortable, safe, predictable life of carpentry and went to the wilderness to be baptized by his cousin, wild John. This was the inauguration of his three-year ministry as the son of God.

What did baptism mean to the people of Jesus' day?

Water has long been a sign of purification in the Jewish tradition. Symbolic washing and purifying was woven into the very fabric of Jewish ritual. Baptism was considered a sign of purification and repentance in preparation for the new age of the Kingdom of God.

But unfortunately, for the average Jew, they had lost sight of that meaning. Baptism had become merely a ritual. Purification through water was no longer a matter of the heart, but a matter of going through the "right" steps in order to satisfy the Pharisees that you were worthy of forgiveness.

So when John began to baptize believers in the Jordan River, he was demonstrating to the people that baptism was symbolic of their new heart decision. As they went under the water they were burying their old life, and as they came up out of the water, as it cascaded down their head, over their shoulders and off their body, they were embracing a new life, purified and forgiven in the eyes of God.

But John had also been teaching them that his Baptism was not the end result. One was coming that was greater than he. And he would baptize them with the Holy Spirit.

Again, we see how Mark, the author of this Gospel, is constantly engaging his listener, keeping one on the edge of the seat, leading up to the next series of events.

Enter Jesus.

Why was Jesus baptized by John? He certainly didn't need to repent of his sins. He was perfect as God the Son.

As I stated earlier, this baptism began his ministry here on earth. You might remember that when kings were appointed in the Old Testament, they were approached by God's prophet, who anointed them with oil, prayed over them, and the spirit of God then descended on the chosen man. Jesus' baptism was equivalent to the anointing of the kings in the Old Testament.

Only, he didn't come to overthrow the Roman Government, as so many Jews were expecting the Messiah to do, but he came to forgive sins and restore people to God. His baptism was ushering in a new age of the kingdom of God. Therefore, in community with those who were seeking repentance and forgiveness of sin, Jesus too modeled what it meant to turn your back on the old life, to change direction, and to embrace something new.

And then, dramatically, God's Spirit descends on him as well. The heavens roll back, a dove comes down, and God speaks.

In the Old Testament, what story also has a dove as a key element? Noah and the Ark. The dove was sent out to seek new life on earth. And when it came back with an olive leaf, Noah knew that the long period of darkness inside the ark was over.

The dove in Jesus' baptism illustrates the anointing of God's spirit, and also symbolizes the coming of the Holy Spirit. God the Son and God the Holy Spirit were coming to shine light in the darkness of sin and depravity.

And listen to God's words to Jesus "You are my beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased." This was not some deep, somber Hollywood voice echoing from the sky. This was a father speaking words of love and praise for his son. Mark writes that whole scene from the perspective of Jesus. You feel as if you're there, standing in the water with Jesus, hearing God's voice shower love down upon you. It is a sacred and holy moment.

THE CALL OF THE WILD

And then the story shifts back to the wilderness. Mark tells us that the Spirit impelled Jesus to go out into the wilderness. He was there 40 days, tempted by Satan, with the wild beasts, and angels ministered to him.

This 40 day desert experience might make one recall Israel's wandering in the desert for 40 years. Elijah also had a 40-day desert experience where angels ministered food and water to him. But Jesus is also being tested. He is coming face to face with his deadliest enemy: Satan. Jesus vs. Satan. This is the context of the apocalyptic battle between the powers of good and evil. Again the listeners are reminded that this isn't a simply, feel-good, bed time story. Jesus is both man and God. His coming changes the world.

But it also points out that God's Spirit will call us into the wilderness to face dark and dangerous times. Scripture tells us that Jesus experienced everything we can possibly experience as a human being, so that he could identify completely with our humanity. Jesus knows first hand what it means to hear the Spirit's Call of the Wild. To be driven into the wilderness.

It's one thing to choose the wilderness. To go seeking forgiveness. Quite another to be propelled into uncomfortable, unsafe, desolate places.

In Jack London's book "*The Call of the Wild*", we have a story that revolves around Buck. Buck is a dog who is transferred from his comfortable home into the wilds of the Yukon Territory. Near the end of the book, London describes Buck as he hears the howls of the forest wolves:

The call still sounding in the depths of the forest . . . filled him with a great unrest and strange desires. It caused him to feel a vague, sweet gladness, and he was aware of wild yearnings and stirrings for he knew not what.

Have you ever noted that God's call often creates these same impulses in us? Unrest. Strange desires. Gladness. Wild yearnings. But for what, we don't know.

These are times when we often have to step out in faith, totally trusting that God will prove faithful. If we ask too many questions, if we seek too much information before making a decision, we often trip ourselves up, we get paralyzed and then we stall. And we never leave the baptismal waters for the wilderness.

We stay rooted in the awesome experience of beginning a new life, of hearing God's voice shower love on us . . . and if we stay in this water, in this place, we eventually stagnate. We never grow. We never move to the next part of the journey God has in store for us. Instead we let our fears and anxieties take over.

We often run from the "wildness" in our lives. We don't want to be disturbed by God's Spirit. And yet, it is this very wildness, this very wilderness experience, that can draw us into the majesty and presence of God. For Jesus was not abandoned in the wilderness. Angels ministered to his needs. He was surrounded by holy community. And God promises the same to us. I will not leave you or forsake you. I hold you in the palm of my hand.

So let me wrap this up for you with several questions:

1. **WILDERNESS:** Is God calling you from your comfort zone, from your safety net, to meet him in the wilderness? Are you missing an opportunity to receive God's grace because you're afraid to change?
2. **BAPTISMAL WATERS:** Who plays the part of John the Baptist in your life? Who prepares the way for you to meet Jesus? Who urges you to repent, to turn around, to change direction and get right with God? And, are you listening?
3. **THE CALL OF THE WILD:** Are you obeying God's Spirit to immerse yourself in difficult situations, to head off into the wilderness places? What would it take to move you forward in your relationship with God, to follow the yearnings of your heart to the wild places of God's heart for you?

In 13 verses, Mark has set the stage for the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. I encourage you to buckle your seatbelt and hang on. It's definitely going to be a wild and bumpy ride!

Let's pray . . .

God, we thank you for the inspiration you gave John Mark in writing this book. Thank you God for a young man who persevered in his faith, who despite discouragement, set-backs, and failures, went on to spread your Good News and became a faithful friend to both Peter and Paul.

Thank you for what we studied about the wilderness, about Wild John, about Baptism, and about Jesus this morning. Take these truths, reflections and thoughts and continue to reveal yourself to us in the coming week. May we see Jesus, meet Jesus in fresh and disturbing ways.

Thank you for your Holy Spirit, your gift to teach us and instruct us in all things about Jesus. Through your Spirit, may we have compassion and conviction for those around us. For where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit we pray,

Amen.

Sources:

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