



Sunday February 21, 2021  
Mark 1:9-15 (First Sunday in Lent)

Pastor Tony Acompanado

It was 5:30 a.m., still dark out, -9 degrees with a windchill of -27, the wind was whipping along at 20mph, and 6 inches of snow had fallen just a few hours earlier. These were the conditions I found myself in as stepped into the forest for my run last weekend. For some this may sound crazy, but for me this is where I find some of my most peaceful moments. I was just a few miles into my run when I stopped to grab something from my pack and just as I twisted back around, I noticed a large fast-moving shadow of something in the dark. It surprised me, and if I'm being honest then it actually scared me a little. At first, I thought someone was following me, or maybe it was a cougar, or a bear...I don't know. Whatever it was, I was fearful that *something* was out there, and it was coming to get me. Turns out, it wasn't quite that exciting because as I looked around more closely to investigate, I noticed that it was just the light of my headlamp that created a shadow through the fallen trees in front of me. And just like that, my hope for a peaceful journey through the wilderness was gone.

This morning we continue our wilderness journey into Lent, which for us began this past week on Ash Wednesday, when we acknowledged with a cross made of ash placed upon our foreheads that our humanity is limited, and that our bodies will fail us no matter how creatively we attempt to preserve them with medicine, exercise, cosmetic surgery, or mindfulness. So, as we venture into the wilderness, we begin an inward journey of discovery – exactly where we belong on this first Sunday in Lent.

Lent begins in the wilderness. And if we have any intention of following Jesus to the cross in Lent, then we have to start where he started – we have to start in the wilderness. It's a time for us to let go of what keeps us from experiencing God's presence in our lives and open ourselves to God's new possibilities for us. During Lent, we're called to repent, to turn around and move away from those attitudes and behaviors that separate us from God. Lent is a time of transformation

But why the wilderness? Well, I think the wilderness represents those times in our lives when we come face to face with our own brokenness. When we have to admit that we've fallen short on our journey of faith, that we've lost our way and that we're struggling in the face of trials and temptations. When we finally admit that we can no longer manage on our own and that we need help. Being in the wilderness forces us to reflect, to rethink, and to re-establish who we are with God, who we are with others, and who we are within ourselves.

And then I wonder, who really wants to go into the wilderness? Because real wilderness; where we wrestle with ourselves and our relationship with God doesn't really make our life any easier; in fact, it may even make it harder. And if this is the case, then why do it?

Because this is precisely what Lent is calling us to do. For 40 days we're invited to go into a wilderness place and prepare ourselves for the difficult journey of following Jesus to the cross. Lent asks us to wrestle with the hard stuff: to pray, to fast, to do something confrontational. It calls us to surrender our imperfect ideals and search for God's meaning. It bids us to face temptation and struggle and to choose to follow Jesus anyway.

Being in the wilderness forces us to face the reality that we cannot keep running, we cannot keep hiding, and we cannot keep pretending that our own will to overcome the challenges of this life will somehow produce the desired results we've been hoping for. So, instead we find ourselves in the midst of an unfamiliar and uncertain wilderness. But maybe, that's exactly where we're supposed to be.

Typically, we don't choose to enter wilderness places. We don't volunteer to experience pain, loss, or struggle. But like it or not, the wilderness happens anyway. So, whether the wilderness comes to us in a hospital waiting room, a shattered relationship, a sudden death, an unwelcome diagnosis, an unexpected job loss, a crippling depression, or an isolating and deadly pandemic – the wilderness appears, most often uninvited and unwelcome.



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However, the good and reassuring news for us today rests in God's promise that whatever sort of wilderness challenges we might have to face, we don't have to face them alone. Our gospel for today tells us that Jesus, our Savior, has gone ahead of us. He understands how difficult it is to take those steps, to resist the temptation to take an easier road through our troubles, or detour around them altogether. He understands our temptation to bury our feelings, to hide our truths, and seek the path of least resistance. He understands because he's already been there himself.

And although I have no idea what it's like to experience forty days in solitude and silence, in addition to the physical deprivation and danger, I can't imagine that Jesus' time in the wilderness passed by very quickly.

We live in a culture that embraces the quick fix, so it shouldn't surprise any of us that this aspect of the wilderness can be especially difficult to endure. Why, we ask, is this pain not ending? Why do our prayers go unanswered? **Where are you God?** I think one of the greatest temptations we face in the wilderness is to believe that God is absent, that God has given up, that God isn't listening, or that God doesn't care.

Temptation and struggle are always about identity — about *who* we are and *whose* we are: When it comes to identity, God always moves first. Before we do anything wrong and before we do anything right, God has already named us and claimed us as God's very own. And almost immediately, there are so many other things trying to tell us who we are and to whom we belong: capitalism, the weight-loss industry, our parents, kids at school — they all take their turns trying to tell us who we are. When the truth is...only God can do that.

This week's gospel text actually begins with Jesus's baptism *before* he gets thrust into the wilderness. According to Mark, the heavens were torn open, and God announced Jesus's identity loud and clear: "*You are my Son, the Beloved.*" At his baptism, Jesus heard the absolute truth about who he was. But that was the easy part. The much harder part came when he had to learn how to be God's beloved in a lonely and difficult wilderness. Maybe, while wandering in the wilderness like Jesus, we too can learn what it truly means to be God's beloved. The reassuring truth — our reminder of God's overwhelming grace is that if we open our eyes and take a good look around, we'll notice that somehow, from somewhere, help comes, rest comes, comfort comes. And while God's grace may not always appear at the time and in the way we'd prefer, it nevertheless comes.

God's grace meets us in the wilderness in the teacher who believed in us when we couldn't believe in ourselves. Or in the coach who gave us a chance to play, even if we weren't very good. It comes as a colleague who supported us through a struggle at work, or a friend who listened to our fears and grief after a relationship ended. It comes through the people who accept our apologies after we've hurt them, and sometimes the grace of God comes through the people willing to walk alongside us in *our* wilderness moments, while trying to make a way through their own. In these and so many other unexpected ways we're reminded that there is far more grace in God than we're able to comprehend

So, while Lent may begin with Jesus' 40-day journey into the wilderness, it also began with Jesus' baptism and God reminding him that he was God's very own Beloved Son. And as we continue through the wilderness to the end of this Lenten journey may you be reminded through the waters of baptism and by the cross and the empty tomb of who you are and whose you are. And when that voice comes from heaven and tells you that, "*you are my beloved,*" I pray that you will listen and believe. Thanks be to God. Amen.