

Feb. 21, 2021 Lent 1B
Mark 1:9-15
Into the Wilderness...Again

Today in Mark's Gospel we get to see how Jesus starts a church. After His baptism and His time of temptation in the wilderness, He launches His strategy for redeeming the world. Look at what He does. He preaches. He teaches. He meets needs. For those who are sick, He gives healing. For those with demons, He drives them out. Those who are hungry, He feeds. And one more that we don't often think about. He gives relationship. If you look at the Gospels, Jesus spends a lot of time in people's homes—eating, visiting, building relationship, meeting people's need for relationship.

That's how Jesus started a church—preaching, teaching and meeting needs.

How are we doing at those things? Preaching? We do that. Teaching? We do a lot of that—at every age level and 6 days a week. Meeting needs of the sick, of those dealing with demons, of the hungry, of those needing relationship? How are we doing there? We're not exactly failing, but we have room for improvement. So how do we improve?

Jesus spent some time in the Wilderness before His big launch. 40 days. We've been spending some time in the Wilderness too. 11 months. For 11 months we have been walking through this COVID-19 Wilderness without knowing where we were going, how to get out or when it would end. God is with us in the Wilderness.

The justice issues we began walking through last May with the murder of George Floyd are a wilderness—a Wilderness for which we were unprepared and unequipped. We don't know what to think or what to do or how to even talk about it. God is with us in this Wilderness.

And the political nastiness we went through this year was its own kind of Wilderness. It divided us and caused us to lash out in anger at those we have never been angry at before. Political parties became pre-requisites for friendship and loving our neighbor. God was with us in that Wilderness.

Now slowly but surely, God seems to be leading us out of the Wilderness. What have we been given in the Wilderness? How have we grown? What have we learned about being the Church?

The Discipleship Vision Board (that's the 7 people you elected to work with me and set the vision for St. Matthew) and the staff have been looking at this and we have been asking three questions.

- If we were starting a brand new church right now, what would we see as the most important things to do?
- What would we give ourselves permission NOT to do?
- What is one thing we have learned in the last year about being the church?

And of course, we have a wide variety of answers. There is a lot about which we disagree. But that's ok. That's good and healthy. That is how we get to the Truth. This is how we find God's will. We talk to God. We talk to each other. We allow our own opinions to be refined. And we find God's truth.

And this time in the Wilderness helps us. In the past 11 months we have learned more what it means to be a follower of Jesus than in any year in my lifetime. In many ways we have been given a blank slate on which to carry our God's work. But this will take prayer and work and study and discipline and change, sometimes painful change, on our part.

And this season of Lent is helpful. Lent is its own kind of Wilderness. Lent, with its sacrifices and disciplines and restraints is a very helpful Wilderness for us.

Wednesday we began Lent 2021, and if ever there was a year in which to re-think, re-imagine and re-do our Lenten disciplines, this surely is it. Our Lenten disciplines work for us privately, personally, individually. But they tempt us, even as so many of our favorite Lenten hymns and gospel songs tempt us, to remain captured and captivated by the personal and individual dimensions of our faith in Christ. Mark's is a Gospel of few words. He tells us very little of his vision of God's new Kingdom and new Covenant that has come to be in Christ. But all through his Gospel, Mark shows Jesus resisting the political and religious authorities of the day, just as He resists Satan here in today's reading. And by the same token, Mark's Gospel shows Jesus standing in solidarity with those who are outside and beyond the normal social structures: the poor, women, the sick and the possessed — just as he stood in Jordan's waters with the repentant sinners of the Baptist's movement.

Those three questions I mentioned earlier—I have been asking them in a number of settings—staff meetings, Bible studies, pastor's meetings, even on Facebook. And I have noticed that answers tend to break down into two areas. There are those whose focus is to take care of those within the church and there are those whose main focus is meeting the needs of those outside the church. We have to do both.

Remember how Mark's Gospel starts and how Jesus launched His Church—preaching, teaching and meeting the needs of the sick, the demonized, the hungry and the lonely. To go through Lent with Mark's Gospel is to put behind us business as usual, and step outside the social framework that normally shapes and forms our public profile as church-in-society. Lent with Jesus in Mark's Gospel is a time for putting our minds to work on understanding the truly formidable issues that are wrecking our world, and then giving public voice and action to our informed convictions about the love of God and neighbor, justice and peace. By all means, let's do the Lenten traditions and disciplines. Let's take serious this deep reflection which calls us to deep repentance. Let's talk to God and to each other about where we have failed and where we need to improve.

And then let's bring all that out of the Wilderness and lay it at the Cross, where all is forgiven, paid for, wiped out and forgotten. Where new life and new power are given to step forth from the grave of COVID-19, the grave of injustice, the grave of political hate to be the risen victorious church that preaches Jesus and teaches Jesus and meets need with Jesus. Amen.