

THE WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE JESUS IN THE WILDERNESS

(08/15/2021)

Scripture Lesson: Mark 1:1-13

“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.” (Mark 1:12)

Well, it happened again! Last Sunday, I asked you to remind me to say something about what we are presently going through both individually and collectively as a wilderness experience, drawing from the resources in the Bible to help us not only survive this difficult time but to thrive, to grow individually and collectively through this experience. And it happened!

This past week, several people indicated through email/text that they would like to hear what I have to say about this. They said that if I would be so kind as to frame it in the context of the archetype of wilderness, viewing wilderness as both an external and an internal experience, both a psychological and a spiritual experience, if I would do this from a Jungian as well as a Buddhist/Christian perspective, and if we could possibly explore the connection of the wilderness experience to chaos theory in quantum mechanics, they would greatly appreciate it.

Well, they didn't say it in *exactly* those words, but I think that's what they meant. In addition, the *exact* number of people who made this request is not important; that's just a technicality. To be perfectly honest, the word “plethora” would probably not be an accurate descriptor; it might be a slight overstatement. But, again, that's not important. What's important is that I experienced it as a mandate. So here we go!

Prior to this received (or, more honestly, *perceived* mandate), this week I had decided to begin a series of reflections on the Gospel of Mark. I really like the Gospel of Mark, and I had been thinking that it would be nice if we all walked through this gospel together in the year to come. I was wondering how we could begin our study of Mark today and, at the same time, address the dynamics of a wilderness experience, when, suddenly, it came to me: the first chapter of Mark contains the account of Jesus' experience in the wilderness! Go figure!

As you know, the members of our church family come from many different religious backgrounds. Some have no religious background or upbringing; their parents never brought them up within the context of a church, synagogue, temple, or mosque. No problem! If you are here today, or if you are reading this online, it shows that you want to learn, that you want to grow, that you want to deepen your faith. So be patient with me if I seem to state the obvious, for there are people here this morning for whom this is new information.

The Gospel of Mark is the first of the four New Testament gospels to be written. It was written, or perhaps more accurately compiled, around 70 CE, approximately forty years after Jesus' death. There is little doubt that both Matthew and Luke had a copy of Mark's gospel before them when they wrote (or compiled) their gospels approximately twenty years later. We know this because there are some passages in Matthew and Luke that are the same, practically word-for-word, as in Mark. Matthew and Luke each have passages that are unique to them, that were part of their own church traditions. There are also passages that Matthew and Luke have in common that do not appear in Mark. This leads us to believe that there was another gospel circulating at that time from which Matthew and Luke drew. This "lost gospel" is called Q, which is the first letter in the German word "Quelle," which means source. The gospel of Q, by the way, apparently consists almost entirely of Jesus' teachings, and says nothing about his birth, death, or resurrection.

Although the author of the Gospel of Mark is not identified within the Gospel, early tradition assigned the authorship to Mark, a companion of the disciple Peter. It is believed that, while he was in Rome with Peter, Mark wrote down what he heard Peter preach. This would make this gospel the earliest and most direct connection to Jesus' life and teaching in that it drew heavily from one of Jesus' twelve disciples, one who was with Jesus from the very beginning, who traveled with him, who listened to his teachings, who witnessed his healings and other miracles, and who experienced his presence following the resurrection. In addition, according to scripture, Peter was the disciple to whom Jesus gave "the keys to the Kingdom."

From the very beginning. What an interesting phrase! What is the beginning of the story of Jesus? Most of us would say that this amazing story begins with Mary, an unmarried peasant girl who lived in Nazareth, a little town in Galilee. It begins with the angel Gabriel's visitation to Mary informing her that the Holy Spirit will "come upon" her and that she will give birth to a son who is to be called Jesus, the Son of the Most High, that he will assume the throne of his ancestor David, that he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, "and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Yes, most of us would say that the story of Jesus begins with Mary and Joseph. We would say that it begins in Bethlehem, the little village where Jesus was born. We believe that this amazing event took place in a barn because there was no room for Joseph and his pregnant wife in the inn. The babe, after he was born, was laid in a manger surrounded by farm animals, and certain shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night were the first to see the Christ child. Legend has it that the Holy Family received a visit from three Wise Men who followed a star until it came to rest over the place where the baby lay, and they offered him their gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh. Then, warned by a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their own country by a different way.

Most of us would say that the story of Jesus begins with Christmas. However, Mark, the earliest of the gospels to be written, makes no mention of Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the Wise Men, the star, the stable, and the miraculous birth. Mark, who begins his gospel with the words, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” begins with Jesus’ baptism, which took place when he was approximately thirty years old, and the wilderness experience that immediately followed his baptism. Why did Mark (and possibly also Q) begin here?

Mark makes a point of noting that Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness. The number forty appears several times in the Bible. Whether it refers to days or years, forty is a special number. It is what C. G. Jung would call an archetypal number, a number which is hard-wired into our psyche because of its psychological and spiritual significance. When it appears in the Bible, it carries a symbolic as well as a literal meaning.

The number forty, when it is applied to a unit of time, signifies not simply chronological time but also a time that has special meaning for the person undergoing the experience. It is invariably accompanied by dramatic spiritual growth or a transformation that comes through what we would call a wilderness experience. If we can understand what happened to those who experienced forty days or forty years in the wilderness, we might gain the strength and insight we need to be psychologically or spiritually transformed by our own wilderness experiences.

Jesus’ baptism was a special event, but not for the reasons we commonly associate with baptism. Jesus did not need to be baptized to wash away the stain of original sin or the sins he had committed in this life. It did not mark his entry into the Christian community, for there was no Christian community when he was baptized. We assume that his ritual immersion in water had little impact on whether he would go to heaven when he died. Because he lived so close to God, Jesus was already in the kingdom of heaven while he was here on earth!

Jesus’ baptism was a transformative experience! His baptism filled him with the power of the Holy Spirit. From that time on, his life was radically changed. When Mark begins his gospel with Jesus’ baptism, he leads us to think about when the human Jesus became the Christ.

One possibility is that Jesus was special from the moment of his birth or even earlier, from the moment of his conception. Those who hold this view note that both Matthew and Luke regard Jesus’ birth as important. We, too, are deeply touched by the Christmas message. There is something so special about God’s incarnation in a little baby lying in a lowly manger that we, like the shepherds and the Magi, are moved to kneel before the Babe of Bethlehem.

According to the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE), Jesus Christ was *truly God and truly man.*” This union of the human and the divine may have taken place at his birth, but it also may have taken place at the time of his baptism. For those who believe that it happened at the time of his baptism, the first thirty years of Jesus’ life were of little consequence. Around age thirty, when he was baptized, he received the Holy Spirit. This was the point in his life when he became conscious of God’s Spirit in a special way. From that time on, he was the Christ.

Those who hold this view note that the legends surrounding Jesus’ birth were apparently not important to the religious tradition that gave rise to the Gospel of Mark. Paul’s letters to the early church, which were written even earlier than Mark, make no mention of Jesus’ birth; it was apparently not important to Paul. Jesus, also, says little to or about his mother, and he says nothing about his birth.

There is, however, a third option. Perhaps Jesus was special *both* from the moment of his conception *and* through his experience of the Holy Spirit as an adult. Since Jesus Christ is an archetypal as well as an historical figure, since he symbolizes a part of our own psyche, then this would be true of us as well. This would mean that *we* are special to God from the moment of our birth. When, later in life, we *consciously choose* to build our lives around God and become the persons whom God wants us to be, we open ourselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This can be a special moment, a transforming moment in our life!

I find it interesting that a parallel debate exists regarding the Buddha. Buddhists ask, when did Siddhartha Gautama become the Buddha, the enlightened one? Some believe that he was set aside as special from the moment of his birth or before. After all, it was foretold by the oracle that he would become a great spiritual leader. There are also legends surrounding his birth, just as there are with Jesus. It is said that he was born from his mother’s side at the level of the heart chakra. While this is probably not literally true, it is symbolically profound. It means that his life was an incarnation of compassion, and his teaching was a message of the heart.

Did Siddhartha become the Buddha at the time of his birth or when he had his experience of enlightenment while sitting under the bodhi tree? Just as with Jesus, I don’t think we have to choose. Siddhartha had a Buddha nature, a spark of divinity within him from the moment of his birth, just as Jesus did. This nature, which became manifest through his enlightenment, finds its parallel in Jesus’ baptism. The rest of Siddhartha’s life was spent helping others to discover this Buddha nature, this spark of divinity within themselves *and* within others, within all sentient beings, just as Jesus went around teaching, healing, and helping us to discover and strengthen the Holy Spirit, the Kingdom of God within and to establish the kingdom of God on earth.

At the time of his baptism, Jesus had a powerful spiritual experience! There are several accounts of what happened immediately following his baptism. The Gospel of Mark tells us:

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.

Note that the Holy Spirit *drove* Jesus out into the wilderness. Jesus was probably already in the wilderness, far from the trappings of civilization, for Mark 1:4 tells us that John the baptizer “appeared *in the wilderness* preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” I suspect that this verse either emphasizes the loneliness of the place or it is being used to describe a psychological state of being, what we might call a wilderness experience.

Mark does not say much about the temptations. The Greek word that is translated as “temptation” might better be translated as “ordeal.” What is of significance to Mark is not the three purported temptations but the ordeal, the wilderness experience itself.

What happened to Jesus in the wilderness? If the Holy Spirit is the energy of God, then while he was in the wilderness Jesus must have consciously strengthened the spiritual energy he received at the time of his baptism. He must have strengthened the power of the Holy Spirit within him because when he emerges from the wilderness, he is a changed person.

As soon as he emerges from the wilderness, Jesus begins to tell people that the “kingdom of God is at hand.” He calls the first of his disciples, who follow him because they sense the power of both his words and his spirit. Jesus then cures a man with an unclean spirit. There is no record of his healing before this. I believe that during his wilderness experience, Jesus so strengthened the power of the Holy Spirit within him that he now has the power to heal!

What did Jesus do for forty days and forty nights in the wilderness? The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, in his book *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*, suggests that while he was in the wilderness, Jesus spent most of his time in prayer or meditation. The reason he believes this is because Buddhists strengthen the Holy Spirit within them through meditation just as Christians strengthen it through prayer.

On my desk downstairs in my church study is a little statue, a gift from my wife, that depicts Jesus in a meditative stance; basically, he is doing zazen. Like Thich Nhat Hanh, I believe that through prayer or meditation Jesus opened himself so fully to the power of the Holy Spirit that when he emerged from the wilderness it was the central power of his life! It doesn't matter whether he sat, stood, knelt, or walked while he prayed. It doesn't matter whether he

prayed in words or emptied himself, as one does in Zen meditation. What matters is that he strengthened the power of the Holy Spirit within him!

The same can happen to us! What matters is how we strengthen the Holy Spirit within us. Do we open our hearts to the Holy Spirit in worship? Do we enter the presence of the Holy Spirit in prayer? Do we invite the Holy Spirit to guide us in our relationships? We can do what Jesus did; in fact, *we are called* to do what Jesus did! If Jesus strengthened the power of the Holy Spirit while he was in the wilderness, we can do this as well!

What are the wilderness experiences of our lives? They are the times when life drives us into a situation that we did not choose, much as the Spirit drove Jesus deeper into the wilderness. During a wilderness experience, we feel cut off from the resources that normally sustain us. It is a lonely time. It is a difficult and painful time. Even if we have friends, it is an ordeal through which we pass alone. Each of us, in our own way, has many wilderness experiences.

Our wilderness experience may be the period of mourning following the death of a loved one. Our wilderness experience may be the lingering trauma from the abuse we suffered as children. It may be the realization that we have become host to a disease like cancer and that we are facing death. The past sixteen months, as we struggled with the coronavirus pandemic that has claimed so many lives, that has alienated us from each other and from anything we would call a normal way of life, we have been and continue to be in the wilderness.

What makes the difference between a wilderness experience that destroys us and a wilderness experience that makes us stronger? Scripture gives us the answer. Scripture tells us that the difference is whether we turn to God in prayer while we are in the wilderness. If we open ourselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit while we are undergoing our ordeal, we may emerge from the desert even stronger than we were before we entered!

As we move forward into the wilderness of a virus that has detached us from our moorings, let us be guided by Jesus' experience in the wilderness following his baptism. Jesus used his time away from the normal demands of life to deepen his relationship with God, to strengthen the energy of the Holy Spirit within him. It was a trial by fire, but it strengthened him. It transformed him. He emerged a different person.

If we ask Jesus to accompany us as we travel through this wilderness, if we take on his heart and mind, we will realize that it is not about us. It will strengthen our empathy and compassion for those whose lives have been devastated by this virus. It will lead us to the realization that although "we are all in this together," we do not always act as if we are all in this together. Some people have it much worse than others.

This wilderness experience can become a transforming experience in our lives—if we handle it properly, if we use this time to strengthen the power of the Holy Spirit within us. Obviously, this cannot happen if we do not attend worship, turn to God in prayer, or talk to Jesus about our lives. If we do nothing, we will either be broken by our trial or, at best, we will emerge from it much as we were when we entered. We will have lost the opportunity to experience a powerful psychological and spiritual transformation.

In the days, weeks, months, and perhaps even years to come, let us face into the wilderness experiences of our lives, not try to run from them in all the various ways that we try to escape from the trials, the challenges, the growth experiences of life. Then let us open our minds and our hearts to the ways that God would guide us through this ordeal. Let us take as our single spiritual discipline the resolve to strengthen the Holy Spirit, the energy of God, in our lives in whatever way we can.

If we do this, as Jesus did, we will emerge from this experience as transformed people. Then we can bring light, healing, and peace to a darkened, broken, and troubled world.

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