

# Wilderness and Baptism

By: Meagan McLaughlin

February 21, 2021. Our readings, and the sermon today, are about wilderness — and also about baptism, and how they were both essential to Jesus.

Readings: [Genesis 9:8-17](#), [1 Peter 3:18-22](#), [Mark 1:9-15](#)

\*\*\* Transcript \*\*\*

When you hear the word “wilderness” what comes to mind? You may respond differently depending on how you feel about the wilderness outdoors. If you are one who, like my friend Keith, loves to travel miles by bike and then sleep in a hammock suspended between trees at night, or like the Cub Scouts in the Youth Group, who reveled in the challenge of cooking dinner over a fire the size and shape of a shoe box and were not the least bit disturbed by fire ants or wasps, the wilderness might excite you. If, however, your idea of “roughing it” starts with being without a TV, or if camping means staying in a cabin with a bathroom and a kitchen, the thought of being in the wilderness may make you cringe. I will admit that as much as Karen and I love visiting parks and hiking outdoors and cooking over a campfire, having a solid roof over our heads that we did not need to assemble ourselves, and a bed at sitting height that doesn’t require an air pump, has become more and more appealing over the last few years.

As we gather today for our first Sunday in Lent, living into our Lenten theme “Called to Truth,” one short line in the Gospel from Mark tells us that Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness. The gospel today is about wilderness — and it is also about baptism. Because just before Jesus enters the wilderness, he is baptized by John. And he hears the voice of God affirming his beloved-ness, the deep truth of who he is as God’s child. Baptism, followed by wilderness. They seem to be two polar opposites, don’t they? But they are actually inextricably intertwined in God’s world. God is present equally in the wilderness as in baptism. And this, I think, may be the truth that our scriptures have for us today.

Jesus is driven into the wilderness, Mark says. In Mark’s telling, we don’t get a whole lot of detail — just one sentence indicating that his wilderness experience was marked by temptation, wild animals, and angels. Matthew and Luke give us some specific information about the temptations, and they note that Jesus didn’t eat or drink the entire 40 days he spent in the wilderness. All in all, even if you are one who loves the outdoors, this wilderness — Jesus’ wilderness — doesn’t sound exactly peaceful.

Jesus spends 40 days being tempted and challenged, in a very profound way, having everything he had just been told by God at his baptism challenged. Beloved? Child of God? Prove it. Show me. How do you really know that? For 40 long days, Jesus is tempted and challenged. We also heard today, as Mr. Jesse mentioned, the story of Noah and his family, in the ark, battered around by raging flood waters for 40 days before hearing that promise of God’s love again. And then we might recall the Israelites, and their journey through the desert for 40 years before they arrived at the promised land, and they and God renewed their covenant, their promise. The exact length of time doesn’t really matter. The truth we know from all of these stories is that the wilderness is not an instant process, a quick and easy place to be, but takes time.

Another truth we hear from our gospel today is that Jesus’ ministry comes just as much out of his time in the wilderness as it does out of his baptism. After all, Jesus goes straight from the baptism to the wilderness, and straight from the wilderness to begin his ministry. In the wilderness, Jesus learns

something of who he is. He is challenged to forget that his identity comes from God, and each time, he affirms his trust in the God from whom he came, the one who called him beloved. And, we are told, the Spirit was with him there in the wilderness, and the angels waited on him. In the wilderness, Jesus learns that even in the midst of trials and temptations, his identity as beloved holds true.

In my wilderness times, this truth has not been clear always in the midst of the struggle. Grief, shame, wounded-ness can overwhelm, making it hard to see, leading us to forget. We have all experienced wildernesses of our own: the death of beloveds, miscarriage, extended unemployment, serious illness and injury, divorce. Even the traumas of this last year of life in a pandemic may feel like something of a wilderness. These times can feel like we are on our own, unsure of who we are and what we are called to do. We may even feel that God has forgotten or abandoned us, leaving us to struggle through on our own.

This is not something we choose, and despite Mark telling us that Jesus was driven into the desert, it is also not something that God foists upon us as a punishment or a lesson. There is pain, loss, and grief, that is very human, very real. And, the wilderness is a part of life, a part of our humanity, and there are deep truths that can be revealed there, in time.

The truth of the wilderness that Jesus shares with us, and that I have learned as I've emerged from my wildernesses, is that nothing can erase our beloved-ness, and nothing can undo the presence of God in all things. This promise is embedded in creation itself, as we also know from the story of Noah like Mr. Jesse talked about, that rainbow that is the promise of God. And that promise is revealed through the rain.

Even death cannot undo God's promise. The parallels in the Gospel of Mark between Jesus' baptism and his death are profound. Both include a splitting of the barrier between God and us: at baptism there's a tearing in the sky itself, and at death there's a rending of the curtain in the temple that separated the Holy of Holies, where it was believed that God lived. Both demonstrate the clear presence and movement of the Spirit, in the dove and in the breath, in the story of Jesus' death. And in both baptism and death, there is that voice proclaiming beloved-ness and identity as child of God.

In baptism, we claim our beloved-ness as children of God, embracing the truth that goes back to creation, when God formed us from the earth and breathed life into us. In wilderness, our identities are challenged, refined, claimed, and affirmed in new ways. We aren't told how Jesus felt during his time in the wilderness, or specifically how he may have been changed, but we do know that he left the wilderness ready to begin his ministry, ready to step toward the pain and grief of John the Baptist's brutal death. The wilderness, it seems, was just as essential to Jesus as his baptism, preparing him to proclaim, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Thanks be to God.

\*\*\* Keywords \*\*\*

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