**A Sermon for DaySpring**

By Eric Howell

*“Wandering in the Wilderness”*

Mark 1:9-15

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They were having the time of their lives, snapping photos of elephants, giraffes, beautiful birds. It was a photographer’s dream, a safari in the Maswa Game Reserve in Tanzania. To see the animals you’ve come half way around the world to see, you get up early in the morning and travel by open topped, open doored jeep on rutted roads out way into the ranging grasslands. If you’re lucky, you’ll see quite a show, a parade of the world’s most majestic animals. When the animals are in view your driver stops the car, turns off the engine, and you shoot photos to your hearts content. But you don’t get out of the jeep under any circumstances.

My dad is on his second safari trip right now, and I’m so glad for him. He was on his first of these a few years ago, sitting in the jeep, trying to frame the perfect photo, when the driver whispered. Nobody move. Just stay still.

Dad and all the photographers lowered their cameras. Their zoom lenses let you see wild animals from a long way away, but you can miss what’s right near you. With the zoom lens, the animals a long way away look close enough to touch. That’s good. That’s what you want.

What you’re not prepared for is when one of them comes close enough actually to touch. “Nobody move. Just stay still.” A lion was prowling around the jeep, with the open top and the open doors. Not really open doors . . .no doors. Where there should be a door, there’s just an open hole. Lion, door frame, you.

Your vacation has just changed. You’ve gone from idyllic, safe, somewhat comfortable, controlled environment to the wilderness now absent any false notion that this is just a tame zoo. Those photographers sat perfectly still until the lion lost interest in the canned imported meal on wheels and padded off looking for locally sourced, organic meat. But not before dad, who couldn’t help himself, slowly, carefully, lowered his camera and clicked a photo. All you see in the snapped shot is the frame of a jeep where the door should be and the snout of the king of the jungle.

The experience of wilderness can happen just like that. One moment you’re going along just fine and the next, everything changes. And that’s what we see when we read in Mark’s gospel, the Spirit drove Jesus out to the wilderness among the wild beasts.

Each year the first Sunday in Lent we begin with Jesus in the wilderness for forty days. Matthew and Luke tell us more detail and all about the temptations. Mark doesn’t do that. Mark writes like his pen is low on ink. Jesus comes up from the water, hears the divine affirmation, “you are my beloved son with whom I am well pleased.“ And immediately the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness.

Mark’s lack of detail is the gift of focused attention. When we read Matthew or Luke, we are drawn instinctively to the details of the temptations. With Mark we are left to dwell on wilderness itself. Mark’s just gives us that word and then is silent, like a summer wind blowing across the desert.

Wilderness. *Eremos.* Desert. Abandoned place. Waste land. In different parts of the world, wilderness would go by others names. In south Florida it is the swampy everglades. In Brazil, it is the forest; in central Africa, the jungle. Around the Jordan River, it is desert: hard, dry, dangerous.

It is geographic designation of untamed land, even more it is spiritual reality. You can find wilderness in the empty places on maps. Always in biblical terms, wilderness is anywhere people are vulnerable, solitary, tested, tried, and feel most alone in this world. It is the furnace of spiritual warfare.

In the biblical and spiritual sense wilderness is not just a place on a map, or a place of quiet solitude. It’s an experience in life of being tested to the breaking point. Wilderness implies suffering, the kind of suffering made known simply by trying to stay alive. That’s not to say there aren’t gifts the wilderness gives through such an experience. Christians have long understood the wilderness as a place of uncommon wisdom born from the journey. The desert fathers could look back at Roman society and more clearly see its headlong rush to insanity because in the wilderness at least in part because they could see their own complicity more clearly. Jesus’ foray into the desert gave the gift of spiritual wisdom he showed through the rest of his life.

In wilderness, prayers become less abstract and more raw. God becomes less a theory and more immanent reality. Life becomes much less about the distant future, big plans to change the world, and becomes quickly about living in the world as it is, a world whose cliffs and rocks, mountains and valleys were there long before you were and will stand long after you’re gone.

Some people seek this experience, both geographically and spiritually. The Desert Fathers sought out the wilderness, as wild as they could find it. “The Desert Fathers believed that the wilderness had been created as supremely valuable in the eyes of God because it had no value to men.” (Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 4).

Jesus though, did not consciously choose wilderness. Indeed, his going there must have been baffling to him. One moment, and Mark’s pithy telling tells this best—one moment he is coming up from the waters of baptism, bathed in the affirming, empowering divine blessing, “You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased.”

Like anyone, surely Jesus reflected on this blessed moment with some joy: I’m special. I’m loved. I’m important. And just as surely Jesus had questions about all this. What does this mean? Can I get my own way? Can I rule? Does being God’s beloved Son mean I can’t be hurt? Does it mean I can walk on water? Does it mean I can heal people, tell people what to do and they’ll do it? Does it mean I can never die?

These would not be narcissistic questions; these would be honest inquiries of a messiah figuring out what it means to be God’s beloved. If, as we’re imagining he posed these questions, the Spirit abruptly answers them decisively: Immediately the Spirit drove him out. The word for ‘drive out’ is all over Mark’s gospel, usually translated as ‘cast out’ as in “Jesus cast out the evil spirit,” “Jesus cast out the sickness.” You cast out something with force, if not violence.

Matthew and Luke are a little gentler. They say the Spirit led Jesus out to the wilderness, which is nicer. It suggests that Jesus was spiritually responsive to divine guidance, that he willingly followed the Spirit’s urging into even hard places, demonstrating his obedience to God’s will for his life. When we are led by the Spirit somewhere we still have some agency in the going. We choose to follow. We aren’t forced to do something when we are led. We participate in the leading by bending our will to follow. That’s the story Matthew and Luke tell. Not Mark. Mark says the Spirit drives him out. This starker image does not give Jesus agency in the decision. He is treated like an animal being driven to be with the other animals, the wild beasts in the wild.

I don’t know what that looks like for Jesus to be driven out into the wilderness, but I do know this: That’s how most of us get there. If wilderness characterizes a life experience of trial, testing, uncertainty, lonely fear, most of us don’t choose it; life drives us there, casting us out of the life we thought we were living into one we are not prepared for:

Life can thrust us out there, out into the wilderness, before we even know what’s happening. Beyond the many different ways that we may be experiencing the wilderness among us, and there are many right here in this very room, we all saw it happen to some others this week.

Those poor families in Florida, whose children were killed at school, are barely yet finding a footing in the desert they are now condemned to wander. If we can pray at all for them, pray that God shepherds them through this terrible landscape, that God gives green pastures, leads them to still waters and restores their wounded souls. For those who walk in the valleys of the shadow of death, may God be with them, and comfort them with the rod of strength and the staff of tender mercy.

It was on Ash Wednesday. That same day we marked our own children’s foreheads with ashes this week and then sent them to school. Can you believe Christians would do such a thing in days like these? We mark our own children with the sign of Christ’s death as if it’s just a liturgical act. And then we send them to schools all around this country just hoping this isn’t the day our theology is truly tested. We pray that our national insanity doesn’t come home to our community, to our schools. But then it comes. And comes. And comes first to one school and then another. A school. A nightclub. A Baptist church. Another school. One after another after another. Always different; always the same. Those who want us to despair that nothing can be done to change things count on us just accepting this reality as an unfortunate part of life in a free country. They are banking on the despair of reasonable people keeping them cowed and quiet. No. We will not accept that anymore.

We mark our children’s foreheads with ashes, but our national cowardice and failure is not a cross our children should have to bear. Perhaps never before has it been so obvious as it is right now: The sins of the fathers are being visited upon the children.

And yet the temptation to despair is insidious. Thomas Merton, as he seems to so often, writes with such sharp insight: “The desert is the home of despair. And despair now, is everywhere. Let us not think that our interior solitude consists in the acceptance of defeat. We cannot escape anything by consenting tacitly to be defeated. Despair is an abyss without bottom. Do not think to close it by consenting to it and trying to forget you have consented.

This, then, is our desert: to live facing despair, but not to consent. To trample it down under hope in the Cross. To wage war against despair unceasingly. That war is our wilderness. If we wage it courageously, we will find Christ at our side. If we cannot face it, we will never find Him.” (*Thoughts in Solitude*, 6-7)

Where do we find him? My Bible, like most, has subheadings added here and there. In my Bible, as Jesus completes his wilderness experience the heading reads, “Jesus Begins His Ministry.” As if to say, oh well, now that that’s over, let’s get to the real work.

That must be wrong. It suggests that whatever happened in the wilderness was prelude, preparation, or unfortunate detour on the way toward where real ministry happens. But surely, Jesus’ ministry toward the redemption of all creation includes the wilderness, indeed begins there, indeed never really leaves. It’s all wilderness, everywhere there are humans hurting, broken, lost, grieving; anywhere there is despair, there is wilderness.

And Jesus is there; still there now. Still meeting us in the wild, untamed places of uncertainty and loss and danger, and despair. This is where the ministry of the Lord Jesus begins, right here, where Satan still prowls like a lion and God’s angels still minister to those cast out.

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