

**First Baptist Church of Augusta**  
**Mark 1:9-15**  
**“Journey Through the Wilderness: Is There an Alternate Route?”**  
**March 1, 2009**  
**Lent 2009**

NRS Mark 1:9 *“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” 12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. 14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”*”

Beginning with last Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, we began a forty day pilgrimage towards Easter. Easter we know about: crowded worship services with vibrant singing, brand-new clothes, and spring hats. Easter we also know about: breaking dawn, an empty tomb, with cast aside grave clothes - glorious resurrection. Yet, we tend to forget, or politely ignore, the journey it took to get to Easter. Jesus dares to make the counter-cultural claim: *“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”* (Matthew 16:24) I like Easter.

So today, we begin the journey of forty days with Jesus, mindful of his own forty days in the wilderness, as well as our own call, to follow Jesus all the way. This morning we have the Gospel of Mark as our map in the wilderness.

Mark is so abrupt in his story telling. In our gospel reading today, it opens with Jesus being baptized by John, followed by the voice of God, claiming Jesus as the beloved, in whom God is well pleased. I caution baptismal candidates every month, that they are probably not going to see the heavens open or hear the voice of God, once they come out of the water. They will more than likely just feel wet.

Jesus, however, gets the works. He is going public with his call, and this baptism becomes, among other signs, symbolic of his identity with humanity, as well as, his identity with God. This is not a bad way to begin a calling.

When President Barak Obama was sworn in as President, there were inaugural parades and parties late into the night. Musicians and artists and dignitaries came from around the world to celebrate the first day of work for the President of the United States. Most presidents include some “honeymoon” period, although with the shape of the global economy and the ongoing wars, it remains to be seen just how long President Obama’s will hold out. Even if he gets a few weeks of a “honeymoon,” he will still have it much better than Jesus.

The Gospel of Mark tells us in verse 12, *“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.”* There were no parties, no swearing in, no time to unpack boxes and move into the office and learn the phone system, and which key goes where. *Immediately*, Mark tells us, Jesus is driven *out into the wilderness* and tempted by Satan. Mark adds further detail, that he is also with wild animals and is waited on by angels. Not much of an inauguration if you ask me.

Those of us familiar with what is often called the “Temptations of Jesus,” remember that in Matthew and Luke, Jesus is in the wilderness and is tempted by the devil in three distinct ways: to change stones into bread, the temptation to jump from the pinnacle, and the temptation to rule all the nations of the world. All Jesus had to do would be to serve Satan, whose very name means to tempt.

Mark is different than Matthew or Luke in that the specific temptations of Jesus are not at all mentioned. All we have are two verses: *12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*

This call to follow God takes Jesus immediately into the wilderness for a long stretch. There is something about this wilderness that is important to Jesus, and therefore it must be important to us as well.

In the Bible, we read of the wilderness often. It refers to an arid place, certainly not some lush stretch of geography marked by deciduous forests and bordered by mountains and crisscrossed with hiking trails. In fact, the same word for wilderness in both Hebrew and Greek is desert. It was a place on the edge of civilization, where life was only marginally sustained.

When I take a trip, I generally look for the quickest and easiest route. I suspect many of you are the same. That is why, after all, we have interstates. Lately though, I am growing to resent the quickest and easiest, especially when I am driving on highways that take me through small towns. Most towns today in Georgia have bypasses. You can drive all the way to Florida, if you like, without ever passing through such lovely places as Waynesboro, Baxley, Tifton, or Thomaston and the like. The public demands, according to the highway system, the easiest and quickest route.

Life of course is not at all like that. There is no such thing as a guaranteed 80 or 90 years of care-free existence. Just imagine, never having a family conflict – not one; or always enjoying sound health (you physicians would be largely out of work). Imagine a life where people do not disappoint you, churches thrive, and your work is just one more day at Disney World. This is the easy route.

But life is not like that, is it. We may build bypasses to scoot us quickly around our small towns, but life is a journey right through the wilderness.

### **Wilderness is Where You Go for Refuge**

Ten or so years ago, I read the book, *Into the Wild*, by Jon Krakauer, which was this past year made into a movie. The book is based on Chris McCandless, a graduate of Emory University. Upon graduation, he gave his law school savings of \$24,000 to charity and made a two year journey, that ended in the wilds of Alaska. In his journal he wrote that he wanted to live off the land for a few months. He saw himself renouncing society's ills, and was frustrated with his culture. While seeking refuge from society, he died of starvation and toxic poisoning in an abandoned school bus in the Alaskan Wilderness.

A month or so ago, I read a book by the title *Solitude*, where the author reflected on his twelve months of living in isolation deep in the Patagonia wilderness. He used this time as the basis of a PhD. dissertation. He built his own cabin, collected his own firewood and caught his own fish, all alone in the wilderness.

Most of us will never experience such wilderness extremes. About as close we will get is something like what Amy and I experienced last week. We went snowshoeing in the backcountry of Breckenridge in a National Forest – but we were only a couple of miles from town. Not exactly extreme wilderness. Still, it is nice to find places to pull away. That is why some camp or backpack and others take strolls down lonely beaches. Yet we all come to know wilderness in one form or another.

The wilderness is where Hagar fled to avoid the wrath of Abraham's wife, Sarah. This is where Moses went before he became the liberator of enslaved Israel. He fled to the wilderness after murdering an Egyptian, and while in the wilderness he tended sheep. While we do not know exactly where Jesus went, the Bible tells us that Jesus would often slip away to deserted places, presumably to pray and meditate before God. Here in the gospel of Mark, all we know is that Jesus was driven to the wilderness.

Where do we “go” for our wilderness? Where do we go to strip ourselves of distractions, to intentionally place ourselves into the dependence of God and God alone?

### **Wilderness is Where You to Learn**

Sometimes the wilderness is a place, not of escape, but of destitution. Wilderness or the desert should not be romanticized. This is no garden refuge, or a month out at a national park. Mark is clear that Jesus was driven to the wilderness and was tempted by Satan, and had wild beasts or animals for company. Please dispel any images of peaceable kingdom for they will not work here.

For some, perhaps many of us, this current economy has become an undesired wilderness. Anxiety over dwindling retirement accounts, health care costs, job instability and so forth has permeated our time. It is hard to have a conversation with anyone without someone bringing up our current economic crisis. Wilderness?

Wilderness and the derivative of hunger comes when the world, as we know it – our culture, our faith systems, our structures of power, our reliance on economics for security - no longer fill us up, no longer satisfy us. As we consider the desert of Jesus, we know that sometimes we are called or driven to the desert, too.

The desert is where we go to identify our hunger in a world stuffed and satiated.

The desert is where we go when the easy answers will no longer do.

The desert is where we go when the promises from the established systems of commerce or politics prove bankrupt and junk.

The desert is where we go when we finally accept that God’s claim on you and me is bigger and greater and more incomprehensible than anything else we will ever experience...*ever*.

Perhaps our greatest temptation, if we are to read ourselves into the gospel story, is that when we find ourselves in the wilderness, is to do whatever it takes to get out as quickly as possible. However, instead of scrambling to look for whatever means it will take to get out, we ought to stay a while, and see what it is God has to teach us, there, in the wilderness. Wilderness is part of the journey in this life. It is a place of escape and a place of learning. It is also a place of participation where we find God.

### **Wilderness is Where We Go to Find God**

The poet, Ann Weems, reflects on how she would much rather be around the aura of Christmas and Bethlehem and the manger and angels. In a final stanza she writes:

*The shepherds have left;  
they've returned to the hillside  
and to the sheep.  
The Magi, too, have gone,  
having been warned in a dream,  
As was Joseph,  
who packed up his family and fled.  
If I stay in Bethlehem,  
I stay alone.  
God has gone on  
toward Jerusalem.*

Last week we hosted an Ash Wednesday service. Even though Christians have observed some form of the imposition of ashes for over a thousand years, it is a relative new observance for Baptists.

The day of the service I worked on the meditation or reflection for the service, experimented with the ash mixture with olive oil (no one teaches these things in seminary), and went over the order of worship with

several of the other ministers. Just as we were wrapping up our church supper, I robed up and joined the other ministers in the sanctuary, where we sat quietly for the service to begin.

I love a church service that begins in quiet: no piano, or idle gabbing, or frantic, last minute activity. Just to sit for a few brief minutes and listen to the pews creak, while finding stillness can be such a gift.

The first half of the service was filled with music, scripture readings and reflections, and so, even to the most stalwart of Baptists, it was still a fairly typical worship service, if not a bit more subdued than usual. I transitioned from my message on penitence and mortality – traditional themes for Ash Wednesday – into an explanation of the imposition of ashes.

Traditionally the sign of the cross is marked on the foreheads of the worshipers, as the minister recites the phrase: “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” I was a bit concerned that the marking of the forehead may be a bit much for the congregation, most of which have never participated in such a service before. It is such a public thing, to be marked by ashes on the forehead. I feel like such a spectacle, and so, I no doubt, projected that anxiety on to others. As a compromise, we chose to mark the palm of the hands with the sign of the cross, which also provides symbolism of the nail marks of Christ’s own hands.

What I was not prepared for was the overwhelming emotion I felt, as one by one, members, family and guests alike, came forward and opened their hands to me to be marked. The hand can be such a powerful and personal extension of a person. There was the grimy hand of a child, still lined with dirt from play, who nonetheless opened it up to be marked as I said: *Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.* One by one, they patiently came to be marked. Old, arthritic hands, who may not even be here next year, hands of young married couples, with a “whole life in front of them,” calloused hands, soft hands, large hands, and frail hands – one by one opened up to be marked. Some hands belonged to folks who have suffered the death of someone they love and cherish. Other hands just innocently were opened with no such sense of loss.

I found myself leaning in close to each one, and without much thought, clasping their hand with mine as I marked them with the cross. For a few, there were messy, ashy hugs by the communion table, and for some just an intimate exchange of knowing glances. I realized as never before, that we are in this together – this life, this death, this healing salvation of which we spend our entire lives seeking.

Marking the hands was initially a compromise to me. It turned out to be an avenue of cherished participation with my church family. Their hands, our hands, clasped together and held by the hand of God, *remembering that we are but dust and to dust we shall return.* Wilderness is where we go for refuge, to learn, and to find God.