



Lost in the Wilderness

Mark 1:1-8

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If often feels like Advent is the fourth leg of the Triple Crown ... let's just rename it the Quadruple Crown. Hardly has the tryptophan of the turkey worn off after Thanksgiving when the starting gun fires, and we're off to the races. It's not a solo race, we're not running it by ourselves. There's this competitive edge to have and to host the biggest and the best Christmas. We've literally made Christmas decorating into a sport – just watch the Great Christmas Light Fight on ABC. I don't know exactly when having a couple strands of icicle lights hanging from the roof became insufficient, but who doesn't enjoy a couple million lights dancing in synchronized timing with Mannheim Steamroller's Carol of the Bells. It's not enough to just enjoy the decorations, the going fad is to ensure the neighbor's know exactly who has the most Christmas spirit.

It reminds me of the Friday night football cheer, as the fans on opposite sides started to call out to the other, "We've got spirit, yes we do! We've got Christmas spirit, how 'bout you?"

In a normal year, there's a lot of momentum that carries us into Christmas morning. And yet, this year, 2020 of all years, has me wanting to trot more like a show horse, than run like a thoroughbred. I'm a little exhausted and weary, more like a marathoner than a sprinter. Just to cross the finish line seems like an accomplishment this year.

Advent invites us to not rush through – to take pause in the preparation – and to really wonder as we wander. We began this exilic season of social distancing in March by declaring we were walking through the Lentiest Lent that had ever Lented. I'm wondering if the same can be said for this season: can this be the Adventiest Advent that has ever Advented? With the call to social distancing, with stores and malls being the last place we want to find ourselves as COVID rears its viral head, can we take time to pause – to reflect – and to acknowledge the reality of our brokenness? Of our weariness?

This is Advent. It is an intentional season of waiting, of hoping, and of expectation. And, though if you have young children, you might have been told the waiting is all about the presents under the tree, the waiting for which we really yearn in Advent is not found in bows or bags, but in peace and promise. This promise is the beckoning call of John in the wilderness.

The Gospel of Mark is a bit different than the other three Gospels. Mark doesn't waste time on a birth narrative or family genealogy. Mark jumps right in to the serious stuff up front. In most Hellenistic biographies in Ancient Greek, the opening line would read, "**About** so-and-so ..." It used the Greek word *Peri*.ⁱ Mark chooses a different opening phrase. Verse 1 of Mark's gospel

begins, *archē tou euangelion Jesou Christou yhiou theou*. Instead of saying “About Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” Mark’s writing begins by saying, “The Good News of Jesus Christ,” or “The Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

The impact of such an opening line is lost on most modern day readers. Especially for us who are in the Church, when we hear the word “gospel,” we immediately think of the four Gospels, or when we hear “Good News,” we think of the promise of God in Jesus Christ. Our literary mind draws a direct connection between this opening line of Mark’s story and the full narrative that is about to be told. But we are not first century Jews reading this text for the first time. For Mark’s intended readers, the opening line would have had a drastically different impact.

The late William C. Placher, pastor and theologian, offers, “Most uses in Classical Greek [for the word *euangelion*] refer to the news of a military victory; one scholar,” he says, “even proposes that the most literal translation would be “good news of victory from the battlefield.””ⁱⁱ Now, in that mindset, imagine hearing this opening line of Mark’s writing. Perhaps it would be more akin to, “The successful conquest of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” or “The accomplished military campaign of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

That may seem a bit much, but we have to remember to whom Mark is speaking. Mark is writing to the people Israel – the Jews who have, at the time, long been waiting for the kind of militaristic leader they had been without. Since the days of the kings, and the long history of the prophets, there had been this promise of one who was to come who would lead God’s people to an eternal victory. And at the time of this writing, in the first century Middle East, the Romans occupied the entire region. The Jews longed for a leader who would raise them up in conquest, to re-captivate their own land, to reclaim the land they had been promised since they left Egypt.

The good news for this oppressed and marginalized people had to include liberation and freedom – the kind of liberation and freedom that is marked by victory on the battlefield. The hearers of Mark’s story were offered up front in this first verse a promise of freedom through the person of Jesus Christ.

The story of good news, the narrative that is about to be proclaimed as *gospel* – as *euangelion*, is about Jesus Christ, the **Son of God**. The promise was thought to be about some human leader, but of a divine being. It is the literal offspring of the divine. There were high hopes and great expectations.

To prepare the reader, and the community of readers, for the one who was coming, Mark begins with John in the wilderness. Quoting Isaiah 40, mashed in with two other prophetic promises, Mark sets the scene as a continuation of the promise of the prophets from the Jewish memory. There is an intentional remembrance that Mark will utilize in setting the stage for the coming of Christ.

Memory is an interesting beast.

For many, remembering is a sacred art. It's how we hold on to the places we've been, and the people we've known. Memory can elicit the most joyful of pasts, and the most depressing of realities. The sight of a photo, of a driveway, or of an ornament ... the smell of a candle, a cake in the oven, or a tree in the house ... the sound of the ocean, a song on the radio, or the greeting of family ... memories surround us, often bubbling up without expectation. Especially in this holiday season, we are often quick to remember those who are missing from the table. In a holiday defined by tradition, the strands of time go back, constantly tugging on remembrances.

As a child, my family would pack up the car and drive to Tallahassee the day after Christmas – every year. It was like clockwork. There were landmarks along the drive that marked the passage of time – landmarks that are burned into my mind's eye. There's the rocket in Cordele, where we turned off the interstate. There's the old burned down barn, and the two silver silos that indicated you were about to cross the Florida line. There's Lake Jackson, which never seemed to have enough water in it, marking the final descent. And then there's the red fence. The red fence lined the front edge of the property. It signaled we had arrived. I haven't taken that drive in over 15 years, but in my mind, it's like I drove it yesterday.

There's something about memory and remembrance that connect us to all that has come before us. It's a powerful force.

Mark says, "John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness." You know, the people Israel have a history with the wilderness. The wilderness is more than just a location, it's a historical space. For a people who were searching for freedom, for a people longing for an end to their oppression, the wilderness marked the passage into a promised future. "The wilderness was the place of new beginnings, the place where Israel stood before crucial decisions, where they entered into the covenant and became God's people, where Israel is called to make a fresh start, the road to a new Exodus."ⁱⁱⁱ The people of Israel left Jerusalem, they travelled East, back in the direction from the wilderness that had led them out of Egypt, and out of Exile, in hopes of a new beginning. There is no doubt that in the people's mind, this road was laden with memories.

In the wilderness, along the edge of the Jordan River, we find John the Baptist. We often think of John as a crazy person – he was dressed in camel's hair, wore a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. Not the guy you want your child to bring home for the holidays. But John's appearance and his demeanor, they weren't foreign or crazy to the Jews who sought him. Mark is intentional in his wording – John was the next prophet, following in the steps of Elijah. In 2 Kings 1:8, messengers were returning to the king, having been told by Elijah to deliver a promise of the king's coming death. The king inquired about this messenger that had sent such a salty message. The passage tells us of the messengers' response, as they described Elijah, "They answered him, 'A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist.'" John's appearance, the description of John, would have elicited memories of the prophets of

old. Mark is connecting the stories, weaving the historical reminder of God's saving act into the foundation of the person of Christ.

John calls on the people to be baptized. We often confuse this line in the Gospel text. John did not proclaim repentance; John proclaimed the *baptism* of repentance. The invitation of John in the wilderness, alongside the Jordan's flowing waters, was not for the people to acknowledge all they had done wrong and to be saved, his invitation was to receive the waters of baptism, and that through the act of baptism, they would receive the saving work of God. "The proclamation of grace precedes the call to change one's life. Baptism mediated the forgiveness of sins, yet it is inseparably bound to repentance, a new mind-set that reverses conventional values and calls for a complete reorientation of one's life in view of the decisive act of God to occur immediately."

Again, Mark is pulling on the strands of time and memory, using the water of the Jordan as the symbolic reminder of the passage from the wilderness in to the promised land. The Jordan was the final threshold, through which the people Israel entered into the long awaited space of salvation. The water was the initiation of the remembrance of all that had happened in the wilderness, as they entered into a new life.

As John uses the waters of the River Jordan in the act of baptism, the people of God were reminded of their collective past. They did not cross the Jordan as individuals, but as a communal people. And thus, the subsequent repentance "is not an individualistic being sorry for one's personal wrongdoings – though it does not exclude that – but a joining in the corporate renewal of the people of God preparing for God's eschatological act, concretely expressed in going out to the wilderness and receiving the gift of forgiveness offered in John's baptism."^{iv}

Here's the thing about memory, it elicits both the heart-wrenching, and the soul-lifting. When we reflect on that which was, we are reminded not only of all who we are missing today, the people and places for which we mourn their loss, but in our remembrance, we are also reminded of the challenging spaces and difficult days through which we travelled solely by God's mercy. Memory can be isolating, but it can also be equally empowering.

Mark is literally recreating the Exodus in the opening introduction to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He's inviting people to remember the wilderness through which God led them. In this opening story of John in the wilderness, Mark is reminding the people of the thoughts and emotions ... the laments and the pains ... the enslavement and the oppression ... the steadfastness and assurance ... the covenant and its hope ... the freedom and liberation ... the fulfillment of promises made.

There's power in memory. It's through remembrance that Mark invites us to hear in this season of Advent. Even today, we encounter this text and we reflect on our own times of wilderness – the times of emptiness and desperation through which we have travelled in the past. There's

power as we hear the voice of a grizzly prophet inviting us to receive the promise of our baptism – to experience the renewal of life and the assurance of God.

In times of desperation and difficulty, we often feel as if God is missing. Like the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, we bemoan our current situation. And yet, the promise of Advent is not that we need to rush ahead, to busy ourselves to forget the past and move on to the future, but to remember ... to remember God has not left us. The invitation of Advent is to acknowledge that even in our times of weariness, God's presence is here to sustain us and to lead us through. The joy of the birth is not **just** that it promises us better days ahead, but that the light comes to us in our darkness, to give us strength in our weariness, to promise liberation amidst oppression, and to assure hope amidst fear.

So remember – let the power of memory overcome you – that you might find yourself in the presence of the one who was, who is, and who is to come. For the glory of God, remember. Amen.

ⁱ M. Eugene Boring. *Mark: A Commentary (The New Testament Library)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

ⁱⁱ Willaim C. Placher. *Mark (Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ Boring.

^{iv} Ibid.