



**rehab: Wilderness**

**Mark 1:9-15**

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March 10, 2019

This is the first Sunday of the season of Lent. In the coming weeks, leading up to Easter, we will recall many stories of Jesus as he made his way to Jerusalem – stories of teaching, stories of healing, stories of reconciliation. These stories help us understand Christ’s purpose in Jerusalem; they help us prepare to receive the gift of God in Christ, which is remembered and celebrated at Easter. But Easter does not come easily – the celebration of Easter is not well understood without reflecting on the journey to the cross.

To help us in this work of preparation, we will be borrowing from the work of rehabilitation.

Rehab seems an appropriate understanding of how to approach Lent, which is historically a season that readies and prepares people for baptism, and for committing themselves to the church. In the church historically, “this path included making an intentional choice to turn away from present practices, beliefs, relationships, and patterns of behavior, in order to enter into a time of intense spiritual preparation that led the exploring believers not only to entrance into the Christian community through baptism, but to live as disciples in a state of hope, healing, and wholeness, which Jesus called eternal life.”<sup>i</sup>

Consider for a minute if you will the many different forms of rehab. There are all kinds of medical rehabilitation programs – cardiac rehabilitation following a stroke, physical rehabilitation following injuries to extremities, and others. There are also rehabilitation programs for those recovering from addictions – whether it be addictions to drugs, to alcohol, to sex, or to gambling. But rehab is not limited to medical recoveries – consider the rehabilitation of oneself to a community after returning from tours of duty in active war zones. Consider the rehabilitation needed to recover after the death of a spouse, a parent, a child, or another loved one. Consider the rehabilitation needed for those returning to the public after serving time in prison. Consider the transitional needs for someone who has lost a job, or even someone who has retired – each requires a type of rehabilitation that involves learning new practices, shifting self-understanding, and adjusting to new life circumstances.

Each of these types of rehab requires a change. There are things you can’t (or won’t) do any more. There are things you must start doing that you never did before.

When I was a sophomore in high school, in the last game of the football season, I tore the ligaments of two of my fingers on my right hand. For months, I could not squeeze with any intensity with my right hand. It made writing with a pencil difficult. It made some basic chores difficult, cause I could not well grip a broom, or a rake. Baseball season started up a few months later, and I was still having difficulty gripping the ball with any strength. In a season of rehab, there were things I could not do, there were things I had to do differently, and there were exercises I had to add on to help rebuild strength and stability in my hand.

Rehabilitation takes on many different forms, it requires different levels of commitment depending on the purpose and goal, but in every situation, in every case of rehabilitation, the goal is to lead a person from a place of pain, brokenness, loneliness, or inability to a place of healing, community, and of wholeness. Said more succinctly, rehab takes us from a place of wilderness to a place of new life.

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As a people of faith, wandering in the wilderness is not a foreign affair. It is both a metaphorical and a direct reality of our historical identity as God's covenant people. When Mark's gospel was read by the early Jewish Christians, the narrative of Jesus spending forty days in the wilderness would not have been glossed over. Consider the connections to our faith story.

In Exodus 24, we read (beginning in verse 15), "Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights." We should not skip over the significance of Jesus and his connection to Moses. The wilderness linked Jesus and his ministry to the memory of Moses, who was a representative of God's covenant and law.

Consider also in 1 Kings 19, beginning in verse 4 we read, "But [Elijah] himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.' Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, 'Get up and eat.' He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, 'Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.' He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God." We should not skip over the significance of Jesus and his connection to Elijah. The wilderness linked Jesus and his ministry to the memory of Elijah, who was a representative of the prophets who were called to guide God's people.

Last week we studied Luke 9, and we read about the story of Jesus in the Transfiguration. Do you think it's any small coincidence that the two people who are seen in the glory of God next to Jesus are Moses and Elijah? Jesus's time in the wilderness should not be seen as some odd event that was unique for his own edification. The wilderness means a **lot** to the people of Israel, and Jesus' time in the wilderness further grounds his Lordship on the shoulders of those who have gone to the wilderness before him. But the wilderness is not just significant because of Moses and Elijah – Jesus' time in the wilderness is of significance because the people themselves wandered in the wilderness. "In the wilderness they showed their allegiance to God, following Moses year after year, on the trek from Egypt to the promised land. In the wilderness they broke that trust when they fashioned other gods. In the wilderness they sought to provide for themselves, hoarding manna rather than relying on God's promise of food. In the wilderness God made and renewed covenants with the people. There they

learned how to be faithful to an unseen God, depending on promises made with words instead of human-made idols, as they had in the past.”<sup>ii</sup>

The imagery and inclusion of the wilderness into Jesus’ story places Jesus firmly in the storyline of God’s people, and it reminds us that, though Jesus was the Son of God, and thus, fully divine, he walked the same path we walk, suffered the same temptations we face, wandered in the same wilderness we wander, and is thus, fully human. He is not just some foreign and far off deity, he is here with us, suffering with us, wandering with us.

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For the faithful seeking to learn about and follow Christ in the first century, there was a distinct connection and memory of wandering in a physical wilderness. Perhaps some of you here today have experienced the same kind of wilderness adventures. Perhaps you even enjoy travelling to places where there are no cell towers, no GPS signals, and where the trees outnumber the people.

I tried such a wilderness experience one year. I planned an intentional wilderness adventure. Like monks and those seeking contemplative solitude, I rented a VRBO in the middle of the Shenandoah Valley. It was off the grid, up a gravel road, on the backside of a mountain. For forty hours I fasted – drinking only water; I prayed, read scripture, and took walks in the surrounding woods. I could see only one other dwelling place. I saw many deer stands, but few deer. I imagine that’s because the only non-natural sound I could hear was the occasional gun shot – which led me to discover the house through the woods had a shooting range set up behind the house. So much for peacefulness.

But for as many physical wilderness experiences we may share, I imagine that most of us are far more familiar with symbolic wildernesses. More so than wandering in the midst of a cellular dead zone, we tend to experience emotional and personal dead zones in life. We all go through periods of wandering in the wilderness when we are faced with our mortality, forced to acknowledge that we have no clear path forward. The wilderness is every place we find ourselves feeling lost; the wilderness describes every season where our directional compass seems broken; the wilderness is symbolic of every time we find ourselves struggling with our mortality, our brokenness, and our failures as individuals, families, and communities. The wilderness is representational of any time we find ourselves tempted to preserve ourselves, to do what is necessary to keep ourselves afloat and alive, to protect ourselves of fears, or pain, or anxieties, regardless the cost to those around us.

Wilderness describes those places where we are unsure of what comes next, where we are unsettled with what is, where we are discerning life’s next step, where we are tempted to turn from God’s will, and tested to see if we’ll respond in faithfulness. I don’t know about you, but I often feel this kind of uncertain wilderness describes more of my life than it doesn’t.

Which is why this text in Mark ushers us into Lent.

Have you ever read this closely? Mark’s recollection of this story is brief. Jesus is baptized, God declares Jesus’ Sonship from the heavens, and the Spirit descends like a dove. Only, the dove turns into a Royal Albatross, picks Jesus up, and drives him out into the wilderness. Ok, the text doesn’t say the thing about the albatross, but the Spirit drives Jesus out into the wilderness. Jesus didn’t feel a calling

and meander his way into the wilderness. He didn't pack a few suitcases, rent a VRBO, and hop a camel out of town. The Spirit drove him out – like an Uber who types in the wrong address – Jesus was escorted without any ability to control his destination. Jesus has no say in this wilderness experience, it is forced upon him. It leaves him with little say and with little understanding.

In the wilderness, Jesus is then tested – he's tempted – he's enticed by the evil one, the holy tester. It's almost as if Satan wants to see how much Jesus believes his own identity. It's almost as if Satan believed Jesus was fully human, but lacking the identity of the divine. But more than just a season of temptation, "It's almost as though Jesus cannot credibly say or preach anything until this happens. Jesus has to enter the worst of evil on this planet before he can reliably declare that the kingdom of God has drawn near. Maybe that is because the kingdom of God cannot draw near until the kingdom of darkness - epitomized by the deep desert of evil - is engaged."<sup>iii</sup>

Jesus' time in the wilderness is significant for us, who still today wander in the wilderness. Jesus' temptation is significant for us, who are still tempted today. Jesus' struggles are significant for us, who still struggle in this life. The promise of God is that he sent Christ ahead of us that Christ would know our pain – that Christ would know our temptations – that Christ would know our struggles – that Christ would know our wilderness. Jesus didn't have a choice in the matter, but was driven out by God's Spirit, because for Christ – who knew no sin – to take on our sin – Christ had to know, he had to experience, he had to suffer, he had to live the very pain, and brokenness, and temptation, and misery, and sorrow we experience.

We begin in the wilderness, because it is in *our* wilderness that Christ says, You don't have to hide your brokenness from me, you don't have to bury your feelings from me, you don't have to run away from me, you don't have to lie to me, you don't have to shy away from me ... for I am with you. I am here in your wilderness with you. I am here walking with you in your times of trial, in your seasons of doubt, in your days of sorrow. I am here with you in the dark and broken corners where you run to escape. I am here with you, and I don't walk above you, or below you, or on top of you ... I walk with you, because I too have wandered in the wilderness.

"Before beginning his life's work, the representative of God's definitive act of salvation is tested by the ultimate power of evil, and emerges victorious."<sup>iv</sup> Though we feel alone, we are never alone. Though we feel the pain of brokenness, we need not fear our brokenness. Though we wander in the wilderness, we need not worry for salvation. For Christ the Lord has gone before us, and for us, he has conquered the wilderness, he has conquered the temptation, he has conquered the grave. May Jesus be your rock in the weary land.

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<sup>i</sup> Rehab. Umcdiscipleship.com. Retrieved March 6, 2019.

<sup>ii</sup> Leah Mckell Horton. *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*. Eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.

<sup>iii</sup> Scott Hoezee. cep.calvinseminary.edu. Retrieved March 6, 2019.

<sup>iv</sup> M. Eugene Boring. *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*. Eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.