



First United Church of Oak Park

Wilderness Teachings

Mark 1: 9-13

The Rev. John Edgerton

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Introductory Remarks

We are an engaged community of faith seeking to live out progressive values, seeking to be a leader in the community that believes in the power of ordinary people, and that the democratic values of civic engagement will improve our common lot and bring to an end the racist hierarchies that have defined this country's history. The commitments of this church — to democracy, to decency, to reform, to progress — these values were all rioted against in our nation's Capitol this week. As a mere formality played out in Congress, the President of the United States fomented a violent overrunning of the halls of government by an unruly mob. And much to our nation's humiliation, this did in fact succeed in disrupting our democratic processes. We are a laughingstock in the world, now, with the German chancellor tweeting out an admittedly pretty funny joke at our expense. There is a cavalcade of emotions that I am sure is active for us, but for me, I find myself overwhelmed with sadness. Sadness at the truth about our nation having been so publicly revealed, America's dirty laundry of white supremacy and the authoritarian impulses of a major segment of our nation on display for all to see. I remain steadfastly committed to the values of this church — of democracy and reform and racial reconciliation — and it is also true this has been a sad and shameful week. As a preacher, I made a conscious decision early on in the Trump presidency that I would not allow the wickedness and vicissitude of an immoral man in high office dictate the content of my sermons every week. The gospel ought to be given its due. The formation of spiritually strong Christians, well-versed in Biblical values, is itself a powerful act of resistance to immoral government. So I will say no more about that man on Pennsylvania Avenue.

And ours — ours is the gift of peace. Ours is the chance to share peace with those who love peace. This is the time in our service when you are invited to reach out to a member of the church and share a word of peace. Send them a

text, drop a note in our chat box, write on their Facebook wall, send them a note in the mail extending to them the very peace of Christ. May the peace of Christ be with you.

Sermon

The Gospel of Mark is my favorite of all the Gospels. One of the most distinctive literary devices of the Gospel is its constant use of the refrain “Kai Euthus,” which literally means “and immediately.” Jesus entered town and immediately a crowd gathered, Jesus left the town and immediately a demon-possessed man confronted him, and immediately, and immediately. There is a kind of breathless urgency to the way the Gospel unfolds. It is told as if the Gospel author has burst into the room with amazing news to share and just has to get through this. The Gospel of Mark doesn't have time to explain what's happening; it tells a story and moves to the next part.

It's true right from the start of the Gospel, with nary an introduction at all: Jesus appears at the Jordan River to be baptized, and immediately upon coming up from the water, the heavens are opened and the spirit of God descends and the voice of God declares — “You are my son, the beloved, with you I am well-pleased.” It is so direct, so immediate. There's no grand and professorial use of the passive voice: “This is my son, in whom I am well pleased.” God speaks directly to Jesus, declaring for all to hear that Jesus is the son of God. But what does that mean? What sort of son of God is God talking about here? Is Jesus going to be like Caesar Augustus, who also claimed the title son of God? Was Jesus to be some mighty king, so far above we mere mortals that we ought cower in fear and awe?

The Gospel of Mark doesn't explain; instead, it moves on with the story. The spirit of God descends on Jesus and the Gospel says, “And immediately the spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts and the angels waited on him.”

What? Whatever I had been imagining the beloved son of God would be like, it wasn't someone who was immediately driven out into the wilderness to suffer deprivation, to be subject to temptation, to be totally vulnerable to wild beasts, all alone, relying on angelic deliverance merely to survive. If I was expecting a powerful king, that's not what I got. Instead, the son of God is a starving man

surrounded by temptation and danger. What kind of son of God is that? What lessons about God am I supposed to take away from this?

Well, first, it is crystal clear from this story that even people who are beloved of God will suffer and know deprivation and want and danger. I believe that I am beloved of God; don't get me wrong. But I don't believe I am more beloved than Jesus. And if even Jesus suffered deprivation and danger and want, then such things will surely come into my life, too. God's love is not an insurance policy against suffering, and a person's suffering does not flow from God being angry at them. We hear this from God's voice, "You are my son, the beloved, in you I am well pleased." Even so, Jesus experience suffering and deprivation.

Secondly, I can see that temptation is not a sign of moral failure. Again, I think of myself as a morally upright person who strives to do the right thing. But I'm not a better person than Jesus. And even Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. The other Gospels try to flesh out a little bit more what sort of temptations Jesus was subject to. But the Gospel of Mark, in its brilliant sparsity of words, merely says that Jesus was tempted. Perhaps Jesus was tempted by some of the same things I am tempted by; perhaps Jesus was tempted by all of the things anyone is tempted by. Given that it is none other than Satan who is doing this, these temptations were presumably formidable. If Jesus, too, was subject to temptation, then it must be true that temptation will be a constant part of life, simply an aspect of what it means to be alive. To seek to live a good life is to be constantly tempted by lower paths, to find such things desirable.

Lastly, I see in this story something remarkable. Jesus told this story himself. This story of suffering and danger, of temptation and want: Jesus told this story to those who loved him. Jesus told this story to those who would treasure his words and share them. There was no one else who could have told the story. The wild beasts were mum. Satan was surely not out sharing the good news. Jesus told his followers about his suffering, about his trials; he told people about his temptation. If he had not, none would have ever known. And what a poorer world this would be, what a brittle faith we would have, if the son of God were made of perfect crystal instead of supple flesh with its scars and blemishes.

The gospel of Mark bursts into the room and declares, here is the son of God — one who suffers, just as we do, one who is tempted, just as we are, one who confides and confesses, one who is beloved of God, one who is a pleasure to God.

For the season of Epiphany, our theme for worship is vulnerability. And although it is not a provocative thesis, I would offer that we ought to be more like Jesus. I know, if you've dropped a teacup in surprise at a preacher telling you to be more like Jesus, now is a good time to get a whisk broom and clean it up. We ought to be more like Jesus, to model our lives after his, to hold ourselves to his standard — not more, not less, but to seek to be like Jesus.

Some of this is actually quite easy. It comes naturally to us, in fact: Each of us has already accomplished some of this. Our lives will certainly be ones where there is suffering and deprivation. Our lives are like Jesus's in that way, so we can check that one off. For every Zoom call that used to be a hug, for every sleepless night, reading the news, that used to be sound rest, for every fear that used to be confidence. We have been in the wilderness and it has been hard. We can check off that box of modeling our lives after Jesus — Jesus whose life was one that had suffering. We can go ahead and check off the box for temptation too, for those extra martinis that aren't doing any good anymore for you, the resentments carefully kept alive and cultivated, those lower paths that are desirable: to be tempted is part of what it means to be alive. These things are easy to be subject to, to have our lives be ones where there is weakness and challenge. These are signs not so much that we have to emulate Christ, but that Jesus has truly and fully shared in our human lot. He lived a human life, not some crystal figurine of a life.

But this last one can be hard. We ought to be like Jesus. We ought to tell people about our suffering. We ought to tell people about our temptations. We have to tell people who love us — we should tell people who treasure our words. We have to tell them when we are suffering. We ought to be vulnerable, as Christ was. This is part of what it means to be a Christian: to be honest, to share our burdens with each other, to know one another fully in our triumphs as well as our suffering. And I promise — I promise — that if we model our lives after Jesus in this way, too, that if you are vulnerable, if you share with another Christian, if you share with another person, if you share with them about your challenges, about your temptations, if you are vulnerable, then there, in the presence of another, you will hear the voice of God: you are my child, you are beloved, in you God is well pleased.

Thanks be to God for the lessons of Christ. Thanks be to God that he shared in our common life, that in seeking to emulate Christ, we need not be perfect, we need be vulnerable. May God help us. Amen.