



# First United Church of Oak Park

## **You Are God's Beloved**

Mark 1: 9-15

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Jesus didn't choose the wilderness; he was driven there. No one chooses the wilderness. An unexpected diagnosis, a sudden death that thrusts us into a new journey with grief, a pandemic upends life as we know it and forces us to search our very souls for any sense of meaning. The wilderness is not a place we go willingly, it is not a choice we make, but once we are there, we do have choices.

Now, I have to tell you, perhaps unlike the writer of the gospel of Mark, I don't believe it is the Spirit of God who drives us into the wilderness. I don't believe God chooses temptation, tests, and pain for us. But I do believe there is no wilderness experience that cannot be made holy. That is where the choice comes in. While we don't choose the wilderness, we do choose how we respond to the wilderness. We choose our focus in the wilderness. We can choose to fight against being in the wilderness. We can choose to deny we are in the wilderness. Or we can choose to explore the wilderness and allow it to teach us its lessons and remind us of who we are.

The writer of Mark is prone to brevity, never giving us much information. We don't know what Jesus did in the desert or how he responded to the temptation from Satan or those wild beasts. All we know is that upon exiting the wilderness, Jesus immediately headed out and started preaching good news. How could he come out of a wilderness experience that included temptation from Satan and dangerous wild beasts talking about "good news"?!

My guess is that Jesus chose to explore the wilderness and allow it to teach him its lessons and remind him of who he was. In fact, I have this hunch that Jesus walked into the desert knowing who he was. And despite temptations, trials, and danger, Jesus continually remembered who he was. There are a few reasons for this hunch of mine, but the main reason is what happened right before he was driven into the desert.

Jesus got a not-so-subtle reminder of who he was right before he was driven out:

“...he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.”

It must have been echoing in his ears. Wild beasts ahead ... you are my beloved ... temptations cry out ... you are my beloved ... the wilderness gets lonely ... you are my beloved.

It reminds me of a few years ago when our fifth- and sixth-grade church school class posted reminders of God’s love all over the church building; there was no missing them. Everywhere I went in the church, I saw a note reminding me that I was God’s beloved. Since I was at the church five days a week back then, I got nearly daily reminders that I was God’s beloved. That certainly kept me going on tough days.

The season of Lent, these weeks leading up to Easter, are supposed to be a sort of wilderness experience. They are a time for stopping and soul searching. In fact, our theme for Lent this year is “How is it with your soul?” I would say we’ve already been in a wilderness. Many of us have found ourselves thrust into isolation, grief, temptation, danger, and, of course, soul searching.

No one chooses the wilderness. We are driven there. The wilderness is not a place we go willingly, it is not a choice we make, but once we are there, we do have choices. As we enter this time of continued soul searching, of sitting in the questions, the grief, the isolation, let’s choose our focus. Let’s choose to let those words echo in our ears as we travel this wilderness. Danger ahead? “You are my beloved.” A wave of grief is about to crash on your shore? “You are my beloved.” Isolation becoming lonely and unbearable? “You are my beloved.” May it ring in our ears until we, too, are ready to emerge from the wilderness with good news: “You are my beloved! You are my beloved! You are my beloved!”