**Opening Our Lives: Open Our Lives to Your Kingdom**
Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Mark 1:9-15
In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 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. 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. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

The first Sunday in Lent always brings us the story of the Temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Mark’s version of what happens is terse and succinct. Unlike the way Matthew and Luke tell it, there is no snappy repartee between Satan and Jesus. Mark doesn’t give Satan the opportunity to pose trick questions intended to beat Jesus at his own game. Or at least, not that we can hear. We’re left to imagine how their encounter might have gone, filling in Mark’s silence with the temptations we might expect Satan would present to Jesus, or to us.

It’s important to note as well how Mark frames the brief story. Starts with John the Baptist. Ends, almost, with John. It was John, the messenger, sent to prepare the way in the wilderness. Crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.” That had been John’s job, if you will, according to Mark, to prepare the way in the wilderness. Opening up time and space for the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Preparing the way in the wilderness and baptizing Jesus in the river Jordan.

Remember what happens when they’d gone down to the river to pray and to baptize? Just as Jesus is coming up out of the water the heavens are torn apart and the Spirit descends like a dove with a message for Jesus, whispering in his ear, lighting up his heart: “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” The Way is being prepared.

And immediately—how Mark loves for things to happen immediately—immediately the same Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness. One of the many meanings of “wilderness” is solitary uninhabited pathless place. Yet Jesus discovers that he is not the only one out there. Satan is already there, ready to tempt him for forty days. And not only Satan—the wild beasts, the desert animals, and the angels were there, accompanying Jesus. Ministering to him. Evidently John had been about his work of preparing the way, of making straight paths. Preparing Jesus and making sure that he would be ready and that he wouldn’t be alone. And that having come up out of the waters of baptism and having heard the voice of God, he would be clear and strong enough to not only endure but to triumph. And to find his way, to find a path out of the wilderness.

Out of the wilderness. Only to find that John had been arrested. End of story? No. Upon hearing that news, Jesus immediately we might add in for Mark, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, saying “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, turn, and believe in the good news.” The story is now really getting started.

You see, Mark doesn’t need to tell us the specifics of what transpired between Jesus and Satan. What he makes clear is that it was the news of John’s arrest that sparks the launch of Jesus’ Galilean ministry. A ministry of sharing good news. A ministry of contrasting the kingdoms of this world with the kingdom of God. A ministry, as we have heard the last couple Sundays, in which ordinary people would become essential partners, invited to become disciples accompanying Jesus in the life-giving, life-saving work of healing, teaching and preaching.
And this many years, this many generations later, is where we come into the story. Disciples ourselves, now. People of the Way.

Now I suppose we could say that this last year of life for us contemporary disciples, this year amidst the pandemic, has felt like a wilderness time, hasn’t it? An often-solitary time as we have withdrawn behind masks and separated by physical distancing. A pathless time in which we might catch a glimpse of a way forward only to be caught up short by new information about the virus and its many variations. A time without a timeline we can measure or count on. A disorienting time in which we often feel uncertain and vulnerable.

Today’s story has much to offer us for our wilderness time. We see that Jesus was not alone, though he might well have been tempted to imagine himself alone during those forty days. Open your eyes, Mark seems to be urging. Draw on the memory of the prophets who had gone before, of your own cousin John, who had been preparing the way and making the paths straight across the whole history of his people. Draw strength from their witness and their tenacity.

Draw strength from your own baptism, and from that voice still echoing in your heart: you are my child, my beloved; with you I am well pleased. God was with him every moment of every day and every night, loving him, reassuring him, empowering him.

Jesus also had support from unlikely sources, perhaps unseen or easily overlooked—the desert animals and the angels. They had his back, we might say, and if I were a betting person, which I’m not, I’d wager that those scorpions and rattlesnakes and coyotes, to say nothing of the angels of God’s heavenly army, were far more wily than even old Satan himself.

No wonder, perhaps, that Jesus comes out of the wilderness clearer and stronger, and ready to live into the Kingdom of God.

Lent is our forty days to get perspective on the wilderness we are currently experiencing. Traditionally, Lent is described as a time of giving up something—sweets, excess anything, laziness, self-absorption, whatever gets in the way of our devotion to a holy life.

In recent years we have also described Lent as a time of taking up something that turns us towards others in service and mission, responding to the needs of the least, the last, and the lost.

This year we add a new focus—Lent as a time of intentionally opening up, opening each part of our life to God’s Spirit. A forty-day season of asking God to open our eyes to God’s presence, open our ears to God’s call, open our hearts to God’s love, open our ways to God’s will, open our actions to God’s compassion, open our pain to God’s peace, and, in doing so, open our world to God’s hope.

We are not alone. God is with us. The Holy Spirit is even now filling us with new life. Let us follow Christ Jesus out of the wilderness to engage all that lies ahead.

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