

Manningham Uniting Church

First Sunday of Lent

18th February 2024

Text: Mark 1:9-15

Theme: Wilderness in Life

Introduction

Good morning.

Wherever you are, whatever thoughts and emotions are sitting with you this morning, welcome.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, Year B of the lectionary reading cycle — which means that last year we read Matthew’s account of Jesus’ temptation by the devil, in the wilderness, and next year we will read Luke’s account of Jesus’ temptation by the devil in the wilderness.

Each story begins nearly the same: Jesus emerges from the Jordan after having been baptized by John, and wanders off into the wilderness for testing.

Matthew describes him as being led by the Spirit into the wilderness, while Luke notes that Jesus is both led by the Spirit and is full of the Holy Spirit as he goes.

Both writers keep the longer narrative describing Jesus’ interaction with the devil as it culminates in the three trials.

Both writers really want you to know who is this Jesus in relation to God and the prophets, and therefore, Israel’s tradition.

Let us pray...

"And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness." (Mark 1:12)

The story of Jesus has hardly begun, and Mark already subverts key understandings.

The wilderness, representing the margins, is found four times in the prologue (Mk 1:1-13).

Let's not forget that Jerusalem was considered the hub of the world to which all nations would come
(Ps 69:35; Is 60:10-14).

Instead, *"people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem"* are seeking John in the wilderness.

Rather than making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and its temple presided over by the Jewish leadership, crowds flee to the wilderness — to the margins — for purposes of renewal.

Mark leaves us with two facts. Jesus is the One whose coming Isaiah promised: *"Prepare the way of the Lord."*

And Jesus comes in solidarity with thousands of others who underwent a rite of repentance and renewal from John who is *"proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"* (Mk 1:4).

In Jesus, a person of doubtful social origins and in this out-of-the-way place, the divine is revealed.

We observe startling imagery is inserted into the narrative which up until now has been rather Earth-based and mundane. The whole cosmos is affected. Creation is ongoing.

When Jesus comes up from the waters of the River Jordan, he — and he alone — sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.

And only Jesus hears the voice from heaven.

It is a reminder of God's Spirit hovering over the waters in Genesis 1 and the dove signalling a new beginning for the world after the flood in Genesis 8:8-12.

The heavens are "split apart" (Mk 1:10) as the veil of the temple sanctuary is "split apart" after Jesus dies (Mk 15:38).

The linking of these two scenes suggests that Jesus is opening up God's dwelling place. The vision of the heavens being torn apart along with the sound of a voice coming from heaven also recalls the prophetic hope of Isaiah 64:1: "*Oh that you would tear the heavens open and come down*".

Many wonder could this unknown Nazareth villager be the fulfilment of this ancient longing?

The scene, however, ends with an anti-climax.
Jesus goes into the wilderness (Mk 1:12).

This event is usually named "the temptation" of Jesus.

The Greek word in this episode, also used in Matthew and Luke, can mean "tempt" or "test".

I think "tempt" better suits the Matthew-Luke accounts where Satan puts three "temptations" before Jesus.

Test better suits, Mark, where there is no evidence of a struggle.

"And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness" (Mark 1:12) this language is strong.

"He was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him." (Mark 1:13)

The wilderness is also the home of wild animals adds to the danger, isolation and distance from the known.

In this situation, the ministering angels suggest divine care and protection. What is wilderness? A wilderness place — is a liminal space, a marginal zone.

Life is there, but it is a precarious life, always on the verge of perishing.

Every ounce of energy expended in the wilderness is oriented toward survival.

According to Ched Myers, a biblical scholar, activist and educator, *"The wilderness is neither idyllic nor demonic—but it is true, a place where things get real."*

It's a place where with few distractions, the backdrop is stark, the contrasts are clear, creation is powerful, and false pretences get revealed.

In the wilderness, there is nowhere to hide, and we must come to grips with our work, our lives for what they are.

It's where you figure things out. It's a place where you can reclaim integrity or lose it."

The wilderness is an in-between place. It is a place of liminality, a threshold. We are betwixt and between. Neither here nor there.

We have left behind what was and what will be is not yet clear.

In the wilderness we come face to face with the reality of our lives; things done and left undone, our fears, our hopes, and dreams, our sorrows and losses, as well as the unknown.

In the wilderness, We cannot be sure of our security. The wilderness is a place where we need to dig deep within.

When you dig deep, you have to rely on God to help navigate you out, as once you are on this journey, the deeper you dig into your internal world and begin to understand the conditioning and the patterns, you have to take personal responsibility to move through the wilderness and out into the light.

However, the wilderness is not a god-less place or a God-abandoned place.

*"He was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and **the angels waited on him.**"*

(Mark 1:13)

The wilderness is a womb in which love can grow if you let it.

The wilderness is a hard place but it's also a transformational space.

The wilderness offers us a chance to be restored by God, if we stay there long enough.

In the words of Brené Brown in her book *Braving the Wilderness*, she embraces the wilderness as 'the quest for true belonging and the courage to stand alone'.

The Spirit leads him, drives him, to the place where it gets real —the wilderness, where he is tested, but ultimately strengthened, his integrity is confirmed.

The wilderness is a hard place! All of us have been in the wilderness.

I love this quote about the wilderness from the late Peter C. Craigie.

He was an accomplished biblical scholar from Britain.

"The wilderness tested and disciplined the people in various ways. On the one hand, the desolation of the wilderness removed the natural props and supports that people by nature depend on; it cast the people back on God, who alone would provide the strength to survive the wilderness.

On the other hand, the severity of the wilderness period undermined the shallow bases of confidence of those who were not truly rooted and grounded in God.

The wilderness makes or breaks a person; it provides strength of will and character. The strength provided by the wilderness, however, was not the

strength of self-sufficiency, but the strength that comes from a knowledge of the living God.” (Craigie, Deuteronomy, pg. 185)

We all have a sense of being in the wilderness, being lost; feeling at times that our life and we are not enough, that something is missing. We could get discouraged, give up, or complain.

Instead, we have to dig down deep and remember the wilderness is not a god-forsaken place. In the wilderness, you learn you’re not all that impressive, and you don’t need to be. Do you know why? Because you are God’s beloved!

The wilderness is a place where you learn the ordinary you is enough. Because you are God’s beloved!

Jesus, led/filled with and expelled by the Holy Spirit, went from his baptismal waters of the Jordan River into the watershed wilderness. For forty days he was tested by satan, humanity’s accuser. He was there with the wild beasts and was tended by angels. When he returned to Galilee he proclaimed the good news of the coming reign of God.

If Lent is our annual wilderness pilgrimage, I wonder where the Spirit is leading you?

If Lent is our annual wilderness pilgrimage, I wonder where the Spirit is leading Manningham Uniting Church?

On the first Sunday of Lent as you embrace your wilderness may you hear the compassionate voice of God calling to you as you suffer in the wilderness.

On the first Sunday of Lent may you smell the fragrance of freedom

as you leave behind the wilderness.

On the first Sunday of Lent may you remember that whether you are in the wilderness or out of the wilderness You are God's beloved.

We are God's beloved!

Can you please do me a favour?

I want you to turn to the person sitting next to you and if appropriate hold his or her hand and look at him or her and say: **YOU ARE GOD'S BELOVED.** Then let the other person say the same to you. **YOU ARE GOD'S BELOVED.**