

Water to Wilderness

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1: 9-15

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Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

1 Peter 3:18-22

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.

And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

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.”

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If you have ever been in a Zoom meeting with me or seen something that I posted on Facebook, you have seen a picture of me holding a baby dressed in white. The baby is 4 month old Christian, and this is a day that remains one of the most joyful and delightful moments in my ministry, and as a new grandmother, as I was blessed and privileged to baptize my grandson.

Baptisms are a wonderfully emotional time as we welcome and bless a new child of God into the church—the little ‘c’ and the capital ‘C’ Church. With the family and friends and godparents we celebrate the sacrament that is an outward and visible sign of the grace of God.

Water marks and seals God’s grace upon us, the grace of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Promises are made, promises that the little one may one day grow to claim as their own.

We serenade this child of blessing, this child of promise, as we welcome and introduce the newly baptized in our midst. It is indeed a day of joy and celebration.

But on this first Sunday in Lent, when the dusty symbol of Ash Wednesday may still linger on us, we see that baptism is so much more, as we have tamed the sacrament into a gentle act of faith. When Jesus was baptized by John in the River Jordan, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit, in the image of a dove, fell on him.

Dripping wet from the waters of baptism, the Holy Spirit, fell on Jesus empowering him for his mission and his ministry. From the ripped open heavens, from what biblical scholar David Jacobsenⁱ calls “the unhinged scene of Jesus’ apocalyptic baptism” the voice of God anointed Jesus with the words and the work, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

In that very moment, in that exact second, the same Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness. From blessing and affirmation, Jesus is suddenly shoved, forced, driven into the bleak, lonely, and dry Judean wilderness for forty days of challenge and temptation by Satan. It is a wild, savage, dangerous, fearful and isolated place.

Jesus landed in the wilderness with the voice of God calling him ‘Beloved’ still echoing in his ears. Jesus landed in the wilderness with the memory of that heaven-broken-open moment, the little dove descending and the loving voice, “You are my Son, the Beloved.

Jesus’ immediacy of water to wilderness shows us that if we have been baptized, we will also be tempted, be challenged, be in wilderness times of our own. We will face obstacles, we will face times of uncertain and vulnerable waiting, we will face incredible temptations, we too will know times and places that are empty and barren and lonely, times when everything is beyond our control. But our baptism is our hope, our strength, our encouragement, an appeal to God for a good conscience, for the journey through. Baptism does not shield us from the wilderness experiences of our lives, baptism prepares us, enables us, to face the wilderness experiences of our lives.

We cannot live and love and experience life in significant ways without sometimes ending up in the wilderness. Wilderness times are those times when we feel we are tested to—or even beyond—our limits, and we speak of those times in wilderness terms: dry, desolate, lonely, trying, difficult, agonizing. We speak of fear, hunger, thirst, and longing in the wilderness.ⁱⁱ

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke tell us about the ways that Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. Mark leaves the specifics of any temptations to our imagination, but he does tell us something that the others do not, that Jesus ‘was with the wild beasts and the angels waited on him.’

Jesus did not choose his wilderness, he did not volunteer to go any more than we do when enter the wilderness. The wilderness comes to us, things happen to us. This is definitely not to say that God causes bad things, causes misery, to happen to us. Notice that the Spirit doesn’t tempt Jesus, but rather drives Jesus to the wilderness. Similarly, I don’t believe that God wants us to suffer, let alone causes us toⁱⁱⁱ. But I do wonder if we can imagine that perhaps God is at work both for us and through us during our wilderness times. God certainly wants only good things for God’s beloved children. The same Spirit of God that descended upon Jesus at his baptism and drove Jesus out into the wilderness also accompanied him during that time and brought him back again. There are wild beasts and there are angels in our wilderness.

As we enter the solemn season of Lent, we honestly look at the trials and temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness and that we face in our own lives. We see the wild beasts of the wilderness, all the scary things that live in the places of our errant desires and challenges and loneliness and uncertainty.

But it is also a time to remember the angels in Jesus’ wilderness experience and in our own. Angels waited on Jesus, tending to his needs, preparing him for the ministry and the cross yet ahead, and showing the memory of that heaven-broken-open baptism moment and the loving voice, “You are my Son, the Beloved.”

We remember the angels we have known and loved and who have loved us, in the wilderness times of our own lives, those who have waited on us when we are tired, thirsty and

surrounded by wild beasts--just as they did for Jesus. Our angels are simply the people who are willing to stay with us in the wilderness.^{iv}

And it began with baptism, with the outward and visible sign of the grace of God, that prepares us, enables us, encourages us, strengthens us, to face the wilderness experiences of our lives.

You have been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

ⁱ David Schnasa Jacobsen: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-mark-19-15-6>

ⁱⁱ Tim K. Bruster: <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/2333/sermon-series-wilderness-time>

ⁱⁱⁱ David Lose: <https://www.davidlose.net/2015/02/lent-1-b-wilderness-faith/>

^{iv} Talitha Arnold: https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003b32/angels_in_the_wilderness