

## *In the Wilderness*

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Advent – November 26/27, 2005

### Sermon Background Study

Mark 1:1-13 (NRSV)

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

<sup>2</sup>As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,  
“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;  
<sup>3</sup>the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight,’ ”

<sup>4</sup>John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup>Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup>I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

<sup>9</sup>In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

<sup>12</sup>And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. <sup>13</sup>He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

*Today marks the beginning of Advent, the season in which we prepare for the coming of our Lord. Where does Jesus meet us? Where does he begin with our renewal? For one, Jesus meets us in the wilderness of our lives.*

Beginnings matter. They set the stage for what is to come. We have four Gospels that have been Scripture from the earliest decades of Christianity. Each of the four paints for us a different portrait of Jesus. And all four Gospels begin differently. Two tell the story of Jesus’ birth. Two introduce Jesus as he begins his public ministry. In this series, we’ll take a look at the beginning of each Gospel and see how it not only prepares us for the rest of the Gospel, but how each beginning is an Advent story, preparing us for Jesus’ arrival. As Morna Hooker puts it, each beginning is the key that opens the Gospel to us.<sup>1</sup>

*A dramatic key*

Imagine, if you can, that you’ve never heard of Jesus. A friend invites you over for a small dinner party to hear an amazing story. You arrive in the evening, a little tired and hungry. But, as everyone takes a seat, someone rises and begins to read a dramatic story.

#### Mark’s Story of Jesus

If you read *Thru the Bible* in 2006 with others in our congregation, Mark’s Gospel will be the first book from the New Testament that you will read. In fact, you’ll begin and finish it in January!

Mark’s Gospel was probably the first Gospel to be written, perhaps as early as 60AD (30 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection). The early church held that the Gospel was written by Mark, an associate of the apostle Peter. Thus, it has often been seen as Peter’s story of Jesus. This makes it all the more interesting that Peter does not play as prominent role as in the other Gospels and is principally portrayed as the lead sinner! Indeed, the blindness of all the disciples is one of Mark’s key themes.

The Gospel is very brief, action-oriented, and compellingly dramatic. It is certainly nothing like a modern biography. There is nothing about Jesus’ birth or childhood. We aren’t even told what Jesus looked like. Instead, in sixteen chapters, Mark proclaims the Good News. The adult (really, middle-aged!) Jesus bursts onto the scene at the beginning of the Gospel. Half of the Gospel is devoted to Jesus’ ministry and half is focused on the last week of Jesus’ life. In all likelihood, the original ending of Mark has been lost. (Certainly, the “longer” ending in your Bible is not part of Mark’s Gospel. God doesn’t call us to handle poisonous snakes.)

Mark integrates two portraits of Jesus in the Gospel. First, Jesus is a powerful wonder worker and authoritative teacher. But Jesus is also a rejected messiah, a suffering servant. How could this be? Why would God’s Messiah suffer such a horrible death? The disciples aren’t able to make any sense of this. As we approach this Christmas season, Mark’s story can remind us that those who reject the babe in the manger need not only God’s grace but our own. Christmas has become so familiar to us that it is hard to remember that the claims we make about Jesus are extraordinary and will seem foolish to those whose eyes and hearts have not been opened.

<sup>1</sup>The inspiration for this series is a slender volume, *Beginnings: Keys that Open the Gospels*, by Morna D. Hooker of Cambridge University. Dr. Hooker helps us to see how each Gospel prologue offers us guidance on how the rest of the book should be read.

This is a bit how it was in the first century. Mark's Gospel, his story of Jesus, was not read, it was heard, usually among small groups of Christians gathered in homes for worship. We aren't very practiced at listening to someone read to us. I doubt that most of us have the attention span even for as brief a writing as Mark's Gospel. But we do attend the theater, where we might enjoy a play that lasts even two or three hours.

Mark's Gospel has to function a bit like a play when it is heard. The listener has no paragraphs or chapter headings. The listener can't go back and reread a passage to clarify something. Thus, knowing that his Gospel would be heard, not read, Mark helps the listener along, helping us to see what is coming. Hooker points out that the first thirteen verses of Mark do just that. They are a prologue, preparing us for the dramatic events we will soon hear about in Mark's story.

#### *Preparing the way*

Mark, the storyteller, is the first to prepare us for what lies ahead. He gives away the ending at the beginning! We are about to hear the Good News of Jesus the Messiah ("Christ" is simply the Greek word for "Messiah"). Most of the characters in Mark's drama won't understand that Jesus is the long-

awaited Messiah, but we are told right up front. To make sure we "get it," Mark then quotes Isaiah's promise of one who would "prepare the way of the Lord."

With the words of Isaiah ringing in our ears, we then meet John the baptizer, who is gathering together all the lost in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance. It is as if he says, "Turn away from your wanderings! Look. The Lord is coming!" Dressed like the prophet Elijah,<sup>2</sup> John points the crowds to someone who is even more powerful, who will baptize, not with water like John, but with the Holy Spirit. The crowds don't know that it is Jesus to whom John points, but we, the listeners do, thanks to Mark's beginning. Though no one other than Jesus sees the Holy Spirit descending upon him, we see it. Only we and Jesus hear God's call to his beloved Son.

#### *Are we prepared for the truth?*

It is striking to me that Mark's prologue prepares us for Jesus' public ministry but not for his crucifixion. Mark tells us right up front that Jesus is the God's Messiah and Son. Thus, we aren't surprised when Jesus performs miracles or restores life or casts out demons. But nothing here prepares us for Jesus' humiliating and lonely death. It is as if Jesus' entire 2½ year journey begins and ends in the wilderness. It is God's Spirit who drives Jesus into the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry (v. 12) and it is God who saves Jesus from the wilderness of his crucifixion by raising him from the dead, pushing him forward into new life.

Thus it is with us. We live in a wilderness that is too often of our own creation. Yet, Jesus meets us there. In him, we are reborn. We are strengthened and renewed. The world may still be a wilderness filled with temptations to turn away from God, but we are prepared so that, by the power of Christ, we can face life's temptations and trials yet remain true to our Lord.

#### The Wilderness

Though the wilderness can be just a geographical reference (a barren rocky place with little rain), "the wilderness" is also a place of theological meaning in the Bible. The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* outlines several positive and negative connotations:

- *Danger and death* – The wilderness is a place where even minimal living is hard and death is never very far away
- *Rebellion and punishment* – After fleeing Egypt, the Israelites rebelled against God in the Sinai wilderness and were condemned to wandering through it for forty years after refusing to enter Canaan.
- *Evil and temptation* – The wilderness was seen as a place of evil spirits. It would have surprised no one that Jesus met Satan in the wilderness.
- *Sanctuary and guidance* – David, Elijah, and Jeremiah all fled into the wilderness to escape their enemies and to find refuge with God.
- *Worship and covenant* – God gave the people instructions to build a tabernacle, a dwelling place for God, that they would move with them through the wilderness. Mt. Sinai itself is in the midst of the wilderness, where God enters into a covenant with his people, firmly connecting the Law of Moses with the wilderness experience.

Jesus filled his parables with references to the wilderness as a place of evil, danger, and spiritual decline. It is in the wilderness that the lost are to be found wandering and threatened. Knowing all this, we aren't surprised that John the Baptist goes to the wilderness to proclaim the Good News. The goodness of this news can be grasped only by those who are lost and sense their own physical and spiritual mortality.

<sup>2</sup>In 2 Kings 1:8, Elijah wears a garment made of hair and a leather belt. The Jews expected that Elijah would return from the heavens to announce the arrival of God's Messiah.

## Daily Bible Readings

*(more readings on John the Baptist and our rebirth)*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Day 1</b> <b>Isaiah 40:1-11</b> The promised coming of God's kingdom. Mark draws in part on this passage to open his Gospel.</p>	<p><b>Day 2</b> <b>Luke 1:5-24</b> The announcement and birth of John the Baptist</p>
<p><b>Day 3</b> <b>Luke 3:1-22</b> Luke's telling of John's ministry at the Jordan River</p>	<p><b>Day 4</b> <b>John 3:1-21</b> Jesus and Nicodemus talk about rebirth.</p>
<p><b>Day 5</b> <b>Matthew 14:1-13</b> The death of John the Baptist</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

## Sermon Notes

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### December Book Recommendation

*Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible (NRSV)*

Available at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew Bookstore

### *Thru the Bible in a Year*

Many of us at St. Andrew will be reading the Bible through next year. This is not some massive new program (even if it sounds like it) but a simple invitation to join us in devoting 20 minutes or so a day to Scripture so that we might all be renewed and transformed, becoming evermore Christlike. The Spiritual Disciplines, such as regular Bible reading, are how we go about our spiritual training.

The reading plan will be distributed to everyone at St. Andrew. The plan will not take us straight from Genesis to Revelation, but will, instead, be built on reading book-by-book from the Old and New Testaments: Genesis then Matthew then Exodus then Acts and so on. We will also be distributing some tips on how to get the most out of your reading. On-line helps will be available as well. Scott is even going to re-launch his blog!

Many of us will be using the new *Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible (NRSV)* put together by Richard Foster, Eugene Peterson, Dallas Willard, Walter Brueggemann, and others. We are getting copies of this Bible at a much reduced price. Copies will be available for \$25 outside the bookstore beginning on Sunday, December 4. (What a gift idea for Christmas!) Of course, any Bible will do. As someone once said, the best Bible for you is the one that you'll read.

We hope you'll consider joining us.

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

We are used to thinking of Lent as a time of preparation. But I'm not so sure that we view Advent as a time of preparation. Should we? You might consider what Advent means to you. What would it mean to *prepare* for Christmas (and I don't mean getting the tree up!). What you think is the purpose of Advent? Indeed, why has the church developed church seasons, like Lent and Advent, at all? Today, the first Sunday of Advent, is the first Sunday on the church calendar. It is the beginning of the new Christian year. Why would the beginning of Advent be the beginning of the year? What does this signify about our faith? How might the beginning of Mark's Gospel help us to understand better the meaning of Advent?

John proclaims a baptism, a plunging, of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. To repent is not simply to be sorry for what you've done, but to turn 180° from the direction you've been headed. Thus, people brought their sins to the river, were plunged into it by John, and, metaphorically at least, crossed the river into God's renewed people. In practice, most of us find it pretty hard to leave behind all our sins and regrets. It much more likely that we'll hang on to them until we drown in the river! How do we go about truly leaving behind all our "baggage" - our sins, our mistakes, our regrets - and embracing the true meaning of Advent and Christmas? How do we truly, practically, receive the forgiveness freely offered us by God? How do we meet Jesus in the wilderness?