

Year B Proper 5 2024 In the Wilderness Mark 1 vv29 to 39

Jesus went to a deserted place and he prayed. These words are easily slid past without much thought. So what? Jesus wanted or needed to be alone to pray. He needed some quiet time after the hectic day before. We all need some alone time, we may think. Or maybe we didn't even notice that part of the story at all. There were other more interesting bits, after all. Yet that small piece of Scripture – Jesus went to a deserted place to pray – is a crucial hinge in our story of salvation. It led to the series of events that resulted in our existence today as the Church. We need to know more about those few little words and we begin by getting a better understanding of what led up to his decision to go off by himself to pray.

It is still the Sabbath. Jesus and his new disciples have just been in the synagogue. Jesus has been teaching, amazing and astonishing the people with his authority and backing it up with an astounding exorcism of a demon. Immediately, Jesus with James, John, Andrew, and Simon, head over to Simon and Andrew's house where, Simon and Andrew immediately tell Jesus about Simon's mother-in-law. She is in bed with a fever, they tell him. If he can get rid of a demon, he can certainly get rid of a fever, they may be thinking.

Jesus does go to the bedside of Simon's mother-in-law. Rather than tell us he heals her, Mark tells us that he takes her by the hand and lifts her up. There is a lot going on here. In case you're thinking that she has a little touch of the flu or something like that, the word Mark uses for "lifted up" is the Greek word *egeiro* that not only means to rouse or awaken, it also carries the sense of awakening someone from death. It is the same word we will hear in the story of Jesus raising Jairus' daughter back to life. And Jesus touches Simon's mother-in-law. Mark does

this over and over again. Jesus touches people who, according to the rule of law, should not be touched. Jesus touches the unclean and brings them back to wholeness of life.

It is to wholeness of life that Simon's mother-in-law is returned – immediately, with a touch of Jesus' hand. She gets up and serves Jesus and the disciples. Many people get stuck on this because it seems so negatively stereotypical: the woman gets out of her sick bed and serves the men. That would be missing the point though. Mark is letting us know that her healing, her wellness, is complete. She is so completely whole again, after being near death, that she is able to get out of bed and return to life as if nothing had gone wrong in the first place. Also, the word that Mark uses for "serve" is important. It is the Greek word *diakoneo* which literally means "kicking up dust" because one is "actively serving". This woman isn't just fresh out of her sick bed, dragging herself around, she is full of energy and vigour. More importantly, the word *diakoneo* carries the meaning of caring for the needs of others as the *Lord* guides in an active, practical way. It is the same word Mark uses to tell us about the women disciples who traveled with Jesus, ministering to him, the women disciples who stuck with him when the other disciples deserted him at the cross. Mark only uses *diakoneo* to describe the serving actions of women disciples, angels, and Jesus himself. It seems there may be more in store for Simon's mother-in-law than simply serving up dinner today.

There was certainly more in store for Jesus of Nazareth. As soon as the Sabbath ended, at sundown, Mark tells us, the whole city showed up at his door with all of the sick people and those possessed by demons. The whole city is joining in the emerging healing and restoration offered by Jesus. He obliges the people by

healing many of the sick people and by casting out many demons. He doesn't let the demons speak though – they know who he really is. Jesus is not simply a young charismatic teacher and healer. Along with the demons, we, too, are in the know. Jesus is something more.

We've seen, publicly and privately, his teaching of God's kingdom – it is here, I bring the kingdom, he declares and then he *shows* us the kingdom, revealed in the healing, in the inclusiveness, in the end to brokenness, and in the restoration of wholeness. We've seen his power and his authority, and his gathering work of calling disciples to him. He's only just begun his ministry and already it's been a whirlwind of events. His fame is spreading and the people are thronging to him.

And, very early in the morning, when everyone else is still snoring and it's dark, Jesus heads out to a deserted place to pray. "Deserted place" is a bit too gentle and tame a translation. It may lead us to think of a quiet stroll in the woods or our alone time with a cup of coffee before the rest of the household wakes for the day. It is nothing so calm and tranquil. The deserted place is *heramos* – wilderness. It is "a place filled with danger, where the spirits lurk and temptation stalks. Mark uses this word *heramos* many times in his opening chapter, and it always carries the meaning of a place where crucial and risky decisions are being made. It is out in the *heramos* that John the Baptizer fills the air with a cry for repentance. John is, in Isaiah's words, the 'voice of one crying in the *heramos*'. Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the *heramos* to be tempted and the *heramos* is inhabited both by angels and wild beasts. The *heramos* is the place where God's will is made clear and where the demand for obedience becomes urgent. It is also the place where the temptation to disobey is felt most powerfully" (Tom Long,

Shepherds and Bathrobes, p.93). The Israelites spent 40 long years in the *heramos* after being rescued from Egypt. God delivered them out of a society of corruption and greed, of social and economic inequality to form a new society of love and perfect justice...but they kept crying out to go back to Egypt. It was a difficult time for the Israelites in the wilderness, trying to learn how to live according to God's ways.

The *heramos* is a holy place, alive with the presence of God. But it is also a dangerous place, charged with the possibility of betrayal, the temptation of turning from God to walk the easier, more alluring path of the world. And it is the *heramos* where Jesus went that morning to pray (adapted from Tom Long, p.93). And the temptation did come.

"Everyone is searching for you," the disciples tell him. In that innocent sounding phrase lies the immense temptation looking Jesus square in the face. It was the temptation to stay in Capernaum. The people admire and respect him. They are astonished by his teaching. He could stay and be their local healer, their beloved teacher. He could live out his days in peace, comfortable and cared for. Everyone is searching for you.

Jesus was in the wilderness and there were two paths leading out of it. One path led back to Capernaum and an easy life of small-town fame. The other path led to a hill outside of Jerusalem and his agonizing death. He could choose the easy path and hear shouts of praise. Or he could choose the much more difficult path where he would end his life hearing shouts of "Crucify him!" This deserted place, this lonely wilderness, is a place of life-altering decision: "the Kingdom of Self-interest versus the Kingdom of God" (Long, p.94). Facing temptation, Jesus made his

decision: "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do."

Jesus chose the path of saying, "Not my will, God, but yours." He chose not to limit the proclamation of his message to Capernaum, to the people who welcomed the message. The kingdom is here; I bring the kingdom. Turn to God and believe this good news: because he left Capernaum, the message fell on the ears of many systemically poor and oppressed and turned their despair into hope. It fell on the ears of the powerful and threatened their comfy status. It fell on the ears of the elite and turned their hearts to murderous, jealous, hatred. Because of his decision that morning to leave Capernaum, the message fell on the ears of many who would listen and follow and it fell on our ears.

As people who have chosen to follow the same path as Jesus, we, too, find ourselves in lonely wilderness places. In fact, we are daily in the wilderness where we must choose our path out: choose between our own will and God's will, between our own words, and God's words, between our own work and God's work. Every day. Our wilderness places are not so turbulent as the one Jesus faced. Ours are most often quiet and close to home, in our daily routine. As Tom Long puts it, "[Our wilderness] is the space between the activities of our lives, where we nonetheless make the crucial decisions of our lives...the place where we decide to follow God's call or our own noses" (p.95, 96).

I'm currently helping a woman in Ontario, get prepared to head to the poverty-stricken rural areas of Madagascar. She feels called by God to leave her home and husband for long months at a time to face the challenges of an unknown country in order to work to break the poverty cycle of children at an Anglican Church run

orphanage. For most of us, we will not face such overtly life-changing wilderness decisions. Ours could be as mundane a choice as “Do I lead another bible study or do I keep my Monday evenings free to watch Murdoch?” I could easily say I’m already super busy, why add something else to my scheduling. But, leading the bible study, the harder path, God’s path, I know will lead to the strengthening and deepening of my relationship with God and I know that the Holy Spirit will have the opportunity to strengthen and deepen the relationships with God of the others there with me. The lonely wilderness times are the times when we are overwhelmed and powerless. It’s chaos, busyness, and exhaustion that leave us feeling disconnected from ourselves, one another, and God. The wilderness can also be found in boredom, restlessness, feeling lost and confused and wondering what more there is to life. Every time there is a decision to be made, it could be a wilderness time: your way or God’s way? Worldly kingdoms or God’s kingdom? It is the time when we are forced to take a second look at ourselves and what we are doing, self-reflect, and reconsider what really matters.

The path leading out of the wilderness towards God’s call is almost always the more difficult path. But we are not alone – the wilderness is a holy place, alive with the presence of God, our God whose power dwells within us...the power to teach and to heal, to love and to make whole. So, let’s go on to the neighbouring towns and proclaim the message there also for that is what we have come out to do.