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First Presbyterian Church
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Mark 1:9-15
Lent 1, Year B

Dear Lord, be with us during these 40 days of Lent. Be with us in our times of trial and temptation. Help us to see beyond the things of this world to your world, to your kingdom. Help us to live into the new life to which you call us. Amen.

“You Do You”

At some point we all leave home. It’s something we do throughout our lives, over and over again. We leave home physically, emotionally, and spiritually. To leave home is to leave those places that are familiar or comfortable . . . maybe even predictable.

Sometimes we can’t wait to leave home, because it’s too well worn and worn out for our liking. But other times we’d rather not leave, because even if it is well worn and worn out, we know what to expect. The mattress is molded to our body; the couch carries stains that are familiar, and to break in a new mattress or buy a new sofa takes too much work or money.

Sometimes life circumstances push us out the door: a change in health, a new job, the loss of a life partner – these things often necessitate a change in address – which can be welcome relief or something we fight tooth and nail.

Leaving home can be difficult and frightening. It can also be refreshing, rewarding, and rejuvenating . . . if we let it be. Leaving home invites us to make new discoveries about ourselves, but it can also challenge our understanding of where we find significance and security. In many ways, leaving home is the beginning of a spiritual journey and period of growth – no matter how old one is. Whether you’re leaving home for college at 18; leaving home for marriage at 28; leaving home for a new career at 38; leaving home to downsize at 68, or leaving home at 88 for what could be

your final home, it's all a period of growth, a time of leaving behind what is familiar and entering a wilderness of uncharted territory.

Friends, leaving home is the way of God's people. Adam and Eve left the garden. Noah left his dry land. God told Abraham, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." Jacob ran away from home fearing for his life. Moses and the Israelites left their homes in Egypt. And in today's gospel Jesus is leaving home.

As Mark tells us, "Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee to the Jordan River." He left his home and now stands with John in the Jordan, the border between home and the wilderness. He's baptized there, the heavens are torn apart, the Spirit descends on him, he's marked as God's Son the Beloved, and then the Spirit immediately drives him into the wilderness. Drives him from his familiar home into the unknown.

This latter piece is really important to note, because Jesus didn't enter the wilderness on his own accord. He didn't go because it was his idea or decision. He went because the Spirit made him.

For years, I've had a hard time reconciling that in my head. Having spent some time in the wilderness of grief and unknown illness, I don't particularly like thinking that the Spirit drove me into those wildernesses. It's just not the type of God I choose to believe in, know what I mean? But then I started to think, maybe it's not the Spirit that caused those things to happen – but more that the Spirit sensed that the wilderness was a necessary place for healing to happen. Because when we're in the wilderness, alone with our thoughts and no creature comforts, there's not much else one can do than lose one's self to vulnerability and lean into God's mercy.

Someone once wrote that, "The hardest thing for any of us to believe is that the wilderness has anything to do with God. It rather feels like God has vanished. But the gospel tells us that it was the Spirit who drove Jesus into the wilderness...not a personal mistake, not a deed of punishment, not the devil, but the Spirit of God."

Wildernesses can take many different forms. They can look like a hospital waiting room, or a doctor's office when you got news you really didn't want to hear . . . a wilderness can look like your empty office at work on the day you learned you were being let go, or it can look like your empty office on the day of your retirement, when you realized you needed to forge a new identity for yourself; maybe your wilderness looks like the fellowship hall of a church where you go to find recovery; maybe your wilderness was the place you went after the funeral when all the guests were gone; or maybe it was a strange bed you slept in after getting kicked out of your house or getting divorced or going off to school or living in your first apartment because you had to re-learn how to navigate your way in the world.

The thing about being in the wilderness is that it's no fun, no fun at all. Not this type of wilderness. We're lost in this wilderness, and I don't know anyone who likes being lost. In the wilderness the old ways and habits and devices that keep us going and moving in a certain direction no longer work. Our cell phones don't get any reception and if we're there long enough they go dead. And since most of us aren't prepared to live in the wilderness, we haven't brought along our charger. So there we are, feeling very alone. What do we do now?

Well, about the only thing we can do is surrender and let God be God. To let go and let God, as someone once advised me when I was in my wilderness. When you're that deep in, there's not much else you can do. While this rock-bottom level of trust may come naturally for some, I need to be honest with you and tell you that it doesn't come naturally for me. In the wilderness, you need to let go of those old habits of self-determination and self-reliance and the "I can do anything if I work hard enough" attitude, because those don't work in the wilderness.

In the wilderness, it's best to hand over the reigns of control to God, and rely on the support of other people. If you're willing, You can meet some really cool people in the wilderness, because once you've been there you're much more empathetic to those who are in them. You can gain a lot of confidence, too, knowing that Christ has gone before you.

The wilderness is an interesting concept in the Bible. In Exodus, Moses is tending sheep “beyond the wilderness” of Midian when God appears and confronts him in a burning bush. At the time, Moses is on the run, hiding in the wilderness because he’s wanted for murder in Egypt; but it’s in the wilderness that God comes to Moses, blindsides him, turns him around, and sends him back to Egypt to lead his people to freedom.

Later in Exodus when Moses succeeds in his unlikely venture of liberating the people from slavery and leading them out of Egypt, it’s back to the wilderness. As the twelve tribes wander in the wilderness of Sinai for forty years, Israel is born, tribes become a people, a law is given, and a covenant is made.

Friends, we may not volunteer to go the wilderness, and we may not like it there, but These are the kind of things that can happen in the wilderness. The strong biblical suggestion is that in the wilderness it is highly likely that God will come to you and things will change and you will never be quite the same again – and that’s OK. In all of the complexity of the wilderness – the physical, geographical, emotional, and spiritual complexity, God comes to us and does some pretty good work with us.

After 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus found clarity of purpose and the grit to withstand his devilish detractors. After 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus was ready to go to his new home, his real home, which turned out to be a life on the road doing all those things God wanted him to do.

This isn’t to say that any of it was easy. It wasn’t. Anyone who has spent even a little bit of time reading the Bible knows that Jesus came across all sorts of people who didn’t like him and what he did. But he was faithful – and he gained that faith and trust in the wilderness.

Now, if you’ve spent time in the wilderness you know it’s an in-between place. A place of liminality, a threshold where you’re betwixt and between. Neither here nor there. You’ve left behind your familiar home and what will be is not yet clear. In the wilderness you come face to face with the reality of your life; things done and left undone, fears, hopes and dreams, sorrows and losses, as well as the unknown.

Maybe this is why we avoid it at all costs. It's easier to stand on the outside than endure the grit of being lost for a while. But God does some of God's best work in the wilderness. So if you're willing to leave the comfort of home, or you're driven there by a force larger than yourself, remember that good things can come from it.

And since we cannot predict when we'll be thrown into the wilderness, the best we can do is prepare for it in small ways. So here's what I want you to do this week. I want you to think about what you need to let go of; are there distractions or temptations? Do you need to let go of your need for personal power and profit? Do you need to let go of your need to be in control and let God be in control? Jesus resisted the devil's temptations for power and control and instead chose to cultivate a life of faithfulness, devotion and resistance. What do you need to let go of in order to let God in?

And as you do these things, remember the story of Noah and the flood, the one we heard earlier. In that story, God forever binds God's self to us in a very new and different way. God is now not only the creator, God is now our protector, committed to forever refraining from punishing or destroying humanity and the world. And to make sure God never forgets this, God sets the rainbow in the sky. God promises to always be there.

Friends, no matter what wilderness you find yourselves in, God is there to protect you and guide you. And You can trust God to lead you out of it, because on the other side is a new home where God's grace and compassion abound.

Whatever wilderness the Spirit has brought you to:
walk in boldness, as a beloved child of God
walk in peace, under the shelter of the Most High
walk in faith, knowing Christ walks with you.

Amen.

Loving Lord,
at the beginning of this Lenten season,
we are met with the challenge of handing over
every bit of our lives that do not come from You.
To rid ourselves of what clutters our lives,
and all that distracts us from the simple truth
of Your love for us.

So, lead and guide us on this Lenten way.
May we walk with Jesus toward the hill just outside of Jerusalem.
May we like Him take up our cross and follow,
spending each moment of our lives living responsively to You,
just as Christ Himself did.
For that is the faithful way. Amen.

God of grace, you provide for us in amazing ways. Accept these offerings as
signs of our gratitude and bless them to further Christ's ministry and
mission among the poor, the suffering and the destitute. Amen.

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by
John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw
the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon
him. ¹¹ And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my Son, the
Beloved;^[a] with you I am well pleased."

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

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good
news^[b] of^[c] God ¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God
has come near;^[d] repent, and believe in the good news."^[e]