

**Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> February 2024 Rev Alison Bruton**

**Title: Worship in the Wilderness**

Readings: Genesis 9: 8-17, Mark 1: 9-15

I wonder how of you enjoy reading novels. I must admit I'm not a great leisure reader, but I do occasionally curl up with a whodunnit or some such. During my Biblical Studies course I learnt to appreciate the value of reading the Bible like a novel by using a version without the headings or verses. Mark's Gospel is a book that really benefits from this kind of approach as it is a fast paced and punchy story as indicated by the fact that we see the word 'and' so often used to begin sentences as well as the word 'immediately'. In fact, of the 59 times 'immediately' is used in the New Testament, 41 of them are in Mark's Gospel.

Another 'quirk' of Mark's Gospel is his use of what are known as 'Markan sandwiches' – a strange term I know, but one which aptly describes how he constructs his writing in his action packed narrative. In our Gospel reading we have three events, Jesus' baptism, Jesus' temptation and the beginning of Jesus' ministry, a classic Markan sandwich. Now the interesting thing about a sandwich is that the filling is probably the most important bit, a sandwich without a filling would just be bread and butter. It's not that the bread itself isn't important as we wouldn't have a sandwich without it, but the filling is given added emphasis in Mark. In our reading, sandwiched between Jesus' baptism and the start of his ministry, we have his temptation; his being driven by the Spirit into the wilderness and his being waited on by angels whilst surrounded by wild beasts. So why no details of the temptations that we read in Matthew and Luke? Perhaps it is the wilderness setting rather than the temptations themselves that Mark finds most significant. This element then must have real importance for us too, and as we have begun the period of Lent perhaps the concept of wilderness has something to say to us this morning.

In geographical terms we might have some idea of what a wilderness is, but as you will see from these images a wilderness can take many forms, not always in hot and desert like places, a wilderness can be cold and icy. Whatever we perceive a wilderness to be, it will certainly be a lonely and uncomfortable place to be for any length of time.

I wonder if the word 'wilderness' reminds you of any other Bible stories? One memorable one that is recorded in the book of Exodus when the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness. In Exodus 15 they reach a desert or wilderness called Shur, where there is no fresh water. Here their joy at being led out from slavery turns to grumbling, their worship turns to distrust. They immediately doubt that God is with them. So, when we experience the struggles of the wilderness how do we respond? Do we grumble and see them as punishments from God, or signs that God is uncaring or non-existent. Perhaps instead, we should perhaps see that the wilderness is an opportunity for God to test our hearts. Do we really trust in him, or do we trust in our own abilities?

We see from our reading in Mark that Jesus was driven into the wilderness, the implication being that it wasn't optional, he had to go there. From the spiritual heights of his baptism and affirmation from God he is driven into a place of desolation and temptation. For us, the challenging events in life can drive us into our own wilderness experience, we don't want to go there, we'd rather stay on our spiritual mountain top, but nevertheless we find ourselves in difficult circumstances. A serious

illness, examination failure, unemployment, the loss of a life partner, a collapse of our faith in God. Events such as these cause a breakdown of our routine, our support structures and bring a sense of isolation that can make us feel that nobody else can possibly understand what we are going through. These are the times when our faith is tested to the limit, where ‘the rubber hits the road’ as they say, where we are forced to distinguish between what might be the routine of church and the reality of what it really means to follow Christ.

In these times of wilderness perhaps the wild beasts that were with Jesus symbolise the worries and anxieties that can sometimes fill our heads, the things that wake us up in the night. When is this time of testing going to end? I would suggest that it is in these times of spiritual emptiness that we are best able to grow as we are able to distinguish between the things that are essential and those that are merely peripheral and might hinder our walk with God. The challenging message here is, I think, that wilderness can be seen as a gift, it can form us and enable us to grow if we only are willing to learn from it.

I’m sure most of us here this morning will be able to relate to such times of challenge in our lives. But where can we find a sense of hope when we are at our lowest ebb? In Genesis we read about the sign that God gave to Noah which signified his presence and his intention never again to bring destruction on the world. Now I’m not suggesting that all you need is to see a rainbow and all will be well, rather it is that sense of promise and commitment from God to be with you, walking with you and ministering to you, much as the angels ministered to Jesus while he was in the desert. Sometimes you may feel you are just clinging on to God, but as we read in Psalm 63 his right hand is always there to uphold us.

But how can we possibly worship God when we are in the wilderness? Well, it will certainly look different from those times of joy and elation when we feel really close to him. Rather, it might involve aspects of worship such as fasting, or solitude, or simplicity. It might turn us towards silence, or lament, or giving things away, aspects that are so relevant as we enter the season of Lent. As followers of Jesus, we are invited to enter a focused intentional wilderness period through study, prayer and self-examination. In this case, however, we are not alone, we are journeying with our fellow Christians. Perhaps we might introduce additional time for devotions into our normal routine, read a book that helps us to focus on our Lenten journey, perhaps come along to our Lenten series at church? I’m a great believer in not just giving something up for Lent, but doing something different, something positive that will help on one’s spiritual journey.

So, as we enter our Lenten wilderness, we should not be surprised that God has brought us to this place. Perhaps we should be asking what he wants to teach us during this time? Does he want me to trust him more? And when we are in those dark places, we can be sure that God is in there with us, keeping us going, giving us hope; bad things happen but we are never on our own in the midst of them. The wilderness can be a time of growth and renewal; let’s not let this period of Lent pass by without grasping the opportunity to allow God to work in us and to enable us to find a new sense of radiance and freedom.



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