

Providence Presbyterian Church  
Rev. David Pettit  
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Mark 1:9-15

What if the local high school guidance counselor invited you to come to speak to their students? This guidance counselor wants you to share some piece of wisdom with these young men and women who will soon be heading off to college or the workforce, soon heading out from the support structures they have known. You are asked to give your own version of Kipling's "If." And maybe your aim isn't how to "be a man" but to be some best version of oneself, and you want to save them time or the same mistakes. And if you were asked to do so, and if you obliged, what would you share, and where would you have learned these things that you share? I hope you wouldn't just grab a cliché from a hallmark card or from inside the wrapper of a Dove chocolate. Perhaps it would be something learned over many years and probably through many mistakes and trial and error.

Formation. Shaping. Preparation for the challenges ahead. These are the things that a guidance counselor no doubt thinks about. Yet, as every guidance counselor or parent is aware, some things are hard to teach, hard to forewarn. They are the things we often must learn through challenges. The wisdom and solidity we look to in mentors and models most likely came through time and difficulty. I think of Kipling's line, "If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you, / But make allowance for their doubting too." He is saying, if you can walk in confidence despite criticism and yet at the same time be open to what you can learn from that criticism, and to be able to acknowledge how others receive you, all with your confidence still intact. Kipling rattles it off so cleanly, but this is not easy to do, and I would say many of us are far from learning this ourselves.

Yes, Kipling packs quite a bit of paradox and complicated long-learned lessons into this tightly packed poem. And I comment on this because I think that the solidity and wisdom connoted here is akin to what Jesus is learning out in the wilderness that he will need to walk the path God has given him.

These early verses in Mark's gospel are essentially focused on a transition. A transition from Jesus being a local tradesman and synagogue attendee, to become a rabbi, to be a leader, a messiah. And what prepares one for such a role? And what kind of preparation would the guidance counselor advise for him to be both prepared and viewed as a legitimate messiah so that his religious vision is taken seriously? For we do not let self-proclaimed surgeons operate on us or un-proven

mechanics touch our vehicles. No, there are rigors we expect you to go through to be ready and be seen as legitimate and trust-worthy.

What experience have you gone through that has prepared you and made you legitimate in your vocation that would be on your bio the guidance counselor asks you for when you come to speak? Perhaps college or work experience, or military service, or community service, or accomplishments. I had to go to seminary and various experiences and rituals in order to be ordained. For Jesus, the preparation that gives legitimacy seems to involve certain rites, like baptism, and perhaps most significantly, his time of temptation in the wilderness.

We touched on the wilderness theme several weeks ago around Jesus being baptized in the Jordan valley. But we skipped over these forty days and forty nights that Jesus spends in the wilderness before he enters Capernaum. For after he is baptized, the Spirit drives him into the wilderness. In Greek, the word used for Jesus being cast into the wilderness by the Spirit is the same word used for when Jesus casts out a demon: *ekballo*. To drive out or cast out. To be expelled against one's will.

The wilderness in the biblical tradition has a few realms of connotation. A primary one is that the wilderness is a remnant of untamed creation. It is wild and unformed. In the ancient Near East, it represents all that is counter to God's purposes. There was a sense of center and periphery: the city or settlement representing the center and God's order, and the periphery or the wild area beyond it as that which wars against that order. A second connotation of wilderness that intertwines with this is that the wilderness is where rituals happen; it is a place where rites of passage occur. It is where one is tested, where one endures humiliation and various rigors in order to be prepared for what is next and to be recognized in one's role as legitimate.

There is an interesting tradition from ancient Assyria that represents both of these aspects well. It is called the Neo-Assyrian Royal Lion Hunt. We learn of it through royal inscriptions, that is, writing inscribed on monuments and public structures. For a young heir to rise to the position of King/Monarch, they would have to prove themselves through this rite of passage. They would have to go out into the steppe-land, out into the wild on the periphery of the civilized city, and they would have to find and kill a lion because the lion is a representation of all that is wild and counter to the civilized world and hence counter to the divine order. And by proving himself capable of killing the lion, this soon-to-be monarch demonstrates the ability to be God's agent for protecting the people, for holding the chaos and the threats to the civilized world at bay. It is the Royal Assyrian version of

Kipling's "If," only their poem would be much shorter. "If" you can kill a lion..., any questions?

So Jesus is cast into the wilderness. Have you ever felt cast into the wilderness? Maybe it was a season? A place? A time of uncertainty or threat, a time of confusion, or vulnerability. A time of testing. A time where you learned some of those lessons that you might want you to pass on to young people who will soon enter the wild world themselves?

Jesus is cast into the wilderness. But the rigors that Jesus must face are not to kill a lion, or to do some great feat by which people will praise him. It is not to accomplish some great thing by all means necessary by which people will respect him and worship him. It is not to perform some amazing feat demonstrating divine right by which he would prove his ability to conquer the chaos around us all. These are the kinds of temptations that we hear about in the longer versions of Matthew and Luke's accounts. Temptations to rule the world, turn rocks to bread, and demonstrate his power by making deals and compromises with his adversary.

The rigors Jesus endures seems to be a test to see if he can discern God's voice amidst all the voices offering deals and making demands. It seems to be a test of solidity that he will need to navigate the crowds' shifting allegiances. After all, Jesus will be both praised and vilified. He will carry the weight of peoples' hopes and expectations and, at times, have to disappoint his followers and disappoint those who think they can intimidate or control him.

Perhaps my favorite line in Kipling's "If" is: "If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster / And treat those two impostors just the same." Triumph as an imposter. Disaster too as an imposter. Imposters that disguise something more true, more worthy. Imposter. Something that is not true but parades as if it is true. How much are we driven by these two notions? Triumph. To win. To be successful. To be praised, and be hoisted on shoulders, to be exalted as an example. Or disaster, and that drive and desire to successfully avoid all manifestations of it. These two impulses speak to much of what drives our society and of what a guidance counselor might instill in eager youth. But to be able to see beyond these impulses, to not be driven by their triggers. To treat those two imposters just the same. It speaks to a way of becoming *in* the world that is not *of* the world.

A process of becoming that is not bound to the previously established norms or values. Jesus will call us to embody paradox as well and go against what we've been reared to think. He who seeks to save his own life will lose it, but the one who loses it for Christ's call and God's kingdom will save it. Jesus will say that I

did not come to be served, but to serve. Jesus will model the ability to face the needy with compassion and help but not to be taken over by the constant demands. Jesus will learn to balance tender care and firm confrontation.

Jesus is going to map a new vision for God's kingdom that is not established with the sword or with a new monarchy. He is going to map a new religious vision built upon God's relationship with Israel in the past, one built on grace and love, and where God might renew us from within with forgiveness and rebirth and the Spirit indwelling. It is a new religious vision rooted in an ultimate show of love and grace, which we are called to emulate and follow.

Now, in the task of gap-filling in Mark's succinct account, I may be extrapolating too far. I'm not sure. Maybe Jesus did not learn all those things in the 40 days and 40 nights out there in the wilderness. But through his enduring of these temptations, this season is undoubtedly a part of that formation and solidifying process. This time in the wilderness is indeed recounted so to suggest legitimacy. He has gone through the rigors; he is called to be God's messiah.

“14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’”

Jesus returns from the wilderness ready to step into this role as God's messiah. He comes back prepared to lead, and signaling to others that he is not just a kid from Galilee. He is not just a tradesman from Nazareth. He is called to be a figure in God's redemptive work. The Kingdom of God has come near. It is time to respond, turn, and believe in it, to give oneself to it.

This past fall, as some of you have heard me recount, I took what I have called my mid-life indulgence. It was a sixteen day trip, mostly by myself, starting in the Bighorn mountains and heading west across Montana and back down through Idaho – fifteen days of fly fishing a different stream every day and camping in a different spot every night. Cell service was spotty. Noise was minimal. I didn't listen to the radio. When I fish and camp, I become absorbed in the environment. So, when I came home, it had a rip van winkle feel, everything looked different, like “how long was I out there?”

In this tradition of the wilderness, one is to return to the mundane world, to the everyday world with a new perspective, with a new role, with a special insight or ability by which you can lead. Something happens out there, and we return different. I think of how conditioned we all have become in our thinking, how

shaped by political discourse we are with what it calls our attention to, and what it calls our attention away from. I think of how prone we are to follow the cultural script and the mapped out divisions, rather than be a voice and an influence into it.

And so, I wonder if we too could use some more time in the wilderness. How significant it would be to be able to re-enter our disoriented society with a new perspective, a new voice, and something to offer, a path of grace and community. To be able to navigate the world without falling into the well-worn ruts already established. That would truly be remarkable and welcome, would it not? And if this is true for us as individuals, I wonder if it is also true for a group, for a church, to come through a season of challenge and questions with some new perspective, insight, calling?

As we begin this season of lent, patterned after the forty days in the wilderness, perhaps we would do well to consider this. Can we disrupt our patterns and ways of thinking enough that we might emerge more able to be Christ's disciples in this world?

For the time has come near. The kingdom of God has come near.

And all God's people said...

*The Baptism of Jesus*

*(Mt 3:13–17; Lk 3:21–22; Jn 1:29–34)*

<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.”

*The Temptation of Jesus*

*(Mt 4:1–11; Lk 4:1–13)*

<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.

*The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry*

*(Mt 4:12–17; Lk 4:14–15)*

<sup>14</sup> Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, <sup>15</sup> and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”