A Sermon for DaySpring

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Frayed Edges

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Mark 1.1-8

Today we begin at the beginning of Mark's Gospel, thought to be the first of the four Gospels in the Bible. It's also the shortest and tends to be the most direct. In John's Gospel, people are always talking about what something means. In Matthew' Gospel, people are always talking about what scripture is being fulfilled. Mark does some of that, but mostly gets down to business. Mark's Gospel is action in motion. Things happen immediately in Mark, always immediately.

Mark's Gospel famously doesn't really have an ending. It just ends with a preposition in the middle of a sentence. Through scribal transmission, three different endings would be added. Those are usually found at the end of most translations, but as far as we can tell, the actual ending in narrative and grammar is frayed. The beginning of the Gospel is as well. Notice the first sentence of the book isn't even a complete sentence. There's no verb: *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*. Furthermore, in the Greek, there's no definite article. It doesn't say *The* beginning, just beginning, or a beginning.

So, it reads something like this: *Beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*. I think that's intended to be the title. The title isn't just referring to what happens first; it's referring to the whole story. All of this book is the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Which raises the question, if this is just the beginning, then what's next, what's the end? That's where our lives come in. We read ourselves into the frayed edges on either end; it's our beginning. The life of Christian communities and Christians is the continuation of the story that begins with the story of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. From the opening words, Mark assures us this is Good News.

We need that assurance, in no small part, because Mark immediately pushes us out into the wilderness. If we are going to hear this Good News and receive the Gospel it will not be in the typical religious centers or civilized places; it will be in the margins, in the wilderness, in the unmapped places. We go out with crowds of people to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The wilderness is where we respond to the Gospel, or perhaps not at all.

The first person we meet makes this perfectly clear. He's the one heralding this Gospel message. His name is John. John is like an incarnation of wilderness, a wild man, wild hair. If the beginning and ends of Mark's Gospel are grammatically frayed, John is the ragged embodiment of the preaching of this Good News. John makes it clear that God is coming; God is here. We must prepare to receive God by repentance and commitment in all the frayed edges of our lives. What John is and who John is is nothing compared to the one who's yet to come. "I'm not worthy to stoop down and untie the laces on his sandals."

John looks like a prophet, sounds like a prophet, smells like a prophet. As a prophet in the wilderness, he represents a radical decentering of the Good News of God. John's witness in the wilderness tells us something important about what is to come. Until now, God was supposed to be found in the ordered places, designated as places where you meet God. Now, something's changed. Something's been unleashed, and John can sense it. The Gospel is not going to be found where you've thought it would be found; it's not going to be civilized, commercialized, or compromised to the comforts of the contented. John's voice cries out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." Pay attention to the grammar—always in Mark, pay attention to the grammar.

John is not just in the wilderness crying out, "Prepare the way of the Lord"
John is crying out, "In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord."

Can you hear the difference? The wilderness is not just the place from which the Good News happens to be proclaimed. Wilderness is where the Good News of God is coming.

But what does that mean? We may have to read the rest of Mark to find out. When we do then we realize that it means more than dropping a pin on a map because wilderness has more meaning than just geography. Geographically speaking, wilderness eludes precise definition, but it usually means the wide-open spaces beyond human control. For the ancients, they even feared it was space beyond God's control. People get lost in the wilderness, and they never come back.

For human experience, wilderness is any place in which a person feels stripped of guidance, lost, and perplexed. (Rod Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind,* 3) You can be in a big old city and feel utterly lost in a wilderness; you can be a person of great resources and feel totally perplexed about what to do next in your life. You can be surrounded by people and feel utterly alone.

Wilderness as a symbol describes the life-location of whole groups of people who do not have abundant resources, who do not have access to expert guidance, and who truly can find no blazed trail out of the landscape of their suffering.

Stephen Bayne was thinking of wilderness in just this way—the human experience. Bayne was appointed the first executive officer of the worldwide Anglican Communion in 1959. He had a big, overwhelming job. It was so big he is said to have remarked, ""I am rather like a mosquito in a nudist camp. I know what I ought to do, but I don't know where to begin." (Which is just even better if you say it in a British accent.)

Faced with a whole world suffering in need of the Church's witness and embodiment of the Good News of Jesus Christ, Bayne's compass pointed true north. He wrote: "The church has no mission of its own. All we can have by ourselves is a club or a debating society, and our only hope, left to ourselves, is to win as many members for our own club and away from other clubs as we can. And whatever this is, it is not mission.

Mission belongs to God. It was His from the beginning. It is His; it will always be His. He has his purposes from the foundation of the world, and the means to fulfill them; and the only part the Church has in this is obedience—a share in the eternal and life-giving obedience of the Son of God . . . And the most terrible judgment on the Church comes when God leaves us to our own devices because he is tired of waiting for our obedience—leaves us to be domestic chaplains to a comfortable and secular world—and goes himself into the wilderness of human need and injustice and pain. This judgment does come on churches and nations, when they forget that God is in command; that God does the choosing."

God chooses wilderness. The Jews knew about wilderness of human need and injustice and pain. They knew about the geography of wilderness bordered as they were between an ocean of water and an ocean of sand, and they knew all too well about the wilderness experience of life.

In the wilderness, if you are still long enough, you hear a cry, perhaps as Leonardo Boff put it: the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor. To cry has a double meaning. It means to cry out, like to proclaim something boldly and loudly like a preacher in the wild. John, like Isaiah before him, cries out for all who will listen: God is coming. God is here. You are not alone. You are not forsaken. To cry also means to weep. There is weeping in the wilderness of life. For those lost in the wild, it is a scary, lonely place to be.

A few days ago, I went for a run on the trails of Cameron Park. It took me many runs years ago to begin to navigate the twisted, intersecting, paths through the hills and brush of the park. It's not uncommon to come on someone who's totally disoriented. Last week I heard a scream, not like someone was hurt, but like someone was trying to get attention from anyone who would listen. The trail I was on took me toward the sound. As I approached, I came upon a teenager who, upon seeing me, tried to play it cool. I asked him if everything was all right. He said yes, he paused. "I've lost my brother." "What does he look like?" I asked. He told me. I said, If I find him, I'll send him this way. Ok, he said. It was cold. It was starting to get dark.

I headed on down the trail. And, fortunately, came upon, a boy who fit the description. He was totally disoriented about where he was and where to go. I said, "Are you looking for your brother?" "Yes," he said. "He's that way." "Ok, thanks," he said. And he took off running like a deer bounding through the woods. There's little feeling compared to being lost and then being found.

Wilderness is a scary place to be. Lose your job, lose your spouse, lose your scholarship, lose your mind. You lose the map you used to navigate the next steps in life. What now? Don't let the trappings of modern life fool you to what's underneath. Beneath the comforts of modern life, there lies a wilderness of human suffering, crying out, crying for some relief, for truth, for grace, for love, for meaning in life.

In the memory of the Exodus from Egypt, wilderness was a place of a long journey of testing and learning to trust in God when there were no other options. It was hard, but at least it

wasn't slavery. Wilderness wasn't just an empty place on the map of the world; wilderness was a feeling, of being lost, being alone, being perplexed, and maybe, there, meeting God.

Now some modern people have romanticized this feeling, recognizing that our civilized, commodified, capitalized culture deadens something in them that they yearn to stir to new life. Thoreau, for example, at Walden Pond, writes, "In the wilderness lies the preservation of the world. Only when we are lost can we begin to find ourselves."

A century later Wallace Stegner writes advocating for the preservation of wild places, "What I want to speak for is not so much the wilderness uses, valuable as those are, but the wilderness idea, which is a resource in itself. Being an intangible and spiritual resource, it will seem mystical to the practical minded, but then, anything that cannot be moved by a bulldozer is likely to seem mystical to them." Stegner calls wilderness a "geography of hope."

Wilderness as a geography of hope may seem an overcooked image, until you consider the black church experience. Theologian Delores Williams offers a version of wilderness—the wilderness idea rooted in the experience of enslaved persons. Rather than a place to be feared, wilderness as seen in the biblical Hagar and the Exodus experience is a place of struggle *and* Spirit, both problematic *and* promising. "For African American slaves," writes Williams, "the wilderness did not bear the negative connotations that mainline white pioneer culture assigned to it. The wilderness was a positive place conducive to uplifting the spirit and to strengthening faith."

The symbolic wilderness then isn't just a forlorn place of suffering. In this wilderness we hear the sounds of those who courageously navigated dangerous terrain, took each step with radical faith cultivated through God's timely miraculous provision through the long journey. No wonder why "all the people of Jerusalem" went to meet John in the wilderness. Something deep in them stirred when they realized God was at it again.

They were drawn to a man on the margins with a message that --it is in the wilderness of our lives where God's Good News begins. (Adapted from "Forerunners" by Courtney Buggs, https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-mark-11-8-5)

Proclaimed on the frontier of the inhabitable world, preached to people ready to hear Good News anywhere they can find it, the Gospel is Good News of comfort. Comfort, comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, her penalty is paid. She is saved.

Earlier this fall, a 38-year-old mother, laid off from her work because of the pandemic, drove to Zion National Park to hike all alone. Her story has all kinds of frayed edges to it. Already plagued with mental health challenges, now saddled with the grief and fear that comes from losing your job—your livelihood, she said she just needed to get away on a spiritual retreat. So, she went to Zion where she could get lost in the canyons and wilderness of that fierce landscape. Shortly

into her journey, she fell and hit her head on a tree. Now, she was in real trouble. No one knew where she was. Alone, in the wild, unable to take 2 steps without collapsing, her only source of water was a river discovered recently to be poisoned from pollution. She was in the fight of her life.

Two days later, she was reported missing and a massive hunt was on, people who loved her and people who didn't know her but loved people went out looking for her like 100 shepherds looking for one lost sheep. Two weeks later, on the verge of death, she was found. Or, really, if we're telling as much of the story as we know, her journey to being saved has just begun as she begins to get the help she needs.

The Gospel comes to shadow lands and into the margins and into the places where people are lost and hurting and alone and dying. The Gospel comes to the places where doubt meet fears and into the frayed edges of our lives. That, my friends, is Good News. If it were not so, we might have to live in fear that the Gospel may not be worthy of our cries. But now we know, from the very beginning. The Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begins on the margins, a voice of hope crying out from and into the wilderness of our lives. The Gospel begins in the wilderness, and it belongs there.