

“Again & Again, God Meets Us” Rev. Michele Ward
Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15 Lent I Year B Sunday, February 21, 2021
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD

Sing: Oh God, you are closer than we are to ourselves. Draw us closer to you.

Today is the first Sunday of the season of Lent, our annual forty day spiritual journey into the wilderness where we encounter God and ourselves in meaningful ways. Andrew and I will serve as your travel guides during Lent, and the theme for our wilderness tour is “Again & Again.” Now, this may seem a bit ironic. We are currently living through one of the most redundant years of our lives as we navigate pandemic life. But I assure you, this tour will be full of exciting stories and mysterious events, just like it is every year.

You might be wondering why we chose this theme when life is already so predictable. I will tell you-- that is precisely the point. The church calendar moves in circles every year while the calendar of time moves in a linear fashion through minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years. But every year, we come back to the same month. And every month, we come back to another week. And every week, we come back to the same seven days.

God is there in those rhythms. God does not abandon us to monotony and despair. God does not leave us to our own devices in the wilderness of our lives. As we guide you through another Lenten season of Sunday morning worship on Zoom, I want to assure you that God is already here. You don't need to strive more to find God during this season. Again and again, God shows up. God is waiting for you already. All God needs us to do is pay attention to how God is meeting us.

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In high school, I had a teen study Bible that would explain what a passage meant or describe the context a little bit more. Before each book of the Bible was a short overview giving more information about when the book was written and its significance. I'll never forget the way the introductory section described the Gospel of Mark. It described the Gospel of Mark as an action movie, full of excitement and strange events, and full of phrases like “and then” or “after that” and words like “immediately” or “suddenly.” Now, if you haven't read the Gospel of Mark recently, this may seem strange to hear a book of the Bible described as action packed, but I encourage you to give it a read. It is the shortest gospel, and because of this, condenses everything into sixteen chapters. Jesus seems to be casting out demons, healing people, preaching,

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teaching, and traveling every time you read another paragraph. Jesus is constantly showing up in the nick of time to do exactly what needs to be done.

Given all of this, the immediacy of our second reading today fits right in with the rest of the Gospel of Mark. Within seven short verses, John baptizes Jesus in the Jordan River and the Spirit of God descends upon him like a dove. A voice comes from heaven to declare Jesus God’s beloved. And then, in typical Mark fashion, the Holy Spirit immediately whisks Jesus off into the wilderness where the Accuser tempts him, he is with wild animals, and angels take care of him. The Gospel of Mark also makes it quite clear that Jesus does not begin his public ministry until after the Roman Empire arrests his cousin John. And the first place Jesus goes is not Jerusalem, the seat of power, nor does he go to protest the unjust arrest of his cousin by King Herod. He heads straight to Galilee, his community, to proclaim the good news to them - God’s kin-dom is here, salvation is near, come see and believe!

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Although these three accounts may seem to have nothing to bring them together, the common guide among them is God’s presence. God is the main agent of change, the main actor, in the landscape of this account. The baptism of Jesus could be any ordinary baptism of one of John’s disciples without the clear shout out from God as God’s beloved child. God’s Spirit compels Jesus to stay in the wilderness after his baptism, and it is the same God leading him back to Galilee to proclaim the nearness of the Messiah and the invitation to repent. God’s presence guides Jesus through these three different landscapes, and God’s presence guides us, too. Our main task is to pay attention to how God meets us at the beginning of our Lenten wilderness tour.

Sometimes, I wonder if Jesus would have liked to skip the wilderness part of this section, or if he really enjoyed being there. Jesus tended to seek out solitude in wild places in his ministry when he needed to rest and reflect, when he needed to quiet the demands around him in order to more clearly hear God’s voice. Perhaps the wilderness is a blessing to him. Perhaps this time of angels caring for his needs reminded him of his full reliance upon God. Perhaps it prepared him for reentering society without his cousin John to mentor him or teach him. Perhaps it was exactly what he needed before his public ministry began.

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Ten years ago, I started doing an annual silent retreat where I spent time entirely alone. One of my seminary professors inspired me when I heard him describe the ways God encountered him whenever he did this. Something I don't remember very much, though, was him describing the discomfort of the first few days. I have found, on my annual silent retreat, that the noise I carry inside of me comes with me. I thought that when I left my regular routines behind, when my environment changed, my internal landscape would shift, too.

But that is not what happens. The silence of this retreat magnifies the noise before it quiets. The elements I refer to as creating the noise are the internalized expectations from others as well as the pressures I place upon myself. All of us have these, and some of us are more practiced at silencing these than others, and some of us do not even know that they exist. But in order to do the work in the world God calls us to do, we must learn how to silence the noise and pay attention. Because if we cannot find that inner stillness and meet with God, we are missing out on the deep well of God's presence. Our passion, our intelligence, our imagination, they can only get us so far. And it can be tempting to do much on our own strength. But this is not the way to deep transformation of the soul. And this is not the way to profound connection to God. The way to this is inward. It is still. It is quiet.

And there, once we are past the doubts and the anxieties, the pressures and the expectations, we are still enough to see the angels waiting on us. We are still enough to take in the beauty of the wilderness. It is not all harshness and difficulty. It is not all temptation and uncertainty. The wilderness can be a meeting place for us with God and with ourselves.

Now, our wilderness seasons are not always intentional weeks we set aside for contemplation. They can also last months, even years. And the majority of us do not seek the wilderness out. This pandemic could be considered a global sized wilderness season. None of us decided we wanted to quarantine in our homes, wear masks every time we leave the house, and witness the deaths of the people we love. And yet, this is where we find ourselves today. We find ourselves in the wilderness, again and again, every morning we wake up. But the wilderness is not the end for us, for our congregation, for our city. The wilderness was not the end for Jesus. It was a

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beginning. It was the place where fear and accusation confronted him. But that is not the end of the story. God does not leave him there. Our task in the wilderness is not to worry about when it ends, but to pay attention to how God shows up. Right here. Right now.

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