

February 21, 2021

Mark 1:2-3,9-15

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’”

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And 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. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” ¹²And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

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

Bible stories are not just unique stories about important individuals. Bible stories are our stories; stories about you and me. John’s calling – to be a messenger that prepares the way – is our calling. As members of the Body of Christ, we are called to prepare the way for people to come into relationship with God. We are to help people cleanse themselves of all the demons in the head, demons that keep them from knowing, from believing, from trusting in the truth: they are a beloved child of God.

John is at the Jordan, offering people this life-cleansing, life-renewing message. He has raised those feeling low and lowered the haughty in a welcome that was all-inclusive; no one left out.

To this welcoming, cleansing, renewing message comes Jesus. He comes, like we all do, to be welcomed into a welcoming community, to be reassured of God’s love, and to grow his relationship with God – Creator, Nurturer, Father and Mother. What follows, for some, is a surprise. This is, after all, Jesus. After being baptized and told he is “my Child, the Beloved” one would expect life to be all resurrection and light. We all know what happens in between baptism and resurrection, but we rarely translate it into our own lives.

Many people come to a church lost and confused; seeking answers; wanting to be accepted and loved. They find a church home in which they are welcomed as a child of God, are convinced that all darkness is vanquished and they will be able to bask in the light forever.

This is not the case. It is not Jesus’ story. It is not yours or my story.

Jesus hears that he is God’s beloved child and is then immediately driven into the wilderness. Driven into the wilderness! Left for forty days and forty nights to face the wild beasts and wrestle with the Devil, his own demons. Dark, is it not? It is Lent after all. It is, also, the story many of us live. It is also where many of us get stuck in this story. We find ourselves in the wilderness, feeling lost and alone, left by God, unable to move forward. Uncertain of what to do. We feel helpless, moving toward feeling hopeless. What are we to do?

The first thing we need to do is remember that this story of Jesus, which is our own story, does not end in the wilderness. It is in the wilderness, lost in the darkness, that Jesus finds God. We must assume it is in the wilderness of isolation that Jesus experiences the nearness of God; an experience of presence that reassures and strengthens him, allowing him to leave the demons of fear and uncertainty behind and return to the world to tell us about the nearness of God and God's fear-less reign.

This story is our story; your story and my story. I am not being melodramatic here; just trying to put our life together in perspective. We – you the members and friends of Amicable Church and I – we are about to go into the wilderness. Each of us on separate paths. To be honest, I am a little concerned about the demons I am going to be wrestling with. I am hearing some of you say you too are a little concerned about the demons you, Amicable Church, will be wrestling with. How appropriate then that we begin this journey into the wilderness in the season of Lent, guided by Jesus' own wilderness experience.

In the days, weeks, and months to come, if you feel you are in the darkness of the wilderness – either as a church or as an individual, remember the message Jesus shared when he came out of the wilderness: “the reign of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” It was in the wilderness that Jesus discovered the nearness of God and this nearness was good news to him. This did not mean all his troubles were over. Remember, the cross was still to come before the resurrection.

What I have to assume from Jesus' message is that even in the darkest moments of his wrestling with his demons he experienced God's presence; a presence that turned him

around to look in a different direction and a different way; a presence that allowed him to see beauty in his wilderness experience.

When you find yourself in the wilderness, remember and use Amicable's mantra: God is present, all the time, everywhere. Take a few deep breaths, repeat several times, and then turn and look for the beauty which is certainly all around you. You can begin to see this beauty by lifting up what you are grateful for – even if it is you are still breathing. Gratitude will offer enough light to allow you to move forward in the dark.

It is my prayer, as we prepare to go into the wilderness this Lenten season, we will keep this story of Jesus' baptism in our minds and hearts. All parts of this story, by the way. Never forget that Amicable Church is John the Baptist, preparing the way for people to enter into a relationship with God and learn, in and through you, that they are a beloved Child of God.

Remember, too, each one of us, on a regular basis, are driven into the wilderness and struggle with demons. Don't leave people alone in the wilderness. Remind them, God is present. And I am certain God's presence is most often felt in and through us.

Into the wilderness we go. May it be the place where we learn that our faith is bigger than our fear. Amen.