

“*Messenger in the Wilderness*” - Mark 1:1-8

What comes to mind when you think of wilderness? Considering the wilderness spoken of here in Mark, which is *not* a forest wilderness like you all are so familiar with around here, what *first* comes to mind for me is the *environment* and *terrain* of Afghanistan. While deployed there, I spent a lot of time flying over the land, and I spent most of that time, while in the air, observing the terrain.

From the air, the wilderness could be breathtakingly beautiful—*ridged mountains* and *deep canyons*—In some places savannah deserts, in others wandering dunes of sand that seemed to go on forever into the horizon. It’s amazing the colors ...

Despite this beauty, there was *the harsh reality of the desert* ... a reality that becomes starkly evident when you are on the ground and in its grasp. Impressions I retain of the desert wilderness are lots of sand; dryness; scrub bushes; harsh terrain; wild animals and reptiles—at times extremely hot and at times extremely cold. It was a hostile place for man; a place where a man *or woman will die of exposure in a short time* without the proper food, shelter, and equipment.

The ancients saw the desert wilderness as a place of *demons* and *evil*.

Maybe *when you think of the wilderness* you think of something a little more personal – *a place in your life* (where you are or have been) that is a dark place; hazardous; with temptations and trials at every turn. Or you think of a place where sorrow, fear, sin, guilt, maybe even disaster has taken you down to a point of *depression* or *despair*. *It could be* that you are in a wilderness today, where *life* has brought you to a place of *emptiness* and *loneliness*.

An *extreme wilderness* that comes to mind is the harsh reality of the unbeliever’s life separated from a relationship with God. For the unbeliever’s life is a desert that only ends in *death* and *damnation*.

We all find ourselves in the wilderness at some point in our life. Wilderness is an unforgiving place, but it is where the gospel begins. It is at *that point* that the need for a Savior becomes apparent. Some good news is needed when in a desert. So, Mark writes in his book in the very first sentence: *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*.

What is this word “gospel”? It is obviously something important.

The original audience of Mark – the Church in Rome – was made up of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians – and the word εὐαγγέλιον – translated “gospel” or “good news” - had important connotations to both groups. To the Jew, the term, in context with the Isaiah quote in v. 3, might have brought the image of *the herald of the good news* of the coming salvation *promised* by the prophet and the hoped for coming of the Kingdom of God. To the Gentile Roman, εὐαγγέλιον was an announcement of the good news of the “birth of an heir to the throne, his coming-of-age, or accession to the throne.”¹ To the Christian this gospel embodies both these principles *in* the person of Jesus Christ – *The King of Kings* who is the *Savior*.

And yet, at the very beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God, Mark immediately tells of John the Baptist. *Why is this? Who was this John the Baptist?*

READ vv. 2-4a

The very beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ starts with a confirmation of the fulfillment of prophecy—in this case a combination of Exodus 23:20; Mal. 3:1 and Isa. 40:3. Mark carefully picked these passages *not only* to show that John the Baptist was the spoken of

¹ C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, The Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989), 36.

messenger and herald, *but also* to make a statement as to the identity of Jesus—the One whom he announced.

Exodus 23 alludes to the first Exodus of the people of God from Egypt. Particularly, it recalls the *angel*, a term also translated as *messenger*, who was sent to go before the people of God, as they were *lead out of the wilderness* into the Promised Land. This is *a reminder* to the people of God concerning *how* they *met* God in the wilderness, *came* into his covenant, and were *then delivered* into the land which he had promised.

Isaiah 40:3, which was our OT reading this morning, is also tied into the chain of quotations. The prophecy there is that *it is from the wilderness* the herald, the “voice,” cries. The way in the wilderness is prepared for none other than Yahweh himself—the creator God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

These two references set the stage for the third, in Mal. 3:1: “*Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.*” The messenger’s preparation is for the coming of the Lord God himself, who comes to his people—In this coming, *the second exodus from the wilderness* is inaugurated, and he brings *the final deliverance* for the people of God (addressed in Mal. 3:16-18).²

On the heels of these prophecies, Mark then ties *their fulfillment* to historic events—the *ministry* of John, and the *coming* of Jesus.

Why do you think it was significant for Mark to describe in v. 6 what John was wearing?

READ v. 6

Two reasons seem evident for this description: First, John’s clothing was that of a prophet as described in Zech. 13:4; Second, his clothing would have brought to mind the image of Elijah the prophet, for it was *almost exactly* what Elijah wore as described in 2 Kings 1:8. For that matter, the prophecies Mark had already quoted were, in the Jewish mind, *already linked* with the coming of Elijah—the Malachi quote in particular. Mal. 4:5: “*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.*”

The garb of a prophet, worn by John, was very significant. It had been 400 years since God had sent a prophet to his people. After so long, *suddenly* a prophet *appears* in the wilderness to the people of Judea *invoking* the image of the great prophet Elijah. For the Jews, this was as if, after so long a time, God was speaking to them again!

So, what was this prophet – John the Baptist – doing? He was... READ vv. 4b-5

The whole country of Judea, which included Jerusalem, was in a stir—they all headed out to the wilderness to see and hear this prophet. We even know that Herod, the King, had heard John.

Mark has a particular focus here. He specifically points out John’s preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. *Repentance*, in this context, is essentially a commitment to turn back to God *in obedience* to His will. To seal this commitment, John was baptizing people who repented, which was actually a pretty radical move.

So why was baptism so radical? Well, first of all, baptism had deep O.T. roots *back to the Law*, and it was tied into washing in connection with repentance. But more importantly, culturally, the Jews exercised *proselyte-baptism*. In other words, to become a Jew it was *necessary* to be baptized. C.E.B. Cranfield comments on this baptism of John’s:

² See William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 46.

The implication of his baptism was that Jews did not have a right to membership in the people of God by the mere fact that they were Jews... by their sins they had become as Gentiles and now they needed as radical a repentance as did Gentiles, if they were to have any part in God's salvation.³

It was a major wakeup call! Combined with the rest of John's message, the *alarms* to get ready for something *really big*, something that was *imminent*, should have been ringing loud in their head!

So, what was the rest of John's message? READ v. 7-8

The One who would baptize with the Holy Spirit could only be one person—the promised Messiah! —the hoped-for King and deliverer of God's people! Isaiah had prophesied of the time of salvation when the Spirit would be poured out on the people in 44:3: "*I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring and my blessing on your descendents....*" Joel and Ezekiel *also* spoke of this same bestowal of the Spirit in the last days. *Now*, a prophet of God was announcing *the imminent presence* of the One who would bring this blessing. Overwhelmed with hope, the people responded in droves *to prepare* for the coming of the promised Messiah.

Who is this promised Messiah? Starting in v. 9, we see *that promised one*, the one who is the Lord God, the King, the Deliverer of his people, the One who would baptize with the Holy Spirit, is none other than Jesus of Nazareth.

Consider the problems we have in this world. Consider all our problems as a human race. The wilderness of *sin* and *death* is everywhere. *In the world* we see war, oppression, genocide. Even *in our country* there are continual problems of hatred, division, and strife. *Individually* people struggle with all sorts of problems: problems in marriage, parenting, work, finances, even with their neighbors. The list goes on and on.

But you know, *every one* of our troubles has its root in sin. This bit of wisdom is the secret to *spiritual care*, by the way, what some call counseling.

So often, when people have come to me, as a pastor, for help, they share with me their *wilderness*—their *trouble*, their *hurt*, their *misery*. Over the years, what I've seen (and others have also observed this in their ministry), I've seen that so often, at *the very root* of their trouble, what has put them in the wilderness, is some sin—perhaps, even a sin they haven't realized is in their life. Repeatedly, *the solution* (or at least getting them on the right path to a solution), the solution to their troubles is found in the acknowledgement of their sin. And, perhaps, the sin is even *a refusal to forgive someone else's sin* against them.

This first step can be rather difficult, as so many people self-justify their sin. But, after that first step, then there comes *repentance*, and *they receive the forgiveness* that is only found in Jesus Christ—the healing and the comfort that comes with *reconciliation with God*. Jesus meets them in their wilderness, and he leads them out of the wilderness.

Maybe this scenario sounds familiar to you. In the wilderness, Jesus comes to save us. Because of his work, *when we repent* our sins *we actually are forgiven* by the Lord. As the Scriptures say: "*If we repent our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" And so, Jesus leads us *from* the wilderness *to* the Promised Land, *the Kingdom of God*, in which his people dwell even now.

If you have never answered Jesus' call to follow him in faith, as your Savior, know that you are out in the wilderness separated from God. The fact is that everyone who has not trusted in Jesus as his or her Savior, and answered his call to follow him will die, lost in the wilderness.

³ Cranfield, 43.

So, *if* you are not a Christian, you are lost with no means of finding your way out *on your own*. You will die there, *unless* you follow the one who comes to rescue you.

But, *the good news* is, your rescuer is right before you now. Jesus Christ, the Savior, *has* come to you in your wilderness, and he's saying, "Follow me!" Hear his call, follow him. And he will lead you out of the wilderness into the eternal joy that comes from being one of his redeemed people.

Jesus meets us in the wilderness. *He* is the promised One, and *without him* the wilderness will swallow us whole.

Proposition: Because of our need for a Savior in the wilderness, we must follow Jesus.