
A LONG LENT

MARK 1:9-15

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2021 BY THE REV. BRUCE PUCKETT

It's been a long Lent. Ok. We're only 4 days in, but it's what I've kept saying over the last year. It's been a long Lent. You likely know that Lent is the season of the church year where we spend the 40 days leading up to Easter, not counting Sundays, journeying with Jesus on his way to the cross. Lent is a time marked by prayer and fasting, self-denial and humble turning toward God and neighbor. During Lent we confront our mortality, our brokenness, and our need of a savior. The metaphorical location we emphasize during the 40 days of Lent is the wilderness, even as we remember Jesus spending 40 days in the wilderness. In our worship together, we adjust some of our regular practices like not saying or singing hallelujahs, not having flowers in our worship space, and using purple as our liturgical color.

If you are familiar with the Chapel, you know that we have three altars in the building. There is the main altar here in the chancel, there is one in Memorial Chapel, and there is one in the crypt. Typically, I change the frontals on the altars with the liturgical season. But call it laziness or simply a recognition of the situation we've been in, but I have left the crypt altar covered in the purple of Lent since last year. This whole time of Covid19 shutdown has felt like one long Lent—a journey in the wilderness, a trek through the desert with no clear end in sight—so the frontal in the crypt has remained purple. I suspect there haven't been many hallelujahs down there either. It's been a long Lent.

But let's be real, the Covid19 pandemic hasn't been the longest Lent. It hasn't been the longest time traversing the wilderness we've experienced in our community, in this country, or in our world. Lent as a wilderness journey has been much longer in other regards. We can name some of the other deserts, some of the other wildernesses that are so prevalent among us. We're in Black History month. It's a month where we remember and celebrate the stories of Black Americans who despite the odds stacked against them have contributed greatly to the world. We have a month where we focus on recovering some of the stories of the ignored people and events that have shaped American life. We do this because for so long the stories of Black women and men have been overlooked, under-told, ignored all together, or stolen so the glory could go to white folks. Because of the racist history of our country and the ongoing impact of systemic racism in the present, people who don't pass for white have so often been trapped in long-lasting deserts and caught in perpetual wildernesses, where life is difficult, and death is dominant. It's been a long Lent.

Racism isn't the only long desert journey we've experienced. There is the devastating wilderness of violence within our city and our whole world. This morning we remembered the 38 people who were murdered in Durham just in the last year. Ronald and Rebecca, Trayvion and Tama, Philip and Paulette... And the names go on. We've included some form of this remembrance in our worship services over the last 4 years in partnership with the Religious Coalition for a Nonviolent Durham. This year the Religious Coalition will have their 29th Annual Vigil remembering the victims of homicide in our city. And the vigils could have started before then. If you live in our community, you know that the lack of value for human life that results in it being snuffed out without it really affecting many in Durham is simply staggering.

These are certainly not the only deserts or wildernesses we're experiencing in our communities. There are the deserts of homelessness, food insecurity, lack of healthcare, unemployment and underemployment, failing educational systems, an unjust criminal justice system, and these are just a few of the communal ones. I haven't even mentioned the individual wilderness experiences we know so well like lost jobs, addiction relapses, failed relationships, devastating diagnoses, and the death loved ones. Our individual and communal wilderness wanderings have been long. It's been a long Lent.

The scripture lesson from Mark tells us that the heavens were ripped open as Jesus came up out of the baptismal waters of the Jordan. The Spirit of God came down and entered Jesus as he heard God's voice proclaiming who he is—the beloved Son of God. And immediately, with no time to sort out what that meant or to bask in the glory of it, the very Spirit that entered Jesus threw him into the wilderness. Let Lent begin! Mark makes no mistake. God's Spirit drove Jesus to that place marked by lack, and testing, and trial—to the wilderness. While he was there, Jesus faced every test possible. The material and the spiritual world united in the dangers they brought—Satan tested and the wild beasts surrounded. To quote another biblical author, “in every respect [Jesus] was tested as we are” (Hebrews 4:15).

And Jesus spent a long 40 days there. He was like the people of Israel who spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness as they journeyed from slavery in Egypt to the promised land. God's people faced trial and temptation. They failed to be faithful, and they received forgiveness. They turned to idols, and they turned back to God. Jesus was like Moses who spent 40 days in prayer for the people of God while on Mount Sinai. Jesus symbolically reenacted these stories and others when he went into the wilderness for those 40 days. In short, Jesus went into the wilderness, the desert, the time of trial because people before him and beside him had and have experienced wilderness, and desert, and times of trial.

Jesus entered the wilderness because the Spirit drove him to the place where humanity encounters struggle and trial and tribulation. Jesus entered the wilderness because God's people throughout history and even now face hardship and testing of all kinds. The Spirit drove Jesus to the wilderness because so often that is where we are. Most of the time it is not that we follow Jesus to the wilderness. No. Jesus goes to the wilderness because humankind can't help but find ourselves in the wilderness over and over. And though Jesus spent those 40 days alone, he joined the throngs of humanity past and present who know all too well the realities of long times spent in the wilderness.

We may very well be in a long Lent. Perhaps it even feels perpetual for some. But Lent is not a journey without company. The wilderness is not a place abandoned by God. The desert is not a place devoid of Jesus. No. The Spirit drives Jesus right out into the wilds with us. There is surely hope in the hallowed presence of the Savior with us in the midst of the mess and the misery. There is surely comfort found when we recognize that Christ is our compassionate companion who comes alongside us right where we are. The wilderness does not seem so relentless, so crushing, so devastating, so final when we know that Jesus has entered it with us.

After those 40 days, after experiencing the challenges of the wilderness, after the testing and the trials, Jesus began his ministry. Surprisingly, he departed the desert with a word of good news on his lips. The experience of the wilds settled for Jesus what was spoken as the skies were torn open. The drama in the desert confirmed the truth of Jesus's identity as God's beloved Son and propelled him to proclamation. So Jesus began proclaiming the good news that the time had come for “God's intentions for humanity and all creation” to be realized.¹ The time had come where God's ways of life and love would interrupt the ways of death and hatred, revealing that God's ways would finally win. Just as the heavens were ripped open at Jesus's baptism, so the old ways of the world marked by death, and disease, and decay were being ripped open as well.

The message, the good news, that Jesus proclaimed was world altering. It was more mind bending than Galileo saying the earth orbited the Sun. It was more reality shifting than a 17th Century enslaved person declaring chattel slavery in North America would end. It was more imagination altering than rovers landing on Mars and sending pictures back to earth. Jesus came out of the wilderness proclaiming a message that required a new kind of imagination and a new kind of trust in God. He “announce[d] the dawn of a new era and a new state of affairs, one in which God rules.”² Jesus proclaimed, “The kingdom of God is at hand.” In Jesus, God's kingdom has arrived. It's on the loose. And it's ultimately unstoppable. So Jesus says, “Repent and believe.” God's ways will blow our

¹ Matt Skinner, Commentary on Mark 1:9-15, February 22, 2015, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-mark-19-15-3>

² Ibid.

minds and demand our trust. What Jesus called for was not merely a turning from wrong ways of being and doing nor was it some sort of mental affirmation of belief. No. Jesus departed the desert calling for the total reorientation of people's hearts, minds, and imaginations to the kingdom God initiated—that's what repent means. And Jesus walked out of the wilderness calling for an ongoing, gut-level trust in God that would allow for living the ways of God's kingdom—that's what believe means. While the wilderness had the potential to wreck any conviction that God was setting the world right and making things new, for Jesus it only solidified the fact. The wilderness was the proving ground for the truth of God's reign and rule breaking in.

What would it even mean for us for our long Lents to be the places that make us more certain of the good news of God's ways? Can you even imagine the dry and desert places of our lives being the spaces where our confidence grows that God's love and justice finally prevail? What would it be like for God to turn the wilds of the wilderness into the locations where God's love for us becomes more certain and our love for each other grows stronger? It sounds like it would take our minds being blown and us placing our whole trust in God. It sounds a lot like it would take repenting and believing. Jesus calls a different kind of community into being. Jesus calls for a community marked by repentance and belief—a community where minds and hearts are transformed by the reality of God's ways and where there is steadfast trust in God. And it's in this community that the truth of God's love and justice becomes more certain even when life gets tough in the desert places.

When our minds have been blown open to the reality of God's kingdom come near, we start to recognize the breaking-in of God's ways in our everyday. As a community of Christ together, we see the reality of God ruling even in the midst of the messes, in the deserts of death, in our weariness in the wildernesses. We see an interruption to the long Lent of racism in the humanity affirming, dignity demanding, *imago dei* asserting proclamation that Black Lives Matter. We recognize an interruption to the long Lent of violence in our city in the gathering of community members to mourn murder victims and declare that we all have lost as a result of the violence. We witness an interruption in the long Lent of the affordable housing crisis in our city in the contagious smile of a new Habitat homeowner. We observe an interruption to the long Lent of cycles of addiction in the "Day 1" chip collected again as if for the first time by a person striving for sobriety. Can't you see these holy interruptions all around?

It's been a long Lent. But I want to let you in on a little secret held by this community called the church. It's Sunday. And I've been reminded by this particular church community that we have Sundays *in* Lent, not Sundays *of* Lent. And the difference in these two-letter words is enormous. You see, for the community of Christ, Sundays are a day of blessed interruption *in* Lent not simply another day *of* Lent. Sundays in Lent are little Easters, just as they are all year long. Sundays are holy reminders that all of our wilderness journeys, all of our desert testing, all of the dry and weary places will finally be met with resurrection. Sundays are little reminders that the struggle will not be forever, that new life will come, that resurrection is a truer reality than death. Sundays are the day where we see that the holy light of Easter breaks in and tears open the skies of whatever challenge or struggle or hardship or injustice or death we experience. And Sundays train us to see all week long that the time has been fulfilled and God's kingdom has come near. It's been a Long Lent. But it's Sunday! Thanks be to God!