

“In the Wilderness”

Valley Presbyterian Church – October 18, 2026

3rd Sunday in the Season of Creation

Joel 1:11-20

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Mark 1:9-13

Sometimes, the places that we consider safe and tame, cultivated and well-developed become wilderness. The prophet Joel writes of the destruction of wheat and barley fields, about withering vines and fig trees: there are no more apples or pomegranates, for all of them have dried up.

In response to this wildness of nature, we are called to remember how God gifts us with food to grow and cultivate, but also that destruction sometimes will come; whether from drought or torrents of rain; extreme heat, cold, or wind. There are times when the storehouses are empty and herds cannot find good pasture. Even the wild animals, the prophet argues, cry out to God because their waters have dried up and fires devour field and forest.

As the crown of all creation, humanity has been entrusted with the stewardship of the world and all its inhabitants. “The animals,” writes Old Testament scholar Elizabeth Achtemeier, “know to whom to direct their cry, while we most likely will deny our sinfulness and persist in our evil ways, frantically searching our technology or science, our medical knowledge or political resources for some means of correcting the situation apart from God. Joel reminds us that where God is deserted, the forces of death reign.”¹

Throughout the long history of the Jewish people, the desert wilderness has served as both a place of danger and discovery. It is where God led them after their release from bondage in Egypt; and it is where, over the period of forty years, they were tested, formed and provided for as a people; and it is also the place through which they traveled on the way to a land promised to them by God to be their destination and home.

¹ Elizabeth Achtemeier in *New Interpreters' Bible Commentary*, vol. 7

John the Baptizer invited people into the wilderness to reflect on their history and their ethos as people, but the wilderness serves as much as metaphor as literal space. It is a moment of reckoning and moral transformation that will lead the people to participate in the way of the Lord; the pathway to a new kingdom being inaugurated by Jesus is through the wilderness.²

In all three of the so-called synoptic gospels, Jesus is taken to the wilderness for a time of testing. In Matthew and Luke, three specific temptations are described, with extensive dialogues with the devil to boot. Mark's temptation is meager by comparison; comprised of just two verses.

Unlike in the other gospels, here in Mark the Holy Spirit – having entered into Jesus at his baptism – “immediately drove” (literally, “threw [Jesus] out” into the wilderness for a period of forty days. This same verb will appear elsewhere in Mark when Jesus “exorcises” or casts out unclean spirits. During the temptation, the stage is already being set between Jesus and all of the forces – natural, human, and spiritual - that would try to impede Jesus from ultimately fulfilling his God-given mission.³

After only thirteen verses, we can see that Mark's gospel aims to paint the ministry of Jesus as confrontational. He has come to combat and perhaps defeat forces determined to counteract God's intentions for human well-being. The first extensively narrated incident of his public ministry in Mark will be an exorcism; the antagonists in Mark are not just human ignorance and religious or political authorities, they are spiritual forces: things that oppress human bodies and minds and defy human attempts to subdue them. The world Jesus inhabits is described as a dangerous place.

Something about Jesus' experience in the wilderness should capture our imagination. Served or protected by the presence of angels, we are told that Jesus is “with the wild beasts.” Just what's going on out there in the wilderness?

One perspective says that Mark evokes hopes of a restored or new creation coming into being. If these wild beasts pose no threat to Jesus, if he sleeps with his head on a lion's back and with a wolf alongside him for warmth, then creation – at

² Raj Nadella in “Interpreting Mark”

³ Matt Skinner from *WorkingPreacher.com*

least this outpost within it – has been transformed. The world is at peace with itself. Through Jesus, as a result of victories he will win over powers of chaos and destruction, harmony will come to earth.

Another perspective interprets this protection of the angels in Mark as demonstrating God's provision for Jesus; assuring readers that God will not leave the "Beloved Son" entirely vulnerable to the ravages of the world. In this reading, the wild beasts have not been made safe; rather they are kept at bay so Jesus enjoys protection. The dangers are real, but in this forty-day, life-or-death, Holy Spirit authorized struggle, Jesus will not be harmed by them.

Like the prophet Joel, we recognize the wildness of creation and the ways that our human choices affect our ability to find harmony with the world around us. As our buildings encroach upon the land around us, coyotes and bears seem to appear more often. When rivers are dammed upstream, there will not be enough water to reach the communities that lie downstream. These decisions and many more like them result in an imbalance with creation and competition over land and natural resources. We are reminded that caring for the world and its inhabitants are a part of our spiritual calling as God's people.

And we know that perilous forces dwell also in places other than the wilderness. This week's school shooting in Oregon reminds us of the ways that our society places even innocent children in harm's way. Jesus showed us, throughout his time in ministry on earth, the need to pay attention to the needs and voices of the most vulnerable among us. In keeping with Christ's teaching, the church is called to help the sick and the poor, the widow, orphan, and immigrant, but also to work for structural changes to provide equity and justice.

Lutheran theologian David Jacobsen reflects on the way God's people continue to play with Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous paraphrase of Theodore Parker: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." This expression is founded upon the idea that God has already built the principle of transformative justice into the created order. This may be true enough, but a variation on that quote, that has gained some traction of late, changes the verb from the intransitive "bends" to the active, transitive "bend;" as in, our task and calling as followers of Christ is to be *benders of the arc*. In the wilderness of creation, and

in the structures and institutions we have formed within it, perhaps even “God’s work” is placed into “our hands.”⁴

Thus, as God’s people, we are called to put our efforts into carving schools to educate and provide opportunity in remote places that were once unreachable; and to build health clinics and hospitals where disease used to ravage unprotected populations. We are tasked with providing access to fresh produce for those neighborhoods that are considered food deserts. And we are challenged to see decent, accessible housing for those in our community as a matter of dignity and human rights rather than an often-unaffordable privilege.

Yes, dangers exist among us; in both the literal and metaphorical wild places in which we live and move and have our being. As individuals and communities, we are constantly at risk of succumbing to the forces of greed and fear: believing that there will not be enough to go around and, so, we must take extreme measures to build walls and protect ourselves. We imagine that by prioritizing our own needs and wants, we can keep the trials and wild animals at bay.

But, here, in the gospels, we hear of Jesus being led – or cast out – into the wilderness where he relies on the protection of the angels; and we see, throughout his life, how he reaches out to the people around him – welcoming, feeding, healing, forgiving and restoring them to their communities – in ways that bend the arc of the world toward greater justice.

Maybe, friends, there are ways that we are, likewise, being called or led into some wilderness place – literal or metaphorical – in order to participate in this ongoing quest for justice. It may be that we are also tasked with being benders of the arc, in small or large ways, by helping to restore creation or mend relationships or lead people into greater acceptance, opportunity, or health. And like our Lord, this might require us to overcome our fear of danger and allow the Holy Spirit to take us somewhere we may have never imagined we might go. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁴ David Schnasa Jacobsen in *WorkingPreacher.com*