

Someone surmised the other day that Mark is my favorite gospel. I pondered that. But no! My favorite depends on which one I'm reading. Overall, I'd probably pick Luke's gospel. It has the most beloved stories, including the familiar Christmas story the other gospels don't have.

But Mark does do something uniquely compelling. More than the other gospels, Mark uses well-chosen verbs and one-liners to get points across rather than going on and on. Like today's temptation story – Mark tells it in 2 verses while Matthew needs 11 and Luke 14!

Out of these temptation stories, Mark might be my favorite. It's not cluttered with all manner of detail. It's point is Jesus is over his head for a while – in a time of disequilibrium before he arrives home again.

Wilderness is a time of disorientation – like disorientations we can all go through. The good news is, disorientations can be a purposeful times and can end in a return to equilibrium, orientation and home – like T.S. Eliot said, “as if for the first time.”

What Jesus models so beautifully in his wilderness is a return to God. Jesus comes home to his truest self as God's child. At the end of those 40 days, Jesus even changes Mark's naming of the gospel. In verse 1 Mark had called it “the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Jesus now names it anew.

It's as if Jesus corrects Mark, “Nope! – not the gospel of Jesus. This is the gospel of God.” It is interesting to read Mark 1:1 “the good news of Jesus Christ” next to Mark 1:14 “the good news of God.”

Perhaps that's the best any of us can do as we face whatever's within and around us impeding God's goodness. The best we might do is remember we don't have to be saviors. We don't have to try to strong arm the fears of the world or the fear in our hearts. We can choose like Jesus to instead wait upon or breathe into the mystery Mark's gospel is telling.

The life-giving truth is – **God has us; God has the world; and God who has us is love, is present, and is as near to us are our own breath.**

There are powers that seem to rule the world. Wars are afoot – in Ukraine, in Gaza, but skirmishes are afoot all over, including in this country, our neighborhoods, our families, our own hearts.

In all three gospels, the temptation stories come on the heels of Jesus' baptism – and in Mark, it's while Jesus is still dripping wet. And Mark says the Spirit “throws” or “casts” Jesus into the wilderness – propels him into vulnerability and *wilderness* – causing us to think scary, insecure, dangerous, isolating.

Feel those words: Scary. Insecure. Dangerous. Isolating. The Spirit of God – who is love – propels Jesus into that kind of time. Why?

Because Jesus was ready for it. Jesus had been touched by the most important thing any of us can come to know. In Jesus' baptism, he was caught up in the truth in general and his life in specific. The heavens – or the overarching wider truth – opened up to him – dawned on him.

Jesus awakens to the sheer goodness of his own life. He belongs to the one who created the heavens in the first place – the one who set the bow in the sky saying life can be beautiful and safe after the storm.

Our Creator not only claims Jesus but names him Beloved and affirmed. *“With you I am well pleased.”*

Hear this, friends. “You are beloved” – not just in general, but in specific! **You** are claimed, credited with worth by the creator of heaven and earth!

God Almighty opens for you this reality – your very existence pleases and delights God. Jesus had heard this at this baptism, and from that place of grace the Spirit knew Jesus was ready to face the real world where life is scary, insecure, dangerous, and isolating – but not only that.

The life-giving Spirit didn't shield Jesus from the real world because it's not only scary, insecure, dangerous, and isolating. The real world is also beautifully rainbow-graced and incredibly exciting.

The Spirit guided Jesus through the suffering so he could also experience this extraordinary good. In order to live fully and freely in the real world, Jesus – like us – needed to feel safe – to know God is always present.

Look at what happens in the wilderness where the Spirit sends Jesus. The text says Jesus is surrounded by wild beasts. And none of them harm him.

The Spirit knew Jesus was ready to now look wild beasts in the eye – and simply say “Hello.” The monsters under our beds aren’t really monsters when the lights are on and we’re held in loving arms. This is what Jesus discovers in this wilderness.

Mark’s brief gospel with its choosy way with words – doesn’t have throw-away comments. These phrases are important: “Jesus is with wild beasts and is waited on by angels.” The wild beasts are toothless. And the word “angel” means “messenger of God.” The angels are signs Jesus is safe, out of danger and not isolated. Jesus is waited on by the near presence of God.

We are deeply loved and the one who creates us is “Well pleased” also with us. The text uses “Beloved.” Such a great word. “Be-loved.” Whatever you step foot into in this new week, breathe first of this truth.

You are Beloved of God. Our belovedness is more authoritative than all the scary beasts we face.

Turn to a neighbor – even if across the aisle – and I’ll say to our Zoomers “You are beloved. You are beloved.” This is most certainly true!

Let us now sing together of this:

*“As we journey through this season, pilgrims through a thirsty land,  
quench us with your living presence; guide us with your loving hand.”*

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