

Wilderness

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

First Sunday of Lent/February 21, 2012

A Dialogue Sermon by Matt Matthews & Rachel Matthews

Mark 1:9-15

Matt: Have you ever felt like you were lost in a wilderness?

Rachel: Have you ever felt the forces of heaven and earth were conspiring against you?

MATT: Have you ever felt lost and sore alone?

RACHEL: Consider little *Alexander*, the star of Judith Viorst's famous children's book:

MATT: "I went to sleep with gum in my mouth and now there's gum in my hair and when I got out of bed this morning I tripped on the skateboard and by mistake I dropped my sweater in the sink while the water was running and I could tell it was going to be . . .

(read in unison)

Matt & RACHEL: . . . a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.

RACHEL: Ever had a day like that? A season like that? A *pandemic* like that?

MATT: Friends and family we know and love are in and out of treatments for chronic illnesses. Life, itself, sometimes feels like an illness.

RACHEL: The newspaper is filled with stories of the wilderness. A friend is getting a divorce . . . A parent of a friend has been diagnosed with Alzheimers disease . . . A young husband gets word from an army chaplain that his wife has been killed in a training accident . . . Things are going right along, and suddenly, the rug of your existence is pulled out from under you. And down you fall, down, down, down.

MATT: "Lord, have mercy, on my tired, sad, sad soul . . .
By your mercy, make your broken people whole . . ."

RACHEL: Have you ever felt like you were lost in a wilderness?

MATT: Have you ever felt like you were lost in a wilderness and that you'd never, ever find your way out?

RACHEL: The wilderness can be a dark, scary place. It's easy to fall prey to wild animals. Temptation is one of those animals.

MATT: The scriptures say that satan tempted Jesus.

RACHEL: When I am in the wilderness, I am sometimes tempted. I'm tempted to let the doubts overshadow me—swallow me.

MATT: I'm tempted to stop believing God.

RACHEL: I'm tempted to find my hope in lesser things.

MATT: I'm tempted to selfishness.

Matt & RACHEL: Have you ever been lost in the wilderness?

RACHEL: When Jesus was baptized, it was a glorious moment.

MATT: When Jesus was baptized, it was a glorious moment.

RACHEL: Water, love, light, happy people. Then the heavens opened up and it became even more glorious.

MATT: "You are my son," God's voice shouted out, "the Beloved. With you I am well-pleased."

Matt & RACHEL: (Sung) "Baptized in water, sealed by the Spirit,
Marked with the sign of Christ, our King;
Born of the Spirit, we are God's children,
Joyfully now God's praises we sing."^[1]

RACHEL: It's a beautiful moment. But notice in Mark's gospel the people don't linger by the River Jordan.

MATT: There's no reception or after-church potluck. No congratulations. No time to bask in the moment.

RACHEL: Hey, this sounds like last week's sermon. Peter, James and John enjoy the moment of transfiguration on the mountain with Jesus, and before they even get to enjoy it, Jesus leads them down the mountain and they get back to work.

MATT: Yes, there's a parallel. After this baptism wonder, Mark tells us . . .

RACHEL: . . . Listen for the Word of the Lord . . .

MATT: Mark tell us, "And the Spirit immediately *drove* [Jesus] out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts."

RACHEL: Luke and Matthew's gospels report that Jesus was "*led*" by the Spirit into the wilderness. There is no such gentleness in Mark.^[2] In Mark's gospel . . .

MATT: . . . In Mark's gospel, Jesus is *driven* out in to the wilderness.

RACHEL: Jesus is expelled into the wilderness.

MATT: We don't usually volunteer to go into the wilderness. It's usually not something we choose. We don't decide to go into the wilderness so much as we just end up there. Everything is going fine. Then we trip, we fall, we bump our head. When we wake up, the world around us has changed.

Matt & RACHEL: Have you ever been in the wilderness?

MATT: There is good news.

RACHEL: There is good news?

MATT: When we find ourselves lost in the wilderness, there is good news. God still speaks. When Jesus was baptized (and when he was on the Mount of Transfiguration), the heaven's opened and God spoke. God speaks to *us*.

RACHEL: God speaks to us in the wilderness?

MATT: God speaks to us in the wilderness.

Matt & RACHEL: God speaks to us in the wilderness.

RACHEL: It's like that TV commercial where the technician goes into remote areas to test the reception.^[3] God keeps asking Jesus, "Can you hear me now? Can you hear me now?" At the Jordan River, coming out of the waters of Baptism, God says, "Jesus, I am with you. *Can you hear me now?*"

MATT: In the desert where the wild things are where Jesus is tested by Satan, God says, "Jesus, I am with you. *Can you hear me now?*"

RACHEL: In the middle of angry crowds, God says, "Jesus, I am with you. *Can you hear me now?*"

MATT: In the garden on the night Jesus was arrested and betrayed, God says, "Jesus, I am with you. *Can you hear me now?*"

RACHEL: In the trial when all his friends have deserted him, God says,

Matt & RACHEL: "Jesus, I am with you. *Can you hear me now?*"

MATT: After the trial when all his friends are long gone, and they are beating him, they are swearing at him, they are gambling for his clothes, God says,

Matt & RACHEL: "Jesus, I am with you. *Can you hear me now?*"

RACHEL: On the cross . . .

MATT: (Stretch out arms. Pause. Read.) "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*"

RACHEL: On the cross, God says, "Jesus, I am with you. *Can you hear me now?*"

MATT: Is the baptismal promise true: that water reminds us that we are part of God's family? And as part of God's family we are never alone? Is it true? Is it true that the one who was with Jesus is with us?

RACHEL: Is it true that the one who was with Jesus is with us even for the long haul, even through the valley of the shadow of death, even in the wilderness?

MATT: So, can we hear God's voice, "I am with you," even when we're having a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day?

RACHEL: God is with us in the wilderness. No, it's not pleasant in the briars. It's nerve wracking. It's like dangerous animals stare us down, but God is with us.

MATT: And God sends comfort. Remember, angels waited on Jesus when he suffered in the wilderness.

RACHEL: It is in the wilderness that we sometimes find out—maybe for the first time—who is in our corner . . . who God has sent to love us, to help us, to listen to us, to remind us that we aren't alone and that we don't have to know all the answers.

MATT: Have you ever been lost, sore afraid? Have you ever felt cast out, or run over? Have you ever been in the wilderness?

RACHEL: I have. I have been in the wilderness. And I have been plucked out of the wilderness.

MATT: I have been accompanied through the wilderness.

RACHEL: I have been let out, delivered, rescued from the wilderness.

MATT: Angels-on-earth, sent by God, have come to me. They have appeared to me and brought humor . . .

RACHEL: Love . . .

MATT: Fried Chicken . . .

RACHEL: Friendship . . .

MATT: When we are in the wilderness, God is with us.

RACHEL: When we are in the wilderness, God is with us through the presence of friends and “angels unawares.”

MATT: And another thing . . .

Matt & RACHEL: And this is important!

MATT: Our time in the wilderness doesn’t last forever.

RACHEL: God says, “Can you hear me now—when you are afraid?”

MATT: “Can you hear me now—when you feel all alone?”

RACHEL: “Can you hear me now—when you don’t know where to turn?”

MATT: Shhhhh . . .

RACHEL: . . . Listen.

MATT: *Listen* for the word of the Lord:

RACHEL: “And the Spirit immediately drove [Jesus] out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts;

MATT: and the angels waited on him.

RACHEL: Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying,

Matt & RACHEL: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

MATT: Good News: even the dark isn’t dark to God.

RACHEL: Good News: even the faraway isn't faraway to God.

MATT: Good News: God is not afraid of the wild beasts.

RACHEL: Good News: And we are not alone.

Matt & RACHEL: Alleluia.

MATT: Amen.

RACHEL: And Amen.

^[1] "Baptized in Water" Glory to God Presbyterian Hymnal.

^[2] See Phyllis Kersten, *Living by The Word/Reflections on the Lectionary*, p. 20, Christian Century, Feb 22, 2012.

^[3] Kersten, *ibid*.