

February 25, 2018
Mark 1:9-15
Desert Places
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In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.

He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.' *Words of God for the people of God. Let us pray. Gracious God, bless these ancient words that they may become your living word in us moving us to hear your good news in desperate times. We pray in Christ's name, amen.*

In 2007, I won the lottery – not the state lottery but Columbia Presbyterian Seminary in Atlanta's lottery for a grant to travel to the Holy Land. Billed as a pilgrimage for mid-career pastors, it was a two week, all-expense paid excursion to Israel. I found out about it because the mother of the person who was in charge of the program at Columbia just happened to be a member at the church where I then was serving in Knoxville, Tennessee. So, I, along with several thousand other pastors from across the nation applied. I was not really expecting to be chosen.

So when I was, I was ecstatic; and, in February of 2007, I joined 25 other ministers spanning eight different denominations on a trip of a lifetime. We had professors from the seminary with us to help lead the pilgrimage. And unlike other American trips to the Holy Land, we were not herded to as many places as we could possibly squeeze in, in fourteen days. We stayed in only two places: the city of Tiberius on the Sea of Galilea and Jerusalem just across the street from the New Gate leading into the Old City.

Our touring consisted of only half day trips from our hotel. Each day, upon our return, we were given free time to reflect, journal and pray. We worshipped together every night. So we entered this wonderful rhythm of emersion in the Biblical Promised Land followed by removal to secluded spots, followed by communal worship together. It was an outstanding retreat.

The photos you have in your bulletin were taken on that trip and they reflect a couple of the wide open unpopulated places that we toured. In fact, I was shocked at just how much open, undeveloped land there still is in Israel and how well the open land – both the desert and the plush mountain valleys, lent themselves to reflection and prayer and the sparking of the imagination.

I included those in your bulletin today, because either one of these places could very well have been the one to which Jesus went for the forty days immediately following his baptism.

The Greek word describing where it is that Jesus went is ἔρημον which means a deserted place, a desolate place, a place out, away from people. That said then, the place that Jesus may have gone could have been either a literal desert of which there is plenty in Israel or the more lush wilderness area to the north that you see in that top photo.

The point is that before Jesus runs headlong into his ministry, he has an experience of seclusion, of desolation – a wilderness experience out alone where he is driven to struggle with his humanity, his divinity and his mission.

I like to consider this Jesus' first miracle: the miracle of his humility. The first thing Jesus does for us is go down with us deep into our shared humanity. His whole life will be like this. It is well known that Jesus ended his career on a cross between two thieves; it deserves to be as well known that he began his ministry in the wilderness in a confrontation with his own dark human inclinations.

And the interesting thing is that this wilderness experience of desolation is absolutely required of Jesus – in all three of the synoptic gospel accounts.

So why was Jesus sent into the deep Judean wilderness? Because there were things Jesus needed to discover about himself that could only be discovered *there*.

There were things he needed to struggle with that could only be experienced in the wilderness.

There were things he could only be uncovered in the tussle, in the fight, in the wrestling with darkness incarnate.

In the summer between my first and second year of seminary. I took a unit of what was and is still known as Clinical Pastoral Education or CPE for short. CPE is a ten week clinical intensive where a pastoral candidate maintains regular hours at a hospital as a chaplain, as well as stays in the hospital overnight once a week in case of emergencies that arise in the night which require a chaplain. One then writes up conversations one has with patients and their families, verbatim, then presents them to the group for reflection and review.

This presentation is called “being on the hot seat.” And it is called the “hot seat” because it is not unusual as a young ministerial candidate to begin to sweat profusely as the group tears into your feeble attempts at pastoral care. And what ends up happening in CPE is that the darkness that most ministerial candidates are so good at hiding from everyone else is revealed in all its ugly glory

- every preconceived prejudice
- every dark assumption about another
- every dark impulse

It was brutal and also probably the one educational experience I had in seminary that actually did anything to really prepare me for ministry. I learned that one may be able to get to heaven on faith but if one is to become a minister, leading others into the kingdom of heaven, one is first

required to go through hell. In other words, the real grappling with the darker inclinations we all have but would just as soon pretend that we didn't.

And it is interesting. On the one hand, we good church people who have never really been forced to grapple with our darker selves are so very blessed. We have taken Christ at his word and he has carried our sin for us to the cross. To examine ourselves further just feels like naval gazing, self-centeredness; And besides, why look further when we have been freed to live fully by faith.

On the other hand, because of the place of privilege we occupy in accepting Christ's substitutionary atonement for our darkest sin, I think most of us *very* good church people are left ill-equipped to deal with the darkness in others and really share the good news of God's kingdom with those for whom the idea of simply "turning to Christ and all will be well" just doesn't have much traction. I am talking about those who are already suffering the consequences of having given in to the darkness and now just want a way – any way – out.

And why should our simple admonition to turn to Christ and come to worship with us mean anything to them? Those of us who have grown up in the church and have never *really* been tempted to stray, much less to give in to our darker temptations, may know little of our own predilection for destructive behavior and therefore barely have an inkling of what someone else who is struggling with the depth of their human darkness must be going through.

And that friends is why Jesus had to go into the deserted place of desolation to grapple with darkest parts of being human. He went there to experience the darkness so he could treat the darkness in us. It was not for *his* sake that he went there and struggled with the evil of which we are capable. It was for ours. He went there for us.

CPE is designed to do the same – not only to keep church leaders from inflicting their own darkness onto others, but to be given the compassion to help heal it when they see it. (pause)

How we interpret Christ and the cross matters. So maybe it is high time that we in the church stop acting as if substitutionary atonement is the *only* legitimate way of understanding it all.

To become ordained as pastor these days, regardless of the denomination, most are not required to undergo any type of extensive self-examination like CPE. In fact, I would go so far as to say that almost everything we do in our churches and seminaries encourages both our ministerial candidates and our elders to focus only on what is good in them – only on the "goodness" that sets them apart for ministry.

But, what if Jesus' desert experience wasn't just about him as Son of God? What if it was also meant as a model for leadership and evangelistic work in the church? What if everyone who was serious about leadership and discipling others was required to go through a kind of intensive, forty day encounter group designed to help one recognize and own one's own darkness – not as a way of tearing one down but as a way of giving one the proper tools to really deal with the darkness one will certainly encounter in others? Perhaps then, rather than knowing only how to simply welcome other good people who grew up in the church and therefore learned how to project their darkness onto Jesus, we would learn to reach out to those who are truly *in* the dark –

those for whom the only thing they know about Jesus and the church is the negative stuff they get through the mainstream media?

And please hear me. I am not saying that there is anything wrong with the theological concept of substitutionary atonement. The majority of Christians around the world have held that as the central meaning of the cross now for two millennia. But what if we have entered a time when something else may also be required? (Pause)

Every addict who is in recovery in AA or NA knows the acronym, HALT. HALT stand for hungry, angry, lonely and tired. Halt reminds the addict that they are human and that their internal states are real; they matter and they need to be tended to or else they can easily take one over and one is then back using again. So H-A-L-T reminds one to halt that is, stop and pay attention to when one is Hungry, Angry, Lonely or Tired.

You know, I believe many of us good people of faith – perhaps especially us good Reformed Presbyterians have been taught indirectly, if not directly, that it is really sinful to pay too close of attention to our internal states. It is selfish. We are supposed to focus on the other... But you know, there is only a hair's breadth between complete altruistic focus on the other to the exclusion of the self... and blame of the other for one's own neglected and therefore unconsciously demanding darker internal states.

There is great wisdom in self-monitoring where hunger, anger, loneliness and fatigue are concerned. These natural human conditions can make us vulnerable to the temptation towards manipulation, lashing out, or the desire to numb using one's substance of choice. But to recognize and admit that I get hungry, angry, lonely, tired – and really the list goes on – is to acknowledge that I am a vulnerable, contingent being. Not only to survive but to thrive, I must acknowledge that my existence depends on powers that are beyond me. The most selfish, evil leaning people in the world are those who deep down feel they can depend on no one else for anything. They are disconnected from the very source of life and so are empty, spending *their* lives sucking it out of others.

The temptation of Jesus tells us that to become whole human beings, capable of experiencing the Kingdom of God, we must face such times when the crowded life that allows us to ignore our own darkness must be left behind, when we must peer into the dark well of our own need, our lust for what we do not have, our weariness with what we do have, our temptation to do and be and possess far beyond our capacity, beyond God's callings for us. Kayla McClurg, "Calling a HALT," *Inward/Outward* e-newsletter for March 9, 2014. inwardoutward.org. Retrieved August 10, 2015.

What this text seems to suggest is that, like Jesus, we need to be pushed up against our limits, our limitations must be exposed.

This is the difficult, demanding, heart-breaking, achingly beautiful and gracious message of the gospel: There is liberation and release when we discover our limits. -Ken Kovacs, "A wild, wondrous journey," kekovacs.blogspot.com. Retrieved August 10, 2015.

I believe we have entered a time in which being told our limits no longer works. We must know them from our own experience – the experience of the wilderness. It would appear that the whole

world is now being thrown into a wilderness time – a time when arguing from a position of absolute authority – even if it is right – only causes people to rebel.

In his brilliant book, *Sinai & Zion*, biblical scholar Jon D. Levenson contrasts the legacy of these two Biblical mountains. Sinai, he reminds us, is the peak of the wilderness, the time of desert wandering of God's people. It was a time grounded in direct experience of God – a miraculous time, a time of plagues and revelations, of splitting seas and early discoveries of God.

Zion, on the other hand, the mountain of David is, symbolic of the heavenly state. There the great Temple of God is built. War is no more. The kingdom has been settled. Zion then, stands in contrast to Sinai. Sinai represents the chaotic prophetic tradition, Zion, the stable tradition of priests and of kings. Our Christian faith embraces the lessons of both mountains, the limits of humanity as represented by the law that was given at Sinai and the creation of a stable society at peace and rest that was the legacy of Zion.

Throughout our history we have benefitted from the dual legacy. In wanderings, we could look to Sinai for the presence of God that was portable and accompanied us through our exile – that spoke startling words of hope in a time of darkness, words of limitation in a time of human expansion. But our eyes were always fixed on Zion, that holy place of ultimate peace and fulfillment, that coveted place that reminded us that Sinai was a stop along the way to Zion. The return to Zion was a chance to realize the lessons of both mountains: the law and the land, the prophet and priest, the pilgrim and the citizen. Our wandering was really a journey. Rabbi David Wolpe, *Off the Pulpit* for May 30, 2013. sinaitemple.org. Retrieved December 14, 2015.

It is good to know which of these mountains we are on depending on the signs of the times. It would appear now that our journey as God's people takes us to the brink of the wilderness. And wilderness times at Sinai call for a different way of being faithful than knowing we have arrived at Zion.

A time of wilderness is a time when things are not at all clear. In the wilderness – removed from the normal routine stable environment we recognize, like Jesus, the many dark voices that are trying to run our lives in the background. There is a voice that says, "Prove that you are a good person."

Another voice says, "You need to be ashamed of yourself."

There is a voice that says, "Nobody really cares about you,"

And one that says, "Be sure to become successful, popular and powerful by all means possible."

Another still that says, "You know the truth better than everyone else. You are the exception and the ends for people like you justify the means."

But underneath all these, often very noisy voices, is the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit at our baptism. A voice that says, "You are my Beloved; my favor rests on you."

That's the voice we all need most of all to hear. To hear that voice, however, requires special

effort; it requires going to a deserted place of solitude, of silence, and a strong determination to listen.

But Henri Nouwen says “That’s what prayer *really* is. It is listening finally to the voice above and beyond it all that calls us “my Beloved.” Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith* (Harper Collins, 1997), 13.

Indeed. Let us pray.

Gracious God, give us the courage to confront our own darkness in through our own wilderness experience so that we can help others struggling during this wilderness time to know of your love. Help us and them to experience the voice above and beyond it all that indeed calls us “my beloved”. And now bless these gifts that they may bring word of your beloved kingdom to those who do not know of its existence. We pray in your name, amen.