

BRAVING THE WILDERNESS

God of trackless desert, whose Son walked untamed in league with beasts and spirits, whose kingdom is not distant but breaking in among us: give us time and space to find a new identity, to let go of control and walk the pilgrim way; through Jesus Christ, the good news of salvation.

From Prayers for an Inclusive Church, Steven Shakespeare

THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

GENESIS 9:8-17, PSALM 25:1-9, 1 PETER 3:18-22, MARK 1:9-15

FEBRUARY 18, 2018

ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

THE REV. RANDALL C.K. DAY, D.MIN., PRIEST AND RECTOR

THE GOSPEL READING: MARK 1:9-15

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 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."

"If you can see your path laid out in front of you step by step, you know it's not your path. Your own path you make with every step you take. That's why it's your path."

That is a quote by the 20th century American mythologist Joseph Campbell from the book, *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*, by author and social scientist (and Episcopalian) Brené Brown – which is a great candidate for a Lent book, if you haven't yet read it (or even if you have).

In today's gospel reading, we

hear of Jesus's baptism and what came next: "the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."

We could file this tidbit under "trivia about Jesus," except for the fact that we are all, repeatedly through our lives, driven into the wilderness, tempted by all that would destroy us, surrounded by danger, and yes, waited on by angels.

Jesus reveals both the reality

of the wilderness for us and also the reality that “If you can see your path laid out in front of you step by step, you know it’s not your path.”

Here is what Brené Brown writes about the wilderness – clearly the one that Jesus was driven into by the Spirit – and also all the ones we enter, whether we like it or not:

“Theologians, writers, poets, and musicians have always used the wilderness as a metaphor, (a word picture) to represent everything from a vast and dangerous environment where we are forced to navigate difficult trials to a refuge of nature and beauty where we seek space for contemplation.

“What all wilderness metaphors have in common are the notions of solitude, vulnerability, and an emotional, spiritual, or physical quest. Belonging so fully to yourself that you’re willing to stand alone is a wilderness— an untamed, unpredictable place of solitude and searching. It is a place as dangerous as it is breathtaking, a place as sought after as it is feared.

“The wilderness can often feel unholy because we can’t control it, or what people think about our choice of whether to venture into that vastness or not. But it turns out to be the place of true belonging, and it’s the bravest and most sacred place you will ever stand.

“The special courage it takes to experience true belonging is not just

about braving the wilderness, it’s about becoming the wilderness. It’s about breaking down the walls, abandoning our ideological bunkers, and living from our wild heart rather than our weary hurt.”

I tell you, no one became the wilderness, embodied the wilderness of this world more fully than Jesus. It is he who then broke down the walls, abandoned the ideological bunkers and lived from his wild heart. It is he who invites us to do the same.

The wilderness is for each of us and it is for us together as a faith community. Resist we may (usually do) but, like Jesus, we are being driven into it. These days, for local faith communities like St. Mark’s, the reality is enter the wilderness or die – which *does include* the possibility of “enter the wilderness AND die” (or it wouldn’t really be the wilderness).

But, truthfully, the world does not *need* churches that will not enter the wilderness – churches and Christian people who will not go where Jesus went, will not enter the wilderness that Jesus **is**. What did Brené Brown say about it? “But it turns out to be the place of true belonging, and it’s the bravest and most sacred place you will ever stand.”

Where else could we possibly want to be?

Much of the story of Jesus –

both in his day and in the millennia since, has been and is the attempt to enclose him in walls, to capture him in ideology and to tame his wild heart... even make him a *source* of weary hurt for the world that was and is the object of his desire.

The point of the wilderness is to truly belong – to God, to humanity.

Recall that Fr. Richard Rohr writes: “The great **illusion** that we must all overcome is that of **separateness**. Religion’s primary task is to communicate **union, to reconnect people to their original identity ‘hidden with Christ in God.’**” (Colossians 3:3) Or, as Thomas Merton said: “hidden in the love and mercy of God.” And Merton again, to help us know and say: “Love is my true identity. Selflessness (which is to say “us” not “me” alone) is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name.”

In *Braving the Wilderness* we find this: “Belonging is the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us. Because this yearning is so primal, we often try to acquire it by fitting in and by seeking approval, which are not only hollow substitutes for belonging, but often barriers to it. Because true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world, our sense of belonging can never be greater than

our level of self-acceptance.

“Being ourselves means sometimes having to find the courage to stand alone, totally alone.”

Brené Brown continues: “Even as I wrote this, I still thought of belonging as requiring something external to us— something we secured by, yes, showing up in a real way, but needing an experience that always involved others. So as I dug deeper into true belonging, it became clear that it’s not something we achieve or accomplish with others; it’s something we carry in our heart. Once we belong thoroughly to ourselves and believe thoroughly in ourselves, true belonging is ours.

“We seem to have forgotten that even when we’re utterly alone, we’re connected to one another by something greater than group membership, politics, and ideology — that we’re connected by love and the human spirit. No matter how separated we are by what we think and believe, we are part of the same spiritual story.

“Spirituality is recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and compassion.”

Or, simply: Our name is Love.

That school shooter this week,

his actual name is Love. (And there we see, as in all such events and terrorism, what Brené Brown calls the “spiritual crisis of disconnection.”) His victims, their families, their names are Love. Whoever sold the gun, the FBI agents who got the tip, those who tried to address his mental instability: their names are Love. The people who are food insecure in our neighborhood, those who will join us in a community collaboration, sweating in a certified kitchen: their names are Love. Opening the doors here day by day by day, our name is Love. Those who venture to come here to do the work they need to do, to express themselves in music and art, or simply to use the restroom, their names are Love.

So a word about paradox, a hallmark of our age, which Brené Brown defines from the Latin root as “seemingly absurd but really true.” She notes that Carl Jung, the 20th century Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, argued that paradox is one of our most valued spiritual possessions and a great witness to the truth. Paradox causes us to be broad, large, and adaptive. Brené Brown describes the path saying: “find sacredness in **both** being a part of something *and* standing alone in the wilderness.” And concludes: true belonging doesn’t require you to *change* who you are; it requires you to *be* who you are.

And so, Jesus, the Truly Human One, the Universal Christ, the Word from before time and forever is driven, **alone**, into the wilderness. From there he broke down the walls, abandoned the ideological bunkers and lived from his wild heart. Yes, he was killed for it, but *at the same time* (paradox) he belonged so utterly to life and to this world, to us and to all humanity, that his love did not know, *could not* know death. And, thus, we move to Easter; we move to resurrection.

This Lent, we (individually and as St. Mark’s) hear the invitation to the wilderness, to breaking down walls, to abandoning the ideological bunkers, to living from our wild hearts, to dying and to living as if death were not (reference to theologian James Allison). Who or what are we facing, yes, *face-to-face*, as we embrace this invitation? Who might we face, or with whom might we join hands, that we might otherwise overlook, ignore, or avoid?

As we make this wilderness journey, may you, may we “discover the place of true belonging, [...] the bravest and most sacred place you will ever stand.”

“If you can see your path laid out in front of you step by step, you know it’s not your path. Your own path you *make* with *every step* you take. That’s why it’s your path.”