

Into the Wild
Mark 1:4-6
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What's John doing out there in the wilderness? He's wearing crazy clothes, eating odd stuff, doing strange things, and all in a rather inhospitable environment. What's he doing?

Everything about John is rich with symbolism. He's dressed like the prophet Elijah whose return was predicted as a forerunner for the coming of God. But he's not exactly like Elijah, because the ancient prophet wasn't a wilderness ascetic.

In other ways, he is like Moses, leading the people into the wilderness for them to repent. Their baptism in the Jordan echoes back to the ancient Israelites crossing the river as they entered the Promised Land. John's baptism is a new liberation from slavery and a new formation of Israel.

And Isaiah had spoken of the voice crying out in the wilderness comforting the people with the news that God was coming.

John combines in his person and his message multiple images and meanings from the tradition of the people.

There's something that fascinates us about John the Baptist. While centuries of art, including the Strauss opera *Salome*, have invested him with erotic possibilities, he also sounds like a dirty hippy we might not want to get too close to because of the odor and the kinda crazy behavior. And yet it is this strange and wild figure who plays the central role at the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. Right here at the beginning of the gospel we realize that there is something wild going on.

Some years when the staff gathers to discuss the Advent theme we spend hours brainstorming and then selecting just the right words and images. This year we had our ideas moments after sitting down to work on it. We were drawn to this idea of wilderness, because we get the sense that many people feel as though we live in wild times. Assumptions about society and morality and order have been upended. Institutions are rocked by scandals. People don't agree about truth or facts or reality.

And so we turn to this ancient prophet, the wild guy in the wilderness, calling us to come into the wild to repent our sins and prepare for an encounter with God.

This fall I read the book *The Practice of the Wild* by the California poet Gary Snyder. The book is a series of essays on our relationship with wild nature. Early in the book Snyder discusses the multiple meanings of wilderness:

A large area of wild land, with original vegetation and wildlife, ranging from dense jungle or rainforest to arctic or alpine 'white wilderness.'

A wasteland, as an area unused or useless for agriculture or pasture.

The oceans.

A place of danger and difficulty: where you take your own chances, depend on your own skills, and do not count on rescue.

He adds that it can also mean a place of abundance—“all the incredible fecundity of small animals and plants.”

Snyder points out there are these two contrasting meanings—the place of fertile abundance or the place of “chaos . . . the unknown.” He writes, “In both senses it is a place of archetypal power, teaching, and challenge.”

The church staff discussed this contrast in our original brainstorming. For us North Americans wilderness so often implies the great forests and mountain ranges. But the biblical wilderness is a barren and arid landscape. We clearly chose to go with the North American idea in our decorative scheme.

I’ve been in both wildernesses. Last year on my sabbatical I spent a week in a cabin at the foot of Mount Hood, across from a cherry orchard. My friend Dan Morrow and I hiked each day in the foothills of the mountain and the along trails of the Columbia River Gorge. Unfortunately some of those gorgeous areas have burned this year.

Our final big hike was up the Eagle Creek Trail to see the great waterfalls. A couple of times the trail was a narrow rocky space along a cliffside where you had to hold onto the wire anchored into the wall. That does make it sound more difficult and dangerous than it really was, but you definitely didn’t want to make a mistake and slip.

We paused for lunch at one of the high bridges over the small canyon formed by the creek. A few rocks provided a nice place to sit in the shade in a wide spot on the trail. We watched the sun play upon the water and listened to it flowing over the rocks below.

Soon after we began eating, three chipmunks scurried across the bridge and joined us. We began to toss them bread from our sandwiches. We lingered long, enjoying this moment of communion with the tiny creatures.

I told Dan that my end-of-life plan is for my ashes to be shared among any friends and family who want them with the intention that each of those people scatter the ashes someplace meaningful for our relationship together. I told Dan that he was to scatter his share of my ashes in that beautiful spot, where we had lunched with the chipmunks.

The Judean wilderness I visited over my college winter break of 1993-94. And it is a strange and barren place. One realizes why this is a place of visions.

My wildest story of the Judean wilderness occurred our first day in it. We had already visited the more fertile northern parts of the country and that day had driven south along the Jordan River to Jericho, that 10,000 year old city, where we enjoyed, in a Palestinian restaurant, one of the best meals I’ve ever eaten—it was a lamb dish.

After lunch we traveled up the Jericho Road to Jerusalem where we had communion on the Mount of Olives at the place where we first could see the Old City of Jerusalem.

Part of that trip from Jericho to Jerusalem was supposed to be a hike up the ancient Jericho Road instead of the modern highway which makes it a very quick trip, as only 25 kilometers separate the cities. By the way, I tried to use Google Maps to figure the modern directions between the two cities but Google informed me that they could not calculate those directions. I assume that is because of all the political divisions that currently make that short drive quite difficult. Anyway, back to my story.

So, our tour bus unloaded some of us at the bottom of the Wadi Qelt. Wadis are canyons formed by flowing water, though the water only runs seasonally and after rains, meaning that Wadis are often barren channels of rock. The ancient Jericho Road uses this cut through the hills as its way to rise from the lowlands of the Jordan River Valley to the highlands of the Judean hill country where Jerusalem is situated.

But our guide missed the start of the actual trail and led us instead up the dry river bed. Only well into our hike, did we realize our mistake. We also realized what those Palestinian shepherd boys had been trying to communicate to us from the top of the cliff—they weren't waving hello but warning us to turn around.

So, our group decided to continue forward and what should have been a mildly difficult hike up an ancient trail that lasted only two hours ended up a more than four hour ordeal of trudging over the rocky river bed. The adventure was heightened by the presence of some senior adults on the hike with us college students, who quickly became the partners helping them along. One man, who had a history of heart attacks, was quite frightened by the possibilities.

At one point we rounded a bend in the Wadi and encountered a boulder fall, blocking our way forward. Should we retrace our steps—going hours back in the other direction from whence we came, knowing that the motor bus was actually waiting ahead of us? Or could we find away over the boulder fall?

We college students scrambled up the boulders and positioned ourselves at various points and then, like a conveyor belt, we lifted and carried those who couldn't make the climb themselves.

We did eventually arrive at the end of the hike, below the St. George's Monastery. Fortunately, they had steps leading from the bottom of the canyon to the top, where our bus was waiting. We discussed getting shirts that said, "I survived the Wadi Qelt," though we never did follow through on that.

In her excellent book *The Power of Mark's Story*, scholar Mitzi Minor writes that in the biblical tradition wilderness is "wide-open space, unsurveyed, unmapped, undomesticated by human beings. It is still free of human control. It may even appear to us as wasted and empty." She then writes that wilderness became "the primary symbol of the absence of human aid and comfort and, consequently, a deepened awareness of human reliance on God."

Like any good journey story, Mark begins with a threshold moment, here in the wilderness in this place of abandonment and discomfort. But, Mark tells us that we are not abandoned here. Mitzi Minor writes, "times when our spirits and souls seem dry, arid, and empty while 'wild beasts' roam near, do not mean that God has abandoned us."

Instead, in the wild places we meet God. So, one way we can read this ancient Gospel is as an invitation for us to be like the Judeans who went to John for their baptism. We too

should go into the wild.

She writes, "Wilderness experiences are necessary stages on the journey for those who seek to be authentically human."

It is in these moments of potential danger that we are purged of excess and luxury. We are forced to grapple with the deep questions and build the qualities of strong character. In the wilderness we find our way forward and learn to trust in God.

And so I draw on the wisdom of Wendell Berry, my favourite poet. When we despair, we should go into the wild to encounter the beauty and the grace of a world outside of our control. In the wild we find our rest, and we are set free.