

The passage from Mark that we read a moment ago is one that we've heard in one form or another, probably at least once a year for our whole churchgoing lives. I know we've read this text twice already this year alone. And, as is human tendency, we get used to things we're in frequent contact with - and we are apt to miss them, because they're so familiar. So let's interact with this text today, rather than just reading or hearing it.

Marilyn McCord Adams writes that today's passage from Mark "narrates a textbook rite of passage: the candidate is singled out," as Jesus is when he comes up from the baptismal waters, "then taken for a proverbial length of time into a liminal space where old identities dissolve and new ones are forged," such as the 40 days Jesus spends in the wilderness, "before being thrust back into society to occupy those new roles," like Jesus did upon his return to Galilee.

Our passage today is reminiscent of Luke Skywalker becoming a Jedi, or Rocky Balboa, going up against Apollo Creed.

Our text finds Jesus in the middle of an identity crisis - well, let's not say crisis because for some reason that feels sacrilegious to say out loud. Let's say, instead, that Jesus has just experienced a calling. A really unmistakable one at that.

I've wondered before, and maybe some of you have as well, how much Jesus knew about who he was and what his future held as he was growing up. I mean, we have the account of young Jesus in the temple - when he stayed behind and had his parents worried sick about him. When they found him, he asked them where else they'd expected him to be. *Of course* he'd be at the temple, about his father's business.

But did he know what it meant to be God's son? Did he know what he would be called to do? Did he know he would go up against the powers that be? Did he know that he would eventually die a criminal's death - a death that was meant to show other would-be political prisoners just how powerful Rome was? Did Jesus know, as a boy in the temple, what his divinity would require of him at 33?

Traditional commentary about Jesus' life would suggest that *sure* he knew. Of course he knew and he was all in from the very beginning. He was God, after all. And maybe that's okay for some of us - that's a satisfactory answer. But if you're like me, you take your Jesus with a little skin on his bones. I need human Jesus just as much as I need Divine Jesus. A Jesus that stubbed his toe in the dark and had to go to the store for groceries

and used the bathroom like a regular person does is a Jesus that resonates. A Jesus that not only has faith in God - but one who chooses that faith in the face of fear - just like you and I do.

Mark tells us that as Jesus was being brought out of the baptismal waters, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit ascending like a dove, and he heard a voice from heaven that declared Jesus God's son, with whom God was well pleased.

And regardless of what he knew or didn't know before this moment, we can be sure that Jesus gets the message loud and clear at this point.

Mark tells us that Jesus is immediately driven out into the wilderness for forty days. That he was tempted by the adversary, that he was with the wild beasts and that the angels alike.

And this is something we get, right? Haven't you ever felt like you were in the wilderness? That you'd been "driven" there, no less? I have! If I'm being honest, that's where I've found myself a lot lately. Driven to the wilderness. Accompanied by angels, yes, but also plenty of other voices - voices that make me doubt myself, my calling, my worth - surrounded by wild beasts like fear and frustration and struggle. The wilderness is relatable for us, is it not?

I wonder what Jesus did in the wilderness for forty days. Other gospels have meatier accounts of this stretch of time, but let's take Mark for Mark this morning. Mark stood alone for decades before the other gospels popped up, so let's let him stand by himself today. What did Jesus do in the wilderness?

This week I checked in with my best friend. She told me that she and her boyfriend had been dealing with the loss of his grandfather. This is the second grandparent he has lost in the last year. She said that she'd left work early and they'd gone for a walk at Durant nature preserve, and she thought that had helped him process and feel, at least momentarily, better. And I instantly remembered the phrase I shared with the kids this morning - *solvitur ambulando* - it is solved by walking.

My best friend should be the *solvitur ambulando* spokesperson. There's not a problem I have broached with her that she hasn't suggested taking a walk about. She's always walking when she's having big feelings. "Why don't you drink some water and take a walk?" This is my best friend's go-to, and it works. I've never taken a walk and felt worse afterwards.

So I bet Jesus walked around a bit while in the wilderness; a little wandering and wondering - what do you think? *Solvitur ambulando* - it is solved by walking. Perhaps Jesus, confronted by his God-given calling, had some things to think about.

Again - relatable.

Because we too have God given callings. We too are God's sons and daughters. And this requires us to do some pondering, doesn't it? What does it mean to be an image bearer? What does this calling require?

When I started my Div school journey, I did so by telling God that I would not work in a church. I would not preach. I was not interested. I had grown up in church and I felt like I would not be allowed to be who I was if I went into congregational ministry. No one wants to hear a sermon from a sometimes grumpy, always sarcastic preacher with the sense of humor of a middle school boy and a mouth that tends to be a little sailor-esque at times. On top of that, I was afraid that if I went into congregational ministry I would have to put away all my other passions, trade everything in and set my sights on being as perfect, polite, polished, and prim as possible. I had forgotten that when God called me, God called me. Not just the me I am when I'm at my very best. Not just part of me, a cleaned up version. No - me. The whole of me.

You, too. You are made in the image of God and you are called, too. Not the version of you that you rally when you've got guests coming over - but the regular-old Tuesday, on the phone with Spectrum for an hour, stuck in rush-hour traffic you. And that is something to think about, isn't it?

In the wilderness, I bet Jesus had some things that he needed to walk out. I told the students that I get antsy when I read that Satan tempted Jesus in the desert - I worry that our minds immediately go to the red guy with the horns which is zero percent biblical. *Ha Satan*, which is the original Hebrew from which we get the word "Satan" just means "the adversary." Someone in opposition to what God wants or has planned - that broadens the scope a little for us... because I know that there have been times in my life when *I* have been the adversary.

If we imagine that Jesus was in the wilderness being tempted by the adversary, how does that change things? That humanizes Jesus a little more, doesn't it? Perhaps when it says he was tempted by Satan, it means he was talking things out with God - *God, couldn't we just do things a different way? What about my Mom, who will have to watch these next 3 years unfold? Can't we do it like this instead?*

Regardless of what Jesus' time in the wilderness was like, Mark says that Jesus left after 40 days and went to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying that the kingdom of God had come near. And with this, Jesus has rewritten the history of humankind - Jesus has come from the wilderness, where he not only withstood the temptation that Adam and Eve were unable to withstand but also avoided the rebellion and distrust that the Israelites had shown during their time in the wilderness. Remember how the Israelites had the gall to suggest that they'd have been better off staying slaves in Egypt? Jesus never once said *"No thanks, God. I'm better off as a carpenter. This ministry business seems a little risky."*

So here we are. It's the first Sunday of Lent, and we have this story of redemption to walk around about. Generally, we think of Lent as a time of self-sacrifice, penitence, regulation. We give up chocolate, or fast food, or Facebook. And then Easter gets here and you can find us in the McDonalds drive through after worship.

But Lent hasn't always been like this. The earliest church understood Lent to be a time of reset - when we return to what was meant to be normal life - a life of natural communion with God that was lost to us in the fall.¹ Before we thought we could do it all ourselves. Before we found ourselves fracturing to please others. Before buying into the lie that we had to do more and be more to be used by God.

Here's what I propose this season: instead of giving something up, let's find ourselves in Mark's story. Let's keep our eyes open to the world around us, observing, listening for where God is singling us out as sons and daughters, beloveds, with whom God is well pleased. Let's lean into what this identity means, and to the calling that comes with it. If you're in the wilderness, like me - if it's all you can do to show up - let's show up and notice God's presence with us. Maybe you feel like you've come to the end of your spiritual upheaval and it's time to begin announcing the kingdom of God at hand, whatever that looks like in your context - if that's you, I hope you spend this season doing good work, changing this world one small step at a time.

This Lenten season, may we all find our way back to Eden - being the image-bearers God designed us to be, wholly and divinely ourselves, rooted in our belovedness and handing out "bless your hearts" to those adversarial voices that creep in to try and keep us from the work that there is to do here. May Easter find us announcing the kingdom of God which has come near, rejoicing and living into this good, good news.

¹ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast*, Westminster John Knox Press 2014, p. 84

