

Leave the Edges Wild
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Mark 1: 9-15

Hallmark really missed an opportunity this year. I figure since it must be such a struggle to come up with fresh, new card messages for all the various holidays throughout the year, that those who actually write the words you see in cards would welcome a new angle to their message, new avenues for creativity. Nevertheless, I was disappointed walking up and down the card aisle last week because I didn't find a single card that combined Valentine's Day and Ash Wednesday. I mean, what an opportunity this would be for the frustrated card writer, to broaden the scope of the card's message to include both the sentiments of romantic love while at the same time expressing the sobering truth of Ash Wednesday. Maybe something like –

Roses are red / violets are blue / from dust you were created /
and you'll return to dust too.

Or maybe –

I love your smile. I love your laugh.
But most of all, I love your mortality.

Ash Wednesday and Valentines Day hadn't coincided since 1945 so it could be a while before it happens again. But I get such a kick out of the way the Christian liturgical calendar intersects with the secular cultural calendar. At times, the culture happily draws upon the Christian calendar - think Christmas music in the mall and the seasonal aisle of your local grocery store being overrun with red and green.

But, the broader culture wants little to do with Lent. It is hard to commercialize repentance, fasting, and prayer. No one is rushing out to buy sackcloth and ashes or buy their kids the Lenten counterpart to Elf on a Shelf, say, Monk in a Trunk, who makes sure children are observing a holy Lent and if not, he'll tell the Easter Bunny or something. No, the culture will rejoin us when we get to Easter. We're on our own for the next 6 weeks.

The arrival of Lent is kind of a jolt to the system. It's sort of like the experience of reading this passage from Mark, where in the span of 7 verses we are yanked out of the waters of Jesus' baptism, rushed into the wilderness, and then whisked away to Galilee for the start of Jesus' ministry.

The wilderness, also translated as desert, is obviously significant in the history of the people of God as is the number forty. The wilderness represents the place of God's deliverance. It is also the place of trial and testing. It is the place where evil dwells. It is

a thoroughly inhospitable environment. The flood lasted forty days and nights. Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years. Elijah fasted in the desert for 40 days and nights. All of this is context for what Mark is telling us.

Whereas in Matthew and Luke's Gospel, we have longer accounts of the temptation of Jesus, Mark gives us just a few details. No sooner does the Spirit descend upon Jesus at his baptism than it drives him into the wilderness - put much more strongly than the other gospel accounts. The Spirit practically shoves him away into the obscure unknown of the desert at the moment we might expect his ministry to begin.

Jesus emerges from the wilderness having endured Satan's temptations. Mark tells us Jesus was with the wild beasts, a unique detail of Mark's Gospel, which sounds threatening but actually in the language of the original text could suggest that they were peaceably coexisting in the wild. This evokes the memory of the shalom that existed in the Garden in the very beginning but was lost because of human sin.

After his time in the desert Jesus appears on the scene and announces that the time is fulfilled. God's rule has come near and he issues the call to repent and believe the good news. Jesus passed the test where God's people had failed time and time again.

Sometimes as I've read Mark's Gospel I think, "Man, would it have killed him to elaborate a bit." But I think this passage is one of those places where the brevity helps pull together theologically what would otherwise remain disconnected. We can trace three distinct moments and movements in this passage that I think encapsulate the spiritual life as a whole but also the Lenten journey in particular.

First, there is the call where we are given the gift of vocation. In baptism, we claim the words that God spoke over Jesus at his baptism. We are God's beloved, and God is well pleased with us. It is crucial that this affirmation become foundational to the spiritual life because it determines how we experience everything else, particularly the next movement.

At some point, the spiritual journey will lead us into the wilderness. This can happen in a variety of ways and it may last a little while, or it may last years. It could be the consequences of our own sinful choices or it could simply be circumstances completely out of our control - like an unexpected diagnosis, loss of a job, or being a victim to the destructive decisions of others. Or, it could also be an intentional move on our part. Within the Christian tradition, particularly in the 4th century in the Egyptian desert, the wilderness was the destination for men and women seeking to flee the Christianity they felt had been compromised in the centers of power after the Emperor had embraced the faith. Ever since then, Christians have been seeking wilderness places, literally and figuratively, to retreat from the corruption and spiritual bankruptcy of society.

And so whether we planned on arriving in or suddenly find ourselves surrounded by wilderness, our faith will be tested. How different our experience will be if we've never heard and never believed the voice that calls us Beloved.

If our God is an impossible to please taskmaster for whom nothing is ever good enough we won't stand a chance in the wild. If our God is decent enough but not involved in our daily lives and we're on our own out there, we won't stand a chance. But if our God in Jesus Christ has himself gone through the wilderness ahead of us, and if he accompanies us through our own wilderness, and by his very presence reminds us of that voice, then we will make it through. The cross of ash placed upon our heads in Lent is but a trace of that first cross made in water. Yes, we are dust - but God breathed life into that dust. In life and death and everything in between, we belong to God.

Lastly, when God brings us through the wilderness, we emerge as different people and are sent anew to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. But it's a different sort of good news than it was before we entered the wilderness. Having journeyed the inward and downward road into the darkness, we find we were not as in control as we thought. We didn't have it all figured out like we thought. We are humbled and recognize our utter dependence upon God. It might take years to fully realize how it was happening, but so often we find that our faith grew the most in the wilderness.

The singer-songwriting duo known as Over the Rhine have a phrase that punctuates various songs on their latest album - Leave the Edges Wild. It was advice given to them by a relative after they purchased a Civil War era farm property. But it's become a metaphor for their art and life as a whole. I've been thinking about that phrase this Lent because I find it so refreshing that the Church tells the truth about ourselves and the world in this season. We can leave the edges wild in that we can acknowledge the brokenness of the world and the brokenness in our own lives. We don't have to pretend our stories are perfect.

We don't puff out our chests in self-congratulation and think of ourselves more highly than we ought to. As Over the Rhine writes in one song, "Leave behind your Sunday best. You know we couldn't care less, out here we've learned to leave the edges wild." The wild edges of our story make us who we are and they remind us that we belong to God and are desperate for God's grace in our lives.

If you are in a season of wilderness, or if you are retreating into the wilderness in some way this Lent, remember the voice that first spoke to you and called you Beloved. Know that Jesus has gone before you and goes with you even now. And throughout the whole journey, in the church, in this place, you have permission to leave the edges wild.

Hallmark really missed an opportunity this year. But they'll have a chance to redeem themselves once our Lenten journey concludes on Easter Sunday...which is also April Fool's Day.