

Sermon by Vicar Tamika Jancewicz
 February 18, 2018
 Lent 1
 Mark 1. 9-15
 “Baptism to Our Wilderness”

Mark’s telling of Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist is full of movement and imagery and because the author of this gospel pushes us from one scene to the next with immediacy it can often get lost on us. Just take a minute and wonder about the image of Jesus coming out of the water and at the same time the heavens being torn apart. The heavens being torn apart is an apocalyptic image we find in the words of Ezekial and Isaiah, where God reveals a vision, a word, and revelation to the prophets and the people, of God’s reign and power. A spirit, like a dove, comes on Jesus—he is filled with it and then God speaks directly to Jesus, “You are my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased” or another translation I read says “You are my beloved son. I delighted choosing you.” It is a message reflected in our own baptismal font (*point*), where we are all reminded of that promise of God’s delight in us, as God’s beloveds. And if you haven’t seen what I’m referring to, I invite you to go to the font after the service and look inside. And if you have seen what’s inside, I invite you to look again and see you how God sees you. Beloved.

And this beautiful imagery in Mark continues after God speaks to Jesus, and the Spirit drives him out into the wilderness. We get an image of Jesus being tempted by Satan, or the adversary, living with wild beasts, and angels waiting on him for forty days—An image of Jesus as both human, being tempted and among other creatures unlike him, and divine with heavenly beings taking care of him. A beautiful terrifying image indeed.

It is the juxtapositioning of Jesus’ baptism and the transformative proclamation of God as the Holy Spirit comes on him alongside this forceful drive from the Holy Spirit that leads Jesus to the wilderness that really stuck out to me as I prepared for today’s sermon. In all three gospels, Jesus goes out to the wilderness after his baptism, in Luke we get a bit of a break with a background of Jesus’ ancestry, but there is something important in Jesus’ transformation at his baptism and when he is driven into the wilderness. It brings up imagery of being immersed in water, where many were gathered to be baptized, and then pushed out into a desolate place with no other person in sight—of both community and isolation. It brings up imagery of God’s love and pleased disposition, followed by a time of temptation and unknowns—of both being beloved and not without reproach and discomfort. And it brings up imagery of coming to a place of your own free will, but seemingly driven out without much say in the matter—of both a conscious decision and a compelling movement that is not quite explainable. All of these imageries are a good recipe for a complicated and bumpy ride during our 40 days of Lent. A journey we are all on individually and in community as we all prepare for Easter and the cross. There’s nothing simple about it.

And I’d like to think about this transformation of Jesus from baptism to the wilderness as a journey we all take throughout our lives at various times. Perhaps not in the actual

physical sense every time, but more in a symbolic/spiritual way. In my own personal journey, there is constant struggle tension within myself of remembering that I am a beloved, called child of God, and seeking affirmation and belonging from others because I fear not being enough. Has anyone else felt this way?

I remember when I stepped on campus in Gettysburg at now United Lutheran Seminary, and the feeling of gratitude that somehow through all of my life changes and failures God had called me to that place. I felt forgiven, loved, and called in a way that I hadn't felt before. It's that new feeling of hope that some get when something great is going to happen. It wasn't soon after starting seminary that I had my first "test" at this, service of Word and Sacrament. At my home church in East Baltimore, Amazing Grace, my pastor, Pastor Gary, lost his voice, and he asked me to be the lectern for that Sunday...and boy was that scary. You see, it hadn't even been a full year since I had joined the Lutheran church, and I had maybe a half of Fall semester complete, and I was just scratching the surface in my liturgical worship class. I still knew very little about the order of worship, so I winged it. And things were misread, I almost forgot the Lord's Prayer, it was overwhelming, and I think the hardest part was that I felt out of place. And this was no fault of Pastor Gary's or the rest of the community at Amazing Grace. They, like all of you, were very gracious and patient with me, but I still felt like I was not meant to be there, that maybe I wasn't called, and that I did not belong, and that was a hard place to be. It is a hard place to be. But despite this very real fear that I still continue to struggle with, I hold on to that hopeful feeling I had when I felt that strong pull on my heart to be in ministry. And I find peace in knowing that this is long journey full of self-discovery, failures, and courage. I am in the wilderness. We all are at some point in our lives.

For this Lenten season we are going to be reading and reflecting on Brene Brown's book, Braving the Wilderness. And in it, Brown is going to take us on a journey of self-discovery and courageousness, as we battle with the very real human need to belong. Without giving too much away from our time together on Wednesdays this season, I want to share with you what she writes about being in the wilderness, and the courageous work of standing alone and belonging to ourselves. She writes,

"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 a place of true belonging, and it's the bravest and most sacred place you will ever stand."

And as we reflect on our message from the gospel today, and think about Jesus' time in the wilderness, we can see that this is a holy depiction of that wilderness Brown is talking about. Jesus' being in the wilderness for forty days, tempted, perhaps afraid—cared for, but definitely isolated and without an entourage of disciples. And this journey into the wilderness is important, and not just for the sake of piety, but, I imagine,

because he needed to face who and whose he was and what he was called to do. Everything was out of his control and yet, he found refuge with the heavenly beings and feeling God's peace helped him to stay present there in such a tumultuous time. And thank God he did, because he emerges from this place with the good news of God's kingdom being at hand. A call to all of us to turn around and see things differently. A promise that God never gives up on making what is wrong right.

And such a message is so necessary for us today. I do not know anyone untouched by yet another school shooting that happened this past Ash Wednesday. 17 people killed and we are still left with more polarizing conversations and arguments on our social media feeds. It feels like a continuous unchanging time of tension and picking sides and belonging in our own personal groups. And Jesus' words rings ever more louder that God's reign and power is at hand. It *is* present. And despite how we might feel about it God doesn't stay silent. Voices of our youth, and many others who are willing to stand in their own courageousness and call us all to speak truths, call out injustice, and be the hands in God's work. Don't fold. God is present.

And such a message, I hope, is encouraging as we all continue into our own personal journeys this lent. Maybe it's a journey of self-discovery. Perhaps it is a time of reflecting on your own spiritual walk with Christ. For some it is a time to practice a discipline that will help them feel healthier and more prepared for the rest of the year. In whatever way you are spending these forty days, know that Jesus set the example. He walks with you on this path. It's a reminder I keep in mind when I'm questioning this call on my life. And I hope you take this reminder with you as well.