

Spirit

The Rev. David Garnett

Mark 1:9-13

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Our gospel story this morning is the story of Jesus' transition from private life to public ministry. The story is a reminder to us that all of our human transitions take us through a wilderness in one form or another. The best metaphor I've found for a church like yours, in transition between installed senior pastors, and for church members in transition, is being in the wilderness, and so it is my practice to begin every interim pastorate with a sermon based on a Bible story set in the wilderness.

Today I will preach on Jesus' time in the wilderness, as well as my own. I will point to Jesus as the model for us to follow when we are in the wilderness, and I will tell my own story both as an example of what not to do in the wilderness and as a reassurance to you that God is with you in the wilderness and caring for you even when you are not handling the wilderness very well and will guide you safely through the wilderness.

Let me begin. I find our story today from Mark jarring. It's jarring to me that Jesus goes so quickly from the light of being declared "beloved" by the voice from heaven at his baptism by John in the Jordan to being driven immediately by God's Spirit into a darker wilderness experience, being tested for 40 days by Satan, being threatened and scared by the wild beasts, while simultaneously being waited upon by God's ministering angels. Jesus has no time at all to bask in his own divine belovedness, but is immediately driven into the wilderness for testing. And Jesus clearly does not volunteer for the testing. It is God who, as part of his love for Jesus, sees Jesus' need for testing before Jesus starts his public ministry, and it is God, through the Spirit, who "drives" him into the wilderness, much as a cowboy drives a steer before him.

Well, I am not Jesus, and never will be, but it was just as jarring to me when something like it happened to me.

Back in 2008, at the low point of the Great Recession, I said goodbye to the church family in Tennessee I had pastored for 20 years so we could follow Molly's call to be a hospital chaplain in Tampa. The church and I had had the usual ups and downs together, good times and hard ones, but, all in all, it was a good pastorate, a good church, and our ending together was full of mutual warmth, affection and affirmation, and we were able, each in our own ways, to pronounce one another Beloved.

Almost immediately my own time in the wilderness began.

Molly had already moved to Tampa to begin her work. My two sons were off to begin their first year of college and high school, respectively, and it was left to me alone to close out our life in Knoxville and get our stuff moved to Tampa.

I still do not entirely understand what happened, but as I got closer and closer to moving, I began 30 days of fear like I have never known. It never happened before and it hasn't happened since, but for a month I was scared to death. The move to Florida turned out to be my wilderness; a voice was trying to get me to settle for something less than my new calling; my worries and fears were my wild beasts within; a hitchhiker was my angel; and when it was all over I was turned down for a position I thought I wanted and had, and began my new journey as an interim pastor.

Being a human being is both a blessed and vexed thing. Both. We're all such a mixed bag of stuff: light and dark, rational and irrational, faith and fear, faith and doubt, strength and weakness, virtue and sin. If you live long enough you will discover parts of yourself that will surprise you, things that don't fit in with your own image of yourself or the image that others have of you, things that you never knew were there and never expected to be there.

My fear did not just play out in my head. It had real and severe physical consequences for me. My pulse and blood pressure skyrocketed and would not come down. I went to my doctor twice during this time, and he first doubled and then quadrupled my blood pressure medication. It was like my adrenal gland was stuck in the wide-open position. I wasn't sleeping at night. At night I had weird prickly sensations running up and down my arms and legs that made me wonder if I was getting ready to have a heart attack. I wasn't eating. I dropped 20 pounds in a month without even trying, getting down below my weight in high school. I remember having trouble thinking and speaking during this time. My brain seemed like it was in slow-setting concrete. The words just weren't coming to me like they used to. I thought I might have had a stroke. I remember talking to Molly in Florida several times during this period, but I couldn't seem to talk about my distress, couldn't put my any of it into words. Physically and emotionally I was a wreck. Spiritually I just felt empty.

I remembered during that time being worried about everything all the time-- money and work and health and parents and children and housing. My mind would attach to a worry and hold onto that worry like a bulldog, passing entire nights not sleeping but imagining the worst in that area.

I was in such bad shape that, unknown to Molly, I was just on the verge of calling the movers and telling them to forget the whole thing. In the end I didn't do that, thank God, and the movers came and got our stuff.

Then it was time for me to drive our remaining car to Tampa. I had to get the car to Tampa and then catch a plane out of Tampa to Seattle to care for my mother during her knee surgery and then help her with her recovery over the next two weeks. I remember feeling so anxious and tired as I began my 700 mile trip, and really in no shape to be driving. But, as you know, certain things have to be done at certain times of life, and sometimes whether you want to do something or not, whether you feel like it or not, you just put your head down and will your way through it.

So I started driving south, down I-75. After only an hour on the road I was still feeling bad, so I pulled off at an exit and went into a McDonald's and asked for the biggest Coke they had and walked out with one of those 44oz. monsters and started guzzling it, thinking that a good jolt of caffeine and sugar would do the trick for me. It didn't.

As I got on the freeway on-ramp, I passed a young man, a hitchhiker with a duffle bag at his feet, sticking out his thumb, wanting a ride, and suddenly for the first time in 20 years I found myself braking, opening my door to a complete stranger on the highway, waving him in, and giving him a lift. I'd like to say I was doing it for him, but I was doing it for me. I was in such bad shape that I thought he could grab the wheel if I blacked out, or maybe even take over the driving for me for awhile, or, with any luck, maybe even drive me all the way to Tampa. If nothing else, I thought he could at least talk to me and keep me distracted from how bad I was feeling. It turned out to be the latter. He put his duffle bag between us, got in next to me, and immediately started spilling out his story.

He was 24 years old and had been hitchhiking for the last 8 years, on the road since the age of 16. He claimed to have been in all 50 states. He told me that in eight years he had never had a home, a job, or any real possessions to speak of. He said the only money he had ever had in his pocket was money given to him in passing by kind strangers. He told me that he had never been to church, and wasn't religious except in a very vague and general way, but did believe in God, and told me that for the last eight years he had begun each morning praying to God and asking that his needs for that day would be met. He told me that for eight straight years he had trusted God to provide for all his needs, whatever they happened to be on that day, and the Lord had come through for him in a wide variety of ways every day of those eight years, which he listed for me.

Then he told me that a big reason for his hitchhiking all the time was that he was a follower of a band called the Grateful Dead, and followed them on their concert tours. He considered their music deeply spiritual and full of the love he needed. He told me he was part of a community of Grateful Dead followers which called themselves "Deadheads", which served as a kind of church for him. He said that at one point the Deadhead community actually held a name-changing ceremony for him, and re-named him "Spirit", and he liked the name so much that he had abandoned his birth name and

accepted the name Spirit as his new name and new identity and introduced himself to everyone from then on as "Spirit."

Spirit stayed with me in the car just long enough to get his story out, about an hour, and then he said he wanted out at the next exit. He said he was going in another direction, so I got off the freeway and dropped him at a convenience store. And that was the last I ever saw of Spirit. Never heard from him again

But I could not stop thinking about him the rest of the way to Tampa, or in the years since. I had that funny feeling that I had just been visited by one of God's odd angels. In the Bible there are a number of stories where people open their door to a stranger and it turns out to be God or the resurrected Jesus or the Holy Spirit or an angel, giving them at that moment just what they needed. That's one of the reasons the Bible writers encourage us to practice hospitality to strangers, because strangers can be angels, bearing gifts we need at the moment.

During one of the hardest transitions in my life, I felt like God met me on a freeway on-ramp in the middle of nowhere. In a vulnerable time of my life I opened my door to a stranger and in breezes Spirit. What are the odds? If that wasn't a set-up job by the Holy Spirit, I don't know what is.

As I look back I can laugh now. It was such an odd and humbling scene. There I was a 50 year old seasoned Presbyterian minister who had preached and taught many times on the need to let go of fear and trust God wherever God happened to lead you, and yet there I was unexpectedly in the iron grip of fear and resisting all the way. And into my life comes a young man, half my age, not a preacher, not a church goer, not even a Christian, a Deadhead, teaching me how to live again, how to live in trust instead of anxiety. It was as if the Lord had said to me, "Look at this guy. If I can take care of him every day on the road for eight years, working only through strangers, surely I can take care of you, you of little faith. Stop worrying and relax."

Well, it didn't happen right away. I kept worrying for another two weeks, but Spirit kept speaking to me in my heart and then the voice of fear within gradually gave way again to the voice of faith.

And now I stand before you not only with the authority given to me by our denomination at my ordination, but now also with the authority given to me by my own hard-won life experience. And with that double authority, I bear witness to the truth of the gospel story before us.

I hear the story say: Don't be surprised if, as followers of Jesus Christ, something of Jesus' story ends up in your own, not exact but close enough.

Don't be surprised if at some point in your life you are driven into a wilderness of some kind. Wilderness comes in many different forms, but they all have this common: they are all wild places in life that you do not control, God does.

Don't be surprised if during your wilderness time you go through some sort of testing. If it happened to Jesus, it may well happen to us who are followers of Jesus. And if it happens, remember that testing is not God setting us up for failure, but God in his love strengthening us to fulfill our calling, just as testing strengthened Jesus for his calling.

Don't be surprised if during your wilderness period you hear a voice other than God's trying to get you to settle for something less than your calling. We know from the gospels of Matthew and Luke that the voice of Satan in the wilderness tried to get Jesus in three different occasions to settle for second best. Like Jesus, you may have to learn again during your wilderness time how to say No to that voice so that you can again say Yes to God.

Don't be surprised if during your wilderness time you encounter a few wild beasts along the way, either inside of you or outside of you, beasts that threaten you and scare you and maybe even overwhelm you.

Don't be surprised if during your wilderness time you meet some of God's angels along the way, God's messengers, who speak to you and help you to navigate the wilderness, with its different voices and wild beasts, to get you to your true calling. It's the presence of angels who let you know in the wilderness that even when you don't know how to handle your own life, there is a God who knows how to handle you, and will.

From my own experience of being in the wilderness, I would say to you in your transition: Do not fear. Do not be anxious. Trust God. Trust the process. Look for those openings of the Spirit in this transition time that just don't happen at other times, and be willing to go through them. Things open up during a transition that are not open the rest of the time.

Congregation, you are in the wilderness right now, in that transition time between installed senior pastors. And at the end of that transition, whether you realize it or not, you picked up a hitchhiker of your own. I am going to be with you in your car while you drive through the end of your wilderness experience. Oddly, I who once resisted my own transition, have now been called to be with you in yours, perhaps doing for you what a young man named Spirit once did for me.