

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 2018,
AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

It's difficult making one's way through the wilderness. Just ask the following folk who left these comments for Forest Service employees. These are actual comments left last year on Forest Service registration sheets and comment cards by backpackers completing wilderness camping trips:

"A small deer came into my camp and stole my bag of pickles. Is there a way I can get reimbursed? Please call."

"Escalators would help on steep uphill sections."

"Instead of a permit system or regulations, the Forest Service needs to reduce worldwide population growth to limit the number of visitors to wilderness."

"Trails need to be wider so people can walk while holding hands."

"Ban walking sticks in wilderness. Hikers that use walking sticks are more likely to chase animals."

"All the mile markers are missing this year."

"Trails need to be reconstructed. Please avoid building trails that go uphill."

"Too many bugs and leeches and spiders and spider webs. Please spray the wilderness to rid the area of these pests."

"Please pave the trails so they can be plowed of snow in the winter."

"Chairlifts need to be in some places so that we can get to wonderful views without having to hike to them."

"The coyotes made too much noise last night and kept me awake. Please eradicate these annoying animals."

"Reflectors need to be placed on trees every 50 feet so people can hike at night with flashlights."

"Need more signs to keep area pristine."

"A McDonald's would be nice at the trailhead."

"The places where trails do not exist are not well marked."

"Too many rocks in the mountains."

Ah, wilderness! By any other name I would not know ye! Today we begin to travel into our own dark and challenging territory as we commence the Seven Weeks of Lent, or as religious legends call it "The Forty Days and Forty Nights" that represent the time Jesus spent alone at the start of his ministry. (It's not really 40 days and nights - - that's just an old Jewish stock phrase for a long period of time, similar to the same amount of weeks and days Noah spent on the high seas before the ark came up onto a bit of dry land.) This is very confusing, because it places us back at the beginning of the *Gospel of Mark* before all the healings and exorcising of demons, as well as Jesus' major encounter with the demon of all demons, i.e., Satan, which is given only a quick nod as so many other things happen immediately

around him. First we are connected with the reading from Chapter 9 of last week, where God speaks, this time at the baptism by John at the Jordan River. God says, once again (actually, it's the first time, as the lectionary has the order reversed), that this is the Son in whom God is well pleased. We should hope so! The idea is that Jesus has authority right out of the gate, and the hearer of the gospel is encouraged to see and believe that a major player has arrived on the scene. Then the Spirit, whom we've not met as yet, but we are supposed to know who it is and what it does, sends him into the desert, where he spends time in prayer and contemplation being protected from the devil and other wild animals by angels who attend to him. There is no mention why the Spirit believes that Jesus needs this type of experience, unless it is to prepare him for the real-life snakes and jackals he will encounter in his earthly ministry in the guise of demons that need to be exorcised and religious and political leaders that need to be faced and beaten down. Perhaps the time alone is also a precursor and a foreshadowing of his own dark nights of the soul, when he is placed in prison himself after betrayal by a close associate and disciple of his own. These are all major events in Jesus' life, but Mark presents them as though they are everyday happenings that are necessary to bring Jesus to the next portion of his life, whatever it might be, and that will ultimately unveil who he is and why he came to exist, as the Son of Man, the long awaited Messiah, to save us, and to bring about the kingdom of God, the good news he lauds while warning those around him to repent so that they might receive its true goodness.

At the end of the reading for today, beginning in verse 14, "Jesus begins to proclaim the in-breaking of God's reign (or 'kingdom'). To speak of a 'reign' means to characterize Jesus' ministry as announcing the realization of God's intentions for humanity and all creation. Jesus' focus is temporal, not spatial. That is, he announces the dawn of a new era and a new state of affairs, one in which God rules; with the expression *kingdom of God* he does not speak of taking people away to a new place in a far-off land. He tells those who listen that God is bringing new realities into existence; Jesus himself demonstrates what these realities look like through his actions and words.

This 'reign' is about more than people's spiritual existence. Jesus will call people to new understandings about what all of life is like. Family, society, political allegiances, economics, wellness, purity and acceptability -- no facet of life remains unaddressed.

Perilous beings dwell also in places other than the wilderness. And the in-breaking reign of God does not curb them all at once. The time may be 'fulfilled,' but it remains dangerous. As we will see by the time Lent concludes, and as we walk through Mark's Gospel from now until November, Jesus' way of living out his purpose is dangerous, too. The late theologian William Placher put it this way: "What Jesus is beginning is the transformation of this world. That is why those in charge of this world as it was ended up killing him."ⁱⁱ

The verses which follow this small grouping set aside for The First Sunday of Lent are the call of the disciples, which we have already heard a few weeks ago. So it seems that the baptism and the foray into the wilderness are what are necessary for Jesus to understand his call and then go and seek to place the Spirit in others so that they might know their own call. We have examined the theme of Jesus' call during the weeks of Epiphany; now as we wonder through Lent we are asked to put what we have learned in its place and make it work both for us and for those around us. Today, on our Commitment

Sunday, we have the reason and motive to do so, because it is the hope that by the giving of our time, talent, and treasure, God's kingdom, the beloved community of God envisioned and preached about by Dr. King and others of his generation - - our generation - - will find its place and become more than spoken words, yes, perhaps a reality. You see, there is no reason for us to read about and ponder the baptism of Jesus unless we are willing to take on its importance ourselves. Have you not wondered why it is that given our friendliness, our openness to one another and to all persons regardless of race, creed, gender, sex, sexual orientation, etc., those chairs are not all occupied every week, every one of them? Perhaps we do not speak the right language (and I don't mean "English" here); perhaps we don't speak the good news language that Jesus, and Mark, and the other gospel writers have encouraged us to do, words that let our neighbors know we are alive and seeking to know them. It's hard work. I thought a lot about that this week when looking for a Valentine's Day message from Hallmark (or whomever) that was not the same old, same old. After 19 years together, it was not only difficult to find meaningful language that covered the vast experience of time and togetherness, it was nearly impossible to encompass all that I wanted to say and felt should be said and that spoke to our specific life experience together. I found myself longing for elementary school days where we gave out cards to everyone - - boys to girls, girls to boys, girls to girls, boys to boys, boys and girls to their teachers and their parents and grandparents. And we made most of the cards from construction paper, and misspelled classmates' names but did not dare to leave one out, because that would be sad and lonely. And somehow this message of inclusiveness - - and it was an important lesson - - planted the seed that we should do the same on people's birthdays, and at Christmastide, and when someone died. This is what "repent!" means to me in this morning's gospel, to return to some of the old ways that made people feel good about themselves and their neighbors. I discovered a wonderful version of this giving within the community from Camp Rehoboth chorus, the group with whom Anthony sings. They raise funds to buy MP3 players with earplugs for folks in nursing homes, particularly those with dementia, and download tunes for them that they loved or that were part of the music of their generation as a way of providing comfort in what has become a world full of confusions for sufferers of Alzheimer's and related diseases. Just a word, a tune, a rhythm can often break through the consciousness when nothing else is reaching beyond its borders. That for me is repenting and preaching the good news. The work so many of you have been drawn to in helping the Hobgoods with their meals, their doctor's appointments, their dog, their packing, and moving is another gospel comfort I witnessed these past few months. Even this week, when Dana Miller got sick and her husband, Patrick, needed a last minute ride to Baltimore for a medical procedure, when word got out folks responded that they could and would help, including a former member who called to say he could be counted on. I believe that once the seed is planted, whether as a child or as an adult, the tree of life allows all kinds of flowers to blossom...

In conclusion, I'd liked to share a short snippet from a Christmas letter I received during last year's card deluge. My friend was writing about one of their summer trips where he had become kind of the local celebrity for his knowledge of all the trails and the best ones to hike and which one to take for that extra-special scenic encounter, etc.

"We pass this way but once," we have heard it said. But my wife has learned that, unless I've studied a map, that isn't necessarily true.

So I understand the fix a local hunting guide got himself into.

His party became hopelessly lost in the mountains and they blamed him for leading them astray. "You told us you were the best guide in Colorado!" they asserted.

"I am," he said, "but the only problem is I think we're in Wyoming now."ⁱⁱⁱ

No matter where we find ourselves in this forty day-some journey, may we be in a place of growth, journeying to a location that will further propel us toward our call to spread the good news of God in Christ, that all are loved, all are welcomed here. That door is the entry into our hearts; that door is also the exit to break down all that divides us. May we use both freely, unabashedly, courageously because we have accepted the call to be children of God, disciples of Christ, one and all.

Amen.

(The Rev. Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.

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ⁱ source: [http://www.jokebuddha.com/joke/Forest_Service_Complaints_\(clean\)#ixzz572NIM8kc](http://www.jokebuddha.com/joke/Forest_Service_Complaints_(clean)#ixzz572NIM8kc)

ⁱⁱ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2342

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.cybersalt.org/clean-jokes/wilderness-guide>