

I suggest you watch this video first

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChcR2gKt5WM>

“Fall on Me”
Mark 1:4-12
January 10, 2021

We enter 2021 tentatively but hopefully, anxious for the protections of a vaccine and eager to resume our pre-pandemic lives. We have endured a wilderness experience; we have been confined in desert isolation; we have experienced the chaos of natural forces over which we have little control. Enter Mark’s Gospel of Jesus, a Good News message that assures us that even as we suffer, Jesus suffers with us. We are not alone. Jesus gives us courage to live as Beloved Community; the empty tomb promises us renewal and resurrection. Mark 1, verses 4-11—hear what the Spirit is saying to the church:

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Here ends the reading. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

Mark is no stranger to chaos and suffering. It is hard for you and I in Parker, Colorado to relate to his circumstances during the time of Nero’s Rome. In year 54, Emperor Nero assumed control of the Roman Empire. For a time it looked to the small community of the Jewish ghetto that life’s anxieties would flatten out, for Nero allowed the 30 or 40 thousand of them to return to Rome and worship openly in newly constructed synagogues.

I say “return to Rome” because 5 years earlier, Emperor Claudius had evicted the Jews from their homes and places of worship, angered as he was that the traditional Jews and the Messianic Jews were taking their differences out into the streets and town squares. When he came into power, he immediately ordered all the synagogues to be closed, forcing the Jewish faithful into home churches and out of sight. Peter, disciple of Jesus and Paul, evangelist of The Christ, held radically different theologies and definitions of what it meant to be faithful to God-in-Christ and their feud likely got the Jews expelled from Rome at a time when the small Jewish population could least afford it.

That the evictions happened swiftly and forcefully was bad enough, but five years later when Nero allowed the remnant to return, he forced them into a ghetto and gave them no help to reestablish their homes, commerce, or worship way of life. Less than ten years later, he swiftly set on them and scapegoated the Jews for a massive fire he either started or ordered to be started on July 19th in the year 64, a fire that burned all through Rome for a total of seven days. The fire destroyed almost the entire city. He may have burned down Rome to make way for his aggressive plan to build a whole new city in grand classical style in his honor, or he might have ordered a small fire to be set as a sign of his power and the fire got away from its tenders.

Either way, Nero needed someone to blame and the Jewish ghetto across the river had largely been spared from burning. A rumor started that the fire had been set by some Messianic Jewish men and Nero had all he needed to make the powerless, starving Messianic Jews his fall guys. As the heavens watched silently, Jews were rounded up by households. If they admitted under duress to being involved in the fire, they were arrested and executed in the most gruesome ways. If they denied being the culprits, they were forced to name others in their family or neighborhoods. It was a mini-genocide and no family was spared.

Paul was under house arrest in Rome at the time. He was executed in the purge, but because he was a Roman citizen, he was spared the torture and manner of death his fellow Messianic Jews suffered. Peter's life was also taken. It is said that as he attempted to flee the carnage, he met with a vision of Jesus, who asked him, "Peter, where are you going?" In shame and capitulation, Peter turned around, was arrested and likely crucified—some say upside down.

Mark may or may not have lived through the siege himself, but he did manage in the midst of all this terror and suffering to write his gospel, the first testimony of the four we know in our Bible. Mark's is the shortest gospel, written in terse, short stories of Christ's adult life and mysterious end-of-life. He has no flowery imagery in his writing, and no birth story or long teachings from Jesus. Mark either had no time for such artistic imagery or no heart for it after all he had suffered through and witnessed.

I've spent some teaching time this morning on the context and setting of Mark's Gospel. I hope you find this history interesting, but more than that, I hope you will see that knowing this information will help you understand Mark's method and message as we visit him time and again throughout this new liturgical year. The Gospel writers were loose contemporaries—their writings span about 30 years all tolled-- but they write out of very different circumstances and backgrounds. Because of these histories, they use different metaphors for the disciple-life and they have very different emotions they want their readers to understand and adopt.

For Mark, suffering is an integral part of life, represented in stories that use images of wilderness, deserts, and bodies of water. In Hebrew lore brought forward into first century Jewish experience, these three natural properties have symbolic meaning:

Wilderness is a place as well as a state of being. Wilderness represents the inner landscape of frightening and uncharted territory where spirits and demons are conjured and their hauntings fall on their unwary victims. The Israelites were sentenced by Yahweh himself to wander for 40 years in the wilderness in punishment for their lack of faith and obedience. The Jews never forgot the lessons of the wilderness; Mark harkens them back to that unruly and unforgiving place to represent the suffering that has faced the entire remnant of Messianic Jews who somehow have managed to escape Nero's web of death.

Desert is devoid of life: thirsty, dusty, bone-freezing cold at night and blazing hot by day, the desert's torture is that of isolation, abandonment. The Jews of Mark's day remember from their ancestors' stories that following their release back to Jerusalem when their Babylonian Captivity ended in 587 BCE, those persons not of pure Jewish heritage-- men, women and children—were turned out into the desert to die—they were abandoned.

Mark adds to the metaphors of wilderness and desert a third: *bodies of water*. Beginning with the story of Noah and the Great Flood, seas, lakes, and rivers were places of great anxiety, especially when heaven's winds whipped up the waves and created watery graves for fishermen and unfortunate others.

One can think, "Why would I want to study the Gospel of Mark? He's all doom and gloom and I have enough of that these days on my own!" Aaah, but here's why Mark will be so great to read and journey with together in 2021: Mark never brings a negative image into a story without a corresponding ray of hope. For Mark, Jesus is the human light that has come into the world as an answer to life's inevitable suffering. Jesus will walk with us through our misery, because he has experienced misery himself. Jesus will be with us as we urgently question God about the overall plan, because he himself has questioned God and felt unheard. In

the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus demands to know the big picture, but he is led only to trust; he is not let in on the divine reasoning for his suffering.

We have to hope in God's greater purpose. We have to trust in God's unconditional love. We have to believe that death is not the final answer to life's end. We have to know that nothing and no one can separate us from God; we are the Beloved.

And that's why Mark begins his Gospel story with the Baptism of Christ in the River Jordan by his cousin, John the Baptist.

Eight times in the Gospel Mark employs the wilderness metaphor, two of them in the first chapter. It is in the wilderness that we are tested: how strong is our faith, how long is our endurance, how dedicated can we be to wait for our epiphany? The wilderness is hard; John lives there a subsistence life, not a glorious one. He lives on a diet of bugs and honey. Surely, he has been tested, but he emerges from his time of trial aware of his purpose: he is to be the bellringer for the arrival of the long-promised Messiah, and he is on fire for this Good News.

John is not himself the Messiah—of that, he is very clear. But he *is* to be the one to introduce Jesus to the world and he is the one to symbolize through baptism the dawning of a new spiritual age in Christ—this has been his wilderness epiphany. The dawn emerges out of darkness for the people who have suffered the calamity of Nero. John tells them it is time they shed their guilt, their judgment, and their harbored resentments against their neighbors and family, that they seek forgiveness and give forgiveness both and so be reunited with God as the Beloved Community.

And dawn breaks also on the story and promise of Jesus, on the hope that he represents for their world. Our wilderness times test us, and Jesus will soon be tested there himself. The heavens open and the dove breaks through. Jesus has no

doubt in this anointing that he is the Beloved and that God is pleased with him. This gives him the strength to enter his wilderness time.

We all have had this wilderness experience. I was thinking about this in my own life, like when I was halfway through seminary learning how to be Presbyterian and realized it was not the tradition for me. I didn't yet know about the UCC, my eventual church home. I was angry with God because I had my whole ministry career planned out and now it was all upset. I entered the wilderness and was tested. I was in a battle of wills with God and of course, I was no match. I was forced to take a breather.

When I emerged, having surrendered my own plans, I was renewed. When I trusted the way would be shown to me, the clouds parted, and the way became clear. I thank God now for my wilderness time.

Mark uses wilderness stories to encourage his readers to be less anxious, to let Spirit lead them when God and Jesus wants to take them. He uses the metaphor of desert to acknowledge that his people, the Messianic Jews, have felt abandoned by their God, exiled once again and forced to leave their homes and all that they have collected and earned. I am thinking that the small business owners and restaurateurs know the desert experience. Many of them have sunk their life savings and all their dreams into their enterprises only to see their efforts fail in the shadow of a pandemic entering its 10th month. Mark knows the desert, for he has been there himself. Mark's Jesus knows the desert, too, as he suffers as much from those who have abandoned him and left him to meet his fate alone as from any physical pain and injury he suffers.

But Mark's Jesus promises resurrection to those who are wandering towards death in the desert. In the desolation that is the first century experience of the unempowered and marginalized comes renewal in the fresh waters of the Jordan, followed by a long, cool drink of spiritual healing for those who will follow the

way of the Messiah. They will still suffer and many will die by the hand of the Romans, but the empty tomb will be their reward rather than the finality of death.

If you've been baptized in a fundamentalist tradition, you likely have been either dunked or been emersed in water backwards by a minister who assures you he will not let you drown. Still, it looks a bit edgy and there may be a bit of fear that accompanies the act. Mark uses water images to evoke the reality of human frailty in juxtaposition to the terrible force of nature that is water unleashed.

Have you ever stood offshore in the ocean and experienced the power of the tide? I have never felt so small and inconsequential as when knocked completely upside down in the surf. Mark uses bodies of water to represent chaos and to shift our reliance away from ourselves and into the waiting arms of God. Jesus stills the waters and saves terrified fishermen; John the Baptist dunks those who need renewal and release from their lack of faithfulness and gives them a fresh start.

Do you realize that in just 9 more weeks, every single person living on planet Earth who was born by March 15, 2020 will have had a birthday during the pandemic? Isn't that a weird thought? We share this disorientation with every other human being whether they live next door to us or halfway around the world.

Well, let's take a little poll as we roll into 2021, still in a pandemic, still masking ourselves off from the threat that is every single other person whom we contact, still facing months of uncertainty and danger from the virus. I have designed a poll in Zoom around a single question: "In 2020, do you feel like you were in a wilderness, a desert, a stormy sea, or none of these?"

On your screen in just a moment will appear this question and four answers. Just pick one and click on it—it'll be fun to see the results.

As you can see, most of us feel we have been tested in some way in the past year. We have suffered—if not personally, then as a species and as a country. Our

losses may be remote, such as watching numbers and news stories on the TV, or they may be very immediate as the stories of our weekly Joys & Concerns have underscored for us. Our daily lives may have changed very little or to the good (that is the breather), or they may have completely twirled us in circles ‘round and ‘round, dizzying us, scaring us, disorienting us. (that is the surrender). Our lives may feel like life has deserted us, abandoned us, and separated us from those who ground us the most. It was hard not to feel this way at Thanksgiving and Christmas just past. (that is the reorienting to God).

Mark assures us that though we suffer, Jesus suffers with us. Though we despair, God brings the dove that breaks through the storm to remind us, to assure us, to inspire us that we are God’s own; we are the Beloved; we are the Beloved Community that is stronger together, no matter what wilderness, desert, or storms at sea face us.

Let us pray:

Spirit of the Living God, Fall on Me.

Jesus of the Gospel Truths, Fall on Me.

God of the Ages, Never Failing, Fall on Me.

Give us hope; show us how to trust you and surrender to your Love.

Bring us strength to endure our wilderness and epiphanies when we are ready to appreciate them.

Send your angels to tend to our desert loneliness so their love songs our hearts can hear.

Teach us faith to quiet the stormy seas of our doubt and renew us in the grace of your unconditional love.

Help us believe that we are the Beloved, *your* Beloved, the Beloved Community of Christ so that we might invite others to know your blessing.

May it Be So.

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