

The Journey
Mark 1:9-15
3/1/09

When Bethannie was sick the other week, I took 2 days off work to stay home with her and she didn't really feel like doing anything but lay on the couch so we watched movies and TV a lot. It was sort of nice to have time to do that although it would have been better if she wasn't sick. What was really great was she picked my favorite movie to watch which is the Lord of the Rings trilogy as most of you know. This is the story of a journey to take the One Ring across Middle Earth to Mordor to destroy it in the fires of Mount Doom. And there are lots of adventures and dangers along the way that must be overcome. Lots of stories and movies deal with journeys. Another movie that Bethannie liked a lot when she was younger was "The Adventures of Milo and Otis" which is the story of a dog and cat who journey across country after getting separated from their owners and the journey takes months and they finally are reunited but along the way they've gotten married and had kittens and puppies and learned lots of lessons about true friendship.

Journeys are important, and they make good movies. But journeys are different than trips. When we think of a trip, we think of moving from point A to point B, visiting a bit, and returning to point A. A journey is more rambling rather than moving in straight lines, and the important stuff takes place along the way, not at any one particular destination. A journey also involves change and growth in the one taking the journey. As we begin the season of Lent, we are beginning a journey that will take us to the cross on Good Friday and then the empty tomb on Easter Sunday as we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As we look at the passage William read for us in Mark chapter 1, we see Jesus is on a journey. He is on the move in different ways. He starts in Nazareth, comes to the Jordan river and is baptized, goes into the wilderness, and then comes into Galilee where he starts to preach. He also moves from being a private citizen in Nazareth, through the experience of baptism, and the wilderness temptations, to a public ministry of proclaiming the good news of the

Kingdom of God. We can also view this as a process of maturing as Jesus moves from one who receives ministry from John, then is affirmed by the Father, overcomes temptation and then ministers to others as he announces that the kingdom of God is near and commands people to repent and believe the good news.

In looking at this passage as a journey, we see there are high and low points. The Spirit descending and the Father speaking are high points. The temptations in the wilderness are low points. But they are all part of the journey. In our own development as believers in Christ we are on a journey. The first leg of the journey is when we come checking out this religious stuff. Some people come because they are desperate for change in their lives and need hope that Jesus is real and can do something different in their lives. Others come because they are curious, wondering why this person they live near, are related to or work with is so hyped up on Jesus. Some people come just to please someone else or because their parent/relative/friend twisted their arm and made them come. But at some point we decide this Jesus stuff is for us and we commit. We have different terms for it – getting saved, being born again, making a confession of faith – but it basically means we believe the good news that the kingdom of God is near and we want to be a part of it. We commit to Jesus as our Lord and Savior, ask for forgiveness of our sins, receive that forgiveness, and commit to live our lives as disciples of Christ.

Then there is affirmation – the joy that comes with having our sins forgiven and knowing we are loved by God, the excitement of learning about Jesus and being a part of a fellowship of believers, the celebration of life that comes as God fills us with His Spirit and gives us joy. But then, at some point, the journey turns ugly and we find our faith being challenged in some way. We may find ourselves being tempted to go back to the old way of life. God may seem far away and it feels like he isn't answering our prayers any more. Some hardship comes along and we question if God really loves us still. Satan is there to remind us of our old life and he throws all kinds of junk at us to make us think that God couldn't possibly love someone as bad as we are. This is the dangerous part of the

journey, the place where we can get lost. How do we get through the wilderness with our faith intact, with our relationship with Christ strong, so that we come out proclaiming the good news of the kingdom?

Let's go back and look at what's happening in Mark 1 in a little more detail. In verses 9 – 11, Jesus comes to the Jordan to be baptized by John and as Jesus is coming up out of the water, the heavens are torn open, the Holy Spirit comes down on Jesus like a dove, and a voice speaks from heaven saying "You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." This description of the heavens being torn open is a way of describing that God is breaking into human experience and working on behalf of His people to deliver them. In Isaiah 64:1 the prophet prays "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!" and in verse 4 he declares "Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you who acts on behalf of those who wait for him."

God is presently at work in the world and in our lives, acting on our behalf, to make us into the image of His Son Jesus Christ. Paul writes in 2 Cor. 3:18 "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." When we are in the wilderness, facing opposition and slander from the enemy, we have to remember that our God has torn open the heavens and come down for our sakes. He is always at work in our lives to make us more like Jesus. We can't oppose the enemy by trying to prove how great we are, we have to oppose him by reminding ourselves and him of how great our God is.

Jesus was empowered by the Holy Spirit. This is important. Jesus did not begin his public ministry until after the Holy Spirit came on him. If Jesus needed the power of the Holy Spirit how much more do we need to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. When Jesus was arrested and then crucified, his disciples all ran away and hid. John writes in his gospel that the evening after the resurrection, the disciples were together with the doors locked because they were afraid (John 20:19) and Jesus came and stood among them. They were scared! Yet 6 weeks

later, on the day of Pentecost, they were all together, and “suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.” As we read further about this in Acts chapter 2, we see that a crowd gathered because the disciples were praising God in different languages and then Peter got up and preached about Jesus and about 3000 people became followers of Christ that day. The disciples weren’t afraid any more! They had been filled and empowered with the Holy Spirit and they turned their world upside down.

We need the power of the Holy Spirit active in our lives in order to make it on our journey. How do we get this? We simply ask. We should be praying every day that God would fill us with His Spirit and empowering us to live as His children. Jesus promised his disciples in John chapter 14 that he would send the Holy Spirit to them and the Spirit would remain with them forever. The Holy Spirit is with us at all times and we can take comfort in that. We do not face our enemy alone.

In looking back in Mark chapter 1 we see that it was actually the Holy Spirit who sent Jesus into the wilderness to face temptation. The thought that is conveyed by the verb that is translated “sent” is that there was a strong moral compulsion by which the Spirit led Jesus to go into the wilderness. The word literally means “to throw out.” Jesus was thrown out into the wilderness by the Spirit but the Spirit went with him. He wasn’t alone. Jesus was taking the offensive against the enemy. He was meeting the enemy on his own turf. The wilderness was seen as the place where evil powers were. It was a hostile place. Yet Mark refers to angels attending to Jesus while he was there. This shows us that God is present with his people and cares for them no matter how hostile the environment or how dangerous the situation. He’s able to be with his people even when they are on the enemy’s own turf. As children of God we are never on our own. But again, it was the Spirit who led Jesus into the wilderness. We shouldn’t go after the enemy in our own strength and ego, but only as led by

the Spirit. And if we do find ourselves in enemy territory, we can call on the Spirit of God to give us power to overcome.

We can expect testing as part of our experience as a disciple of Christ. It's going to happen if it hasn't already. We will find ourselves in the wilderness, facing a hostile situation, facing obstacles that we don't have the strength to overcome. Satan will test us to see how committed we are to Christ. He'll lie and try to get us to question the character of God. He'll appeal to every weakness we have. He'll slander and accuse us and try to tear us down so that we no longer believe that God could want anything to do with us. We are told to resist him!

Peter writes in 1 Peter 5:8-9 "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your fellow believers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of suffering." You see Satan will try to make us think we are such awful people and no other Christian has ever gone through what we are going through. All other Christians are super saints and we are the only failure in the bunch. He'll try to convince us that we are the weakest link and if the others find out, they'll reject us. He not only tries to break our fellowship with God, he also tries to break our fellowship with each other. But Peter says that our fellow believers throughout the world undergo the same kind of suffering that we do. Then in verses 10 and 11 he writes "And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen." James, the brother of Jesus, writes in James 4:7 and 8 "Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you." And finally Paul writes in Ephesians 6:10-18 (read)

In other words, remember who we are in Christ. Remember the gospel message that the kingdom of God is among us and we have been forgiven and cleansed through the blood of Christ. Confess the truth that we are children of God, loved and forgiven and made holy. We have the righteousness of Christ.

And we are filled with the very Spirit of God. We are not condemned sinners but we are the forgiven sons and daughters of God. And we have to confess the truth of who our God is. He is the one who created heaven and earth. He tears the heavens open and comes down to deliver his people. He is the one who is mighty to save. He is the one who has overcome all evil and he will reign forever and ever. We are accepted and loved, forgiven and empowered by this God who we call Father.

In Revelation chapter 12 John sees a vision of war in heaven and Michael and his angels fight against the great dragon, Satan, and finally throw him and his angels down to earth. Then a loud voice was heard in heaven proclaiming "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Messiah. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them!" In Luke 10, Jesus sent out 72 disciples to proclaim the kingdom of God. They came back rejoicing and testifying that even demons submitted to them in Jesus' name and Jesus said "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven (referring to this same vision that John had). I have given you authority to overcome all the power of the enemy. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." Satan has been cast down and we can overcome all our wilderness experiences. But our greatest joy is that we are known and loved by God. Our names are written in heaven. Our God is committed to us and will bring us through all our wilderness experiences.

I know in this sermon I haven't given you any stories or illustrations to help clarify the points I'm making. It's pretty much been all scripture. But probably all of us can think of our own experiences of being tested. Maybe we're being tested right now. With the shaky economy and a general sense of insecurity in society, maybe we feel like we're in the wilderness. We have problems, hard times, times when we wonder where God is. We have times when we doubt.

There are times we fail. We fall back into sin. But we have the Holy Spirit who calls us back to God in these times. My purpose in giving a lot of scripture today is to remind us that this is what Jesus lived through. This is what he experienced and what he taught his disciples and what has been handed down to us by those who have gone before us. This is God's word for us so we can be encouraged and persist in our own wilderness experiences. Before Jesus was led into the wilderness he heard the voice of the Father speaking from heaven, "you are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." We all need to hear the voice of our Father speaking affirmation to us, reminding us that we are loved and that we give Him pleasure, and that He is with us at all times and in all places. Wilderness experiences are lonely. Jesus didn't have any family or friends with him in the wilderness. But the Holy Spirit was with him as he is with us. We are never alone.

Jesus came out of the wilderness and began his ministry of proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. He ministered in the power of the Spirit, casting out demons, healing the sick, restoring people to full health, performing miracles, cleansing people and restoring them to a right relationship with God. And he said we would do even greater things than he did. We're not to spend our lives in the wilderness. The wilderness is the place we go through, not the place we build a house and plan to retire. We go through the wilderness to be tested and strengthened, to learn how powerful our God is, and so we can then come out and proclaim the good news that the kingdom of God is near.

We will go through wilderness times and we can't get through it alone. It starts with obeying Jesus' command to repent and believe the good news that the kingdom of God is near. We need to be filled with the Holy Spirit, empowered by God Himself, and following the leading of the Holy Spirit wherever he goes. We need to be able to hear the voice of God speaking to us and we have to believe it when he says we are his children whom he loves and with whom he is well pleased. And our God will be with us, taking care of us, empowering us, and bringing us through all things, transforming us into the likeness of Jesus Christ. Let's pray.