

“Wilderness Voices”

Mark 1:1-7

Dr. Anne M. Cameron

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The good news of Jesus Christ—the Message!—begins here, following to the letter the scroll of the prophet Isaiah.

*Watch closely: I'm sending my preacher ahead of you;
He'll make the road smooth for you.
Thunder in the desert!
Prepare for God's arrival!
Make the road smooth and straight!*

⁴⁻⁶John the Baptizer appeared in the wild, preaching a baptism of life-change that leads to forgiveness of sins. People thronged to him from Judea and Jerusalem and, as they confessed their sins, were baptized by him in the Jordan River into a changed life. John wore a camel-hair habit, tied at the waist with a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild field honey.

⁷⁻⁸As he preached he said, "The real action comes next: The star in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will change your life. I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. His baptism—a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit—will change you from the inside out."

Imagine you live in Galilee around the year 70 AD. There's a war on. Some radical Jews have revolted against the Roman occupation. The capital is under siege. Conditions in the Holy City are bad. There's talk that Rome has weapons of mass destruction. Even the Temple is at risk. People are split between loyalties. Some feel a revolution is in the works and God is behind it. Others argue we shouldn't fight; we should make peace.¹

¹ Inspiration for this opening section came from Christopher Hutson's essay on Mark 1 in "Feasting on the Word", Year B., Vol 1.

Anxiety is high; fear of violence is everywhere. Reports abound: police turning on people in the crowds; people undermining the authorities. Even soldiers turning against fellow soldiers.

There's been a recent turnover in leadership. Prices are skyrocketing. Oil is higher than it's been in a long time.² The economy is uncertain; people worry about how to provide for their families.

The country has become pretty diverse. Even in the small towns, there are immigrants and people of many religions. Tensions are high, between those who long for the 'old way' with its apparent unity vs. those who embrace the new diversity.

There's the group of people who keep talking about this man Jesus, executed nearly forty years ago for crimes against the state. They keep talking about how Jesus is "good news". Someone named Mark wrote his story, to keep the memory alive for future generations.

This is the advent of Jesus Christ, according to a man named Mark who lived after Jesus. A man who probably never met Jesus in the flesh, but who talked to many who did. A man who most certainly knew who Jesus was.

Mark's story of Jesus is the earliest one we have. There is no baby in a manger, no birth narrative. Mark cuts to the chase. There are no visible angels, but there are angels in Mark's good news nonetheless. The 'good news'. The Greek word here comes from one that means 'angels' or 'messengers'. The Message. Angels are hidden in that word. Angels just beyond the margins of Mark's message, waiting in the wings.

It is an announcement, not in a trumpet blast, not in a spectacular celestial musical revue, not in a movement of the stars or in unlikely dreams in the night, but in the form of a crazy preacher out in the desert south of Jerusalem. The message comes in a wilderness voice who prepares for One who is much greater. In the proclamation of a man who doesn't even know yet what Jesus looks like.

² Olive oil, that is.

“After me!” he claims. “After me!” he cries. The Messiah, the mighty, the powerful. This is what they had been hoping for! A savior! At long last! A leader! Someone to straighten out the government, clear the political mess, pave the way for a new world order. Someone powerful enough, well-connected enough, to pull some strings, end the war, get us out of these doldrums, fix the budget, reform the system.

Someone—a messiah---

powerful enough to get rid of the Roman occupation,
powerful enough to get rid of the occupation of drugs, greed,
corruption

powerful enough to get rid of what holds us captive

Someone---a savior---

Strong enough to banish the death-march of ignorance,
Stong enough to turn around inadequate schools, urban
violence, injustice, prejudice

Someone---a leader---

Great enough to inspire us to turn from where we are, to
change, to repent, and to go with him.

We still wait for the one John pointed to, the one Mark described.
The messiah, savior, and leader.

He came with no armies, no money, no connections.

He came quietly, to a quiet little nowhere town, to a quiet little
nobody family (only Mark doesn't tell us that).

He came to unlock the secret of power, not to take over.

He came to release us from the captivity of money and greed and
self, not to give us more.

He came to orient us to a completely new way of life, not to
reinforce old ways.

He came to have us turn toward him and away from what we have
so carefully constructed.

He came to set captives free (even us), to open blind eyes (even
ours), to give strength to the weary (certainly us) and power to the weak.

He came on the heels of a crazy street preacher crying out in the
wilderness.

Mark quotes the Jewish scriptures, the prophet Isaiah he says, but this isn't *exactly* right. Mark takes a few liberties here³. It's a blend of Isaiah and Malachi with hints of Exodus thrown in. For those who knew their Jewish scriptures, they would have known right away what Mark was quoting: deliverance.

John cries out in the wilderness with deliverance talk.

Deliverance from the power of Babylon and its idols.

Deliverance from the power of Rome and its idols.

Deliverance from the powers that continue to reign over us.

The Wilderness is a lonely, frightening place. Most of the time I just go along and pretend it's not there, do you? We pretend there is no emptiness, no loneliness, no fear. We are good at pretending. But that voice crying in the wilderness is there to shake us up, to tell us, *we need the wilderness*. We need to come to the desert.

For it is so often in the deserts of our lives where we find ourselves. So often at the low points in our lives we acknowledge our great need. In the silence of our alone times, we discover our need to return to God, to be drenched in God's Spirit, to be baptized into something new.

In that rocky landscape, in that quiet isolation, away from distractions, away from our comforts, we might, we just might, be able to take in the message. We might actually be able to hear the good news, to believe in the One who so desires to fill our need, who so longs for connection with us that he was willing to enter our wilderness, to make his camp among us, to become one of us, for our sake and for the sake of everyone we know.

³ **Isaiah 40:3** A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. **Malachi 3:1** "See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," **Exodus 23:20** See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared.

Wilderness.

John is a crazy man, going out to that place. A remote and desolate place.⁴ It is dry, brown, parched. The Jordan River there, a tiny ribbon of green slicing through barren countryside. What drew the crowds? (The same thing that draws us, our need.) It's a long way from Jerusalem on foot. There are robbers waiting behind huge boulders. Treacherous. Why would they have chanced it? (The same reason we take a chance, to hear and believe.)

A wild, unknown place where the unexpected happens. (This is what we need, this is what we long for.) The Baptist is a crazy choice for an advance man, that wild look in his eye. Not a great marketing strategy for Jesus. (But then we knew that about Jesus. We know Jesus isn't that way.) He chose a crazy street preacher, that's all. A voice crying out in the wilderness. No more, no less, unless of course, what if he's not crazy? What if his long bony finger really is pointing to the Lord God Almighty?

It's the chance we all take, staking our claim here and now, claiming the Lord's advent once again, putting our hopes in the One who has come, the One who continues to come, into the wilderness of our lives. John staked his life on it, will we?

The Message. The Gospel. The Good News. *Euangellion*. Angels are hidden in that word. Hidden in that wilderness word. Angels just beyond the margins, angels just outside the wilderness, angels waiting in the wings.

⁴ The place where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered 19 centuries later.