

Who Is that Man in the Wilderness? A sermon in response to Mark 1:4-11, Genesis 1:1-5, and Acts 19:1-7 by Rev. Scot McCachren for Hilltop Church, Mendham, NJ, January 7, 2024 (B Baptism of the Lord).

This morning, as we begin our year with the Gospel of Mark, I'd like to open by *reminding* you of the age-old story of a mysterious – yet ever-reliable rescuer in the wilderness... A man who seemed to come out of nowhere... who stood up for the poor, the weary, and the humble against those who would harm them... a man who relentlessly traveled through the hot/dry/dusty wilderness – who would show up unexpectedly in small towns and villages – to bring peace and justice... +++ And rumors of him spread throughout the land. – The suffering longed for him. – The mighty feared him. +++ But, he never stuck around long enough to take credit for what he had done – long enough for anyone to really figure out who he was, or why he had suddenly appeared on the scene when he did. +++ Time after time, the same thing happened, to the point that you learned to *expect* it:: After our hero seemed to miraculously save the day, someone looks up and says, +++ >>> “Who *was* that *masked* man” – and the invariable answer:: “I don’t know, he slipped away before I could say ‘thank you.’” – Just then, we hear in the distance the triumphant whinnying of a horse, and a voice call out, “Hi Ho, Silver! Away!” +++ And then..., the voice-over: “The LONE RANGER, and *Silver*, the fiery horse with the speed of light, a cloud of dust, and a hearty, Hi Ho, Silver!” The Lone Ranger!... The daring and resourceful masked rider of the plains led the fight for law and order in the early west... Return with us now to those thrilling days of yesteryear. The Lone Ranger rides again!”

See..., I think that Jesus – *at least in the Gospel of Mark* – is a bit like the Lone Ranger. He’s exactly what the world needed – and he showed up exactly when we needed him most. But..., he’s a bit of an enigma – especially in the opening chapters... Jesus heals a leper, then commands him not to tell anyone... When he casts out demons he does not permit them to speak, because they know who he is and will tell it... Word gets out anyway and people crowd around him, – hoping that he can help them. – Hoping he will cure them – and drive out their demons. – So Jesus retreats out to a remote region where there are fewer people, instead of the crowded towns (all the while continuing to heal more and more people and dispatching lots of demons)... +++ Jesus reveals things about himself little-by-little, and only when he is ready to do so. +++ In fact, in Mark, Jesus is not just an enigma to the people around him – but to the reader as well. Mark was the first of the 4 Gospel to be written, and it is very concise. It gets right down to business and doesn’t give us much context. Mark doesn’t fit Jesus into Jewish prophecy and tradition for us like Matthew. – It doesn’t connect the dots for us to see how the Gentile churches began, like Luke and its companion, Acts... +++ As Sgt. Joe Friday used to say in *Dragnet*: Mark is “Just the facts, ma’am.” +++ There is no *Christmas narrative* – no shepherds, no wise men, no angels announcing his arrival. ... Where does Jesus even come from? There’s no *genealogy* like we find in Matthew and Luke. In fact, Mark does not mention any of Jesus’ family members by name until chapter 6, and then it’s just because the people hearing him preach in the synagogue say, “Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon?”

Jesus just appears in the Wilderness, – as a full-grown man. – He appears by the Jordan River, seemingly out of nowhere, to be baptized by John... And, he doesn’t even speak at first (did you notice that?). – In *Matthew*, Jesus speaks at his baptism – but not in Mark. In fact, he also doesn’t speak when he is tempted by Satan, – whereas in both Matthew and Luke, he has entire conversations with Satan. +++ Not in Mark. He doesn’t say a word. +++ >>> “Who **IS** that masked man?” ... <<< Over the next 6 weeks, between now and Transfiguration Sunday, we are going to try to unravel the mystery together, to see if we can find an answer: “Who **IS** that Man in the Wilderness?” +++ We’ll find clues – *sometimes reading between the lines* to truths that lie just beneath the surface of the story. We’ll see how Jesus reveals more and more about himself – a little here, a little there – all the while insisting that his identity be kept a secret. +++ And, at the same time, we’ll see what this earliest Gospel has to say about US – about what Christ *means* for US. And what it teaches us about grace, about the Holy Spirit, and about the love of God.

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And so, let’s begin... with today’s reading... with Jesus’ baptism. – What does it tell us about that Man in the Wilderness?? +++ Well, in fact, to answer that we’ll end up having to look even further back, all the way back, well, back to... well, to The Beginning.” +++ ... +++ *So, boys and girls, return with me now to those thrilling days of yesteryear,* – to a time when the People of God were subjugated by a violent *foreign power*, – when the

religious leaders and the temple offered no hope for anyone, – when the *suffering poor* had no one to stand up for them, – and when the *mighty* had **no one** to fear...+++ **Who** would save them from their suffering? **Who** would stand up for *them*? >>> Just when there seemed to be no hope remaining... a dusty stranger appears in the wilderness. And nothing will ever be the same again.

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Today's Genesis reading is the opening passage of the whole Bible and it is certainly one of the most famous. It tells about the work of our **Creator God**, – who called forth **Light** at the very beginning. – It was **GOOD Light** and it separated from Darkness – as the **Wind of the Holy Spirit swept across the waters**. +++ ... >>> **God started with light**. Early Christians always associated **light with Christ**, as we see in epistles like Romans and Ephesians, and as the Gospel of John so eloquently expresses it: “In **him** was life, and the life was the **light** of all people. The **light** shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” +++ So... from a Christian perspective, all 3 persons of the Trinity were there at Creation: **the Creator God, the Light of Christ, and the Wind of the Spirit**, blowing over the waters. +++ And **NOW**, in Mark, when the work of Christ is commissioned through baptism, the Trinity comes together again – over the swirling waters of the Jordan River: **Jesus Christ** stands in the water, the **Holy Spirit** descends on him like a dove, and the **Creator's voice** from heaven proclaims that he is **GOOD**: “You are my Son..., the Beloved...; with you I am well pleased.” +++ **The baptism of Christ is an extension of the original act of Creation. – It is a new thing that has never happened before – and Mark is promising to tell us all about it – to share the GOOD NEWS...** >>> **So – what have we already learned about that Man who shows up in the Wilderness?** – What does Mark already tell us about him, even though he just showed up and has not yet spoken a word?? ... >> We already know that he is both divine and human. – We know that Jesus is the Son of God, come among us. – And we know that **everything that follows... everything...** will tell **his** story.

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Another thing hiding in plain sight in today's reading is how Mark actually begins setting up for us just how radical Jesus' ministry is really going to be, that he will be a troublemaker and provoke both *religious* and *political* authorities... How do we know that? Well, It's the simple fact that this momentous **new thing** – the light of God incarnate – appears out in the **wilderness** of all places. – Jesus doesn't come to the Chief Priest in the Jerusalem Temple, the seat of Judaism, where they would try to control his message. ... No, he does the exact opposite. He shows up in the same wild, untamed place where God has always **re-created** God's People. The wilderness. It's the same wilderness where the Lord had made that first Covenant, with Abraham. – The same desert where God had led Moses and Israel for 40 years after delivering them from bondage. – The same wilderness where the 10 Commandments had been given. The people of God had **always** gone to the wilderness when they needed a fresh start – and when they needed to be saved... **And notice** – Mark tells us that the people were **flocking there in droves** – first drawn to John, and then **saved** there by Christ. They were drawn to the wilderness from the Judean countryside and >>> **ALL the people of Jerusalem came out!!** <<< Those are Mark's actual words here: “**All** the people of Jerusalem were going out to him.” Can you picture that? **All** of them? ... And what does it **mean** that all the people of Jerusalem are joining John and Jesus in the wilderness?? It means they are all leaving the **Temple**. ... (See, with Mark, you've got to read carefully, or you'll miss something important) ... Here in the **very first chapter** of Mark, before Jesus even says one word, the earthly stronghold of the Pharisees and other traditional Jewish authorities is already being abandoned by God's People. ... **EVERYONE** is leaving for the wilderness... – **Everyone** is looking for a **new** beginning, – for a **new** relationship with God, for a **new** kind of law, – a **renew** kind of covenant. – And they are leaving the old ones behind. +++ So **from the very start** – the religious leaders have very good reasons to feel threatened by Jesus. +++ And so do the *Romans*. When the voice of God declares to Jesus, “You are my Son, the Beloved,” it's a direct slap in the face of **the Emperor**, who is **officially** declared to be the Son of God. – Everyone in the Empire had to revere **Caesar as divine** or face the consequences. +++ But Christians **NEVER WOULD**... The opening chapter of this first gospel **boldly** draws a line in the sand. – **Jesus Christ** is the Son of God – and **nobody** else is. This sets a tone that is unwavering through all 4 Gospels and early Christian history: – Jesus would never play by anybody's rules but the Lord's. And if that means trouble – then so be it... So – we know **That Man in the Wilderness is a TROUBLEMAKER!** Before he ever speaks a word.

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And, finally, in today's short passage, we already begin to witness one more thing about Jesus. It's one of the most important things of all: – **we begin to get an idea what his baptism does for us**.... **John's** baptisms had always been just water, and always tied to a confession of sins – but now John declares that the one who comes will bring

something new and eternally powerful: “I have baptized you with water; but **he** will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” +++ Paul reinforces this promise in our Acts reading, when he finds some believers who have only been baptized by John. – They have never **heard** of the Holy Spirit. So, Paul baptizes them “in the name of the Lord Jesus.” Immediately the Holy Spirit comes upon them and fills them. That is the same baptism **we all** receive: – in the name of Jesus Christ..., **and** his Heavenly Father..., **and** the Holy Spirit. +++ All three show up for Jesus’ baptism – and all three showed up for yours. +++ With John, baptism had been a bit of a *quid pro quo* for repenting. **Now, believers don’t have to do anything to earn it – we just have to show up for it.** +++ In Mark, that’s what we see in Christ’s *own* baptism. Jesus doesn’t say a word. He doesn’t have to prove he’s *worthy* of being baptized. **All he does is show up for it.** As **David Lose** describes it, “Jesus doesn’t have to *do* anything, but rather simply *receives* the gift of the Holy Spirit and of God’s favor... It is a powerful word of acceptance, identity, blessing, and commitment: ‘You are my beloved Son. With you I am well pleased.’” Not because of anything he had **done** (*he hasn’t done anything yet*) – but because of who he is... +++ ... +++ I wonder what it felt like. I wonder how much it meant to Jesus to hear those words and see the appearance of the Holy Spirit as he was claimed by God. How much strength did it give him later, in the dark times that would follow? **Jesus’** baptism was not about *repentance* – he had nothing to repent. It had nothing to do with *forgiveness* – he had committed no sins... But it told him “who he is – indeed, **whose** he is – to hear that he is accepted, [he is] loved, [he is] pleasing,” ... **no matter what.**

My friends, the GOOD NEWS is, this is how Jesus Christ brings the Holy Spirit upon each of us in *our own* baptism. “Here, perhaps,” **Lose reminds us**, “is why... Baptism matters so much. Because each of **us also** longs to hear words of acceptance, identity, blessing, and commitment. +++ Which is precisely the gift of Baptism. +++ **We do not have to do anything to receive God’s promises.** Indeed, the beauty of *infant* Baptism is that you *can’t* do anything – not even make a decision for Jesus, let alone commit your life [to him]. **Rather, we are passive recipients of God’s blessing and favor.** [It is a **gift**.] We are called *God’s beloved children* **not** because of something **we** do but because of who God is – a loving parent who wants nothing more than to see us flourish. **In Holy Baptism, God... chooses... us.** In Holy Baptism, God says that we **are...** enough. Already. **That we are pleasing to God and deserve to be loved.** Our identity as God’s beloved child... [can *never*] be taken away from us.” +++ And, just as Christ was encouraged in baptism to face what lay ahead – **so are we.** +++ ... +++ So, as we are gathered this morning on the first Sunday of this new year, think about all the things that might lie before you over the **next** year... – decisions you’ll make... – people you’ll meet... – people you will have to say goodbye to... – challenges you will face... – successes... – and failures... – risks you will take... – love you will share... It can be scary to think about, can’t it!? Until you remember that the Holy Spirit will be with you every step of the way. – Until you remember that in your baptism you have been forever sealed and claimed as a child of God – and **you will remain so** no matter **what** happens these next 12 months.

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So – as short and concise as they are, these opening few verses of the Gospel of Mark actually have a lot to tell us about that Man in the Wilderness – especially for someone who doesn’t want the word about him to get out too quickly and who has not yet spoken one word. I look forward to **continuing** to explore this earliest Gospel with you this year. +++ Already, through the baptism narrative, we know that Christ is both divine and human. He was a radical threat to traditional religious and political power structures. And, through his baptism, he offers you an **unconditional and eternal** connection to the grace of God in *your own* baptism – through the work of the Holy Spirit...; always walking by your side..., always encouraging you..., always whispering in your ear, “You are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased.”

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.