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St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church – Florissant, MO
First Sunday in Lent, February 21, 2021
Mark 1:9-15

Mark doesn't give us much to go on here. His account of Jesus' baptism and what follows is sparse, stark even and it moves quickly. We don't get the detail we get in the other gospels. And yet, as Dawna Wall, the writer of today's reflection in our *Living Compass* booklet says, "between the lines there is a world of experience. It's a long story, we might say."

In our own lives we sometimes have experiences that are hard to put into words, experiences that are full and powerful and long and winding and we aren't sure just how to convey all that they hold in words. So we say, "It's a long story." We say, I am divorced. It's a long story. We say, I survived cancer. I *had* three children. My husband died a few years ago. I visit my wife on Tuesdays. It's a long story. We give a few details knowing that there is so much behind those details. The story only gets fleshed out with the people in our lives that we know intimately, the folks we really trust with our hearts.

This is how I see Mark's stark words this morning. He is drawing us into a story that will unfold as we experience it. The thing is, we think we already know the story. We have heard all this before. We know what the other gospel writers say about this experience and we have our Sunday school stories and our Bible study explanations. But these are not just stories meant to entertain or comfort us with their familiar words, these are the living words of God meant to challenge us and move us and change us. It's a long story.

Mark's words are actually packed full even in their brevity. I have heard them all before, too. This week, I tried to read them with fresh eyes. A few things stood out to me. First, we learn that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee. This wasn't where anyone would have expected the

long-awaited Messiah to come from. Nazareth is obscure; It's what Biblical scholars have called a "third-class village in second-class Galilee." God didn't come in the form of human power. God came to us in one who was on the outside, one who was not considered important to the power structure of the day. It is easy for us to fashion Jesus according to our standards, but Jesus was no celebrity. I wonder how we might encounter this humble Jesus in the obscure lives around us. In the hungry? The silenced? The folks on the margins of our prosperous economy?

In Mark's story, only Jesus hears the voice of God telling him who he is - that he is the beloved Son of God. It's a long story, waiting to be revealed, full of twists and turns. Perhaps the greatest turn is that, once he is baptized and his identity is confirmed he is driven out into the wilderness by the Spirit of God. Driven. Mark's words are harsh. It is God who sends Jesus into the wilderness. Yet God also sends angels. And God keeps the wild animals from harming Jesus. I wonder if the message for us on this first Sunday of Lent is to let God drive us into the wilderness of our lives, trusting that God is there by our side in it.

What are the places of wilderness in our lives, places we are afraid to go? What are the pieces of our long story that we just don't want to tell? I hope this season of Lent can be a time when we trust God enough to go to those lonely places with Jesus. I hope that we can be honest before God, knowing that we, too, in our baptism are marked as God's beloved. And then, can we let God send us angels and know that God will never abandon us?

Mark's last brief sentence tells us that Jesus came out of the wilderness "proclaiming the good news of God." He says, "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." What is that good news? It's a long story. It took the disciples a long time to understand that the good news wasn't going to unfold exactly as they had hoped. They had to embrace the whole story of life, death, and resurrection. They had to trust

that God was with them even when it didn't feel like it. They had to let their old ideas of what a messiah is die and they had to embrace a new way of understanding the story of God. What is the good news that God is speaking to us this morning? What is the good news that God wants us to embrace during this wilderness season of lent, so that we can rise to new life with Christ as we celebrate Easter? What is the good news that you need to hear?

Lent is a time when we go into the wilderness, to the places we often don't make time for or places we are afraid of. Places of honesty and confession, places of pain and loneliness, places of awe and gratitude. Lent isn't a time for punishing ourselves or depriving ourselves just for the sake of it. It's a time when we bring our whole self to God who calls us beloved.

Lent is a time to bring ourselves before God with a beginner's mind. To be open to what God might be trying to say to us in this moment, in this neighborhood, in this church, in this family. Sure, we have heard the stories over and over. We know what comes next and we think we know how it ends. But, remember, it's a long story. It's a living story. It's a story God is waiting to share with us in the intimacy of our hearts.

During lent here at St. Barnabas, you are invited to hear the story anew, with a beginner's mind in a variety of ways. Join in Evening prayer at 6 pm on Tuesday nights. Show up and be ready to approach the story with fresh eyes. Consider signing up to pray the Stations of the Cross some Friday during lent. Perhaps there is something new that God is waiting to say to you in this ancient devotion. Keep the *Living Compass* booklet on your nightstand and read the reflections each morning or evening. Let the words come to you fresh and touch you in new ways. Find a way to carve out some time during this season of Lent to sit with God in the silence and to discover the good news with fresh eyes. It's a long story.