



Theme: Jesus and the Earliest Gospel...Mark
“Good News Comes from the Wilderness”

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber

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Weekly Memory Verse:

¹² The Spirit then compelled Jesus to go into the wilderness –Mark 1:12

VIDEO Sermon Bumper

SLIDE “Good News Comes from the Wilderness”

My name is Jeff Huber and I’m Lead Pastor at Summit Church and we are so glad you have joined us for this time of worship. Today we begin a new series of sermons in which we are reading through the gospel of Mark. The focus of Mark’s book is his Jesus’ life and ministry. Mark is a book of action because of the circumstances in which it was written. Mark is trying to answer two important questions for his readers, and they are important for us today as begin this study of Mark’s gospel.

SLIDE Who is this man Jesus?

Who is Jesus really? What can we learn about him?

SLIDE What does his life mean for our lives today?

If we are going to study Jesus, we could have chosen any of a million books that have been published about him to study to understand his life.

Jesus has more books written about him than any other historical figure in the history of our planet. We could have chosen any of those books, but we have chosen what most scholars agree is the very first book published about Jesus. It is the earliest Gospel and it's important to understand its author and context as we get started.

SLIDE Who was Mark?

Mark is known as John Mark. Sometimes just called John. In the New Testament we find him named nine times: eight times in the Book of Acts and the letters of Paul and once by Peter. In 1 Peter he is called, "my son." He is a spiritual son to the apostle Peter, so some consider Mark the Gospel of Peter.

Mark is also the cousin of Barnabas. Paul and Barnabas and John Mark went on the very first missionary journey together. John Mark was probably just a teenager and he was going as a helper to Barnabas and Paul who were his elders in the faith. He got cold feet during the missionary journey and he left Paul and Barnabas and went back to Jerusalem. That caused Paul to look with a bit of suspicion on his faithfulness. After that, Paul refused to take him on any other missionary journeys. This upset Barnabas and caused a division between Paul and Barnabas.

From that time forward, Barnabas would take John Mark on his missionary journeys and Paul would take Silas and Timothy and others. That division was apparently healed because we find Paul mentions Mark several times in his letters and he always refers to him affectionately. We find in 1 Timothy, at the end of his life, Paul asks for Mark to come to Rome to be with him before his death.

John Mark goes on to be a great apostle and leader in the early church. It must be noted however that the Gospel of Mark never comes out and names its author. The opening title was added by the church later. Nowhere

in the Gospel does it say, “I, John Mark, write this gospel.” The earliest testimonies from the first century of the church do recognize that John Mark wrote this gospel.

It was believed that John Mark spent a good portion of his life in the city of Rome. Tradition says that he went to Rome with the apostle Peter. Peter went to Rome just before his death to preach and it is said that John Mark went with him to be his interpreter. Many scholars have said that the Gospel of Mark might also be titled, “the Gospel of Peter,” because what we find in the Gospel of Mark is Peter's recollection of what happened in the ministry of Jesus. So, Peter is believed to have a strong influence in the Gospel of Mark.

Scholars also believe that Paul was a huge influence on the Gospel of Mark. Remember that Paul was constantly PREACHING the gospel. The very idea that this book would be called a Gospel, which also means Good News, when up to the point of its writing “the gospel” referred to what was preached by the apostles, bears witness to the influence of the apostle Paul. Paul writes in his letter to the Christians in Rome, in the first chapter, these words about the Good News, or the Gospel.

BIBLE

¹⁵ So I am eager to come to you in Rome, too, to preach the Good News. ¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—the Jew first and also the Gentile. ¹⁷ This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, “It is through faith that a righteous person has life.”

John Mark begins his book with these words:

BIBLE

1 This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.

This is the beginning of what the apostle Paul has been preaching. Most likely Paul and Peter both influenced this gospel.

SLIDE When might he have written this gospel?

Mark probably wrote this gospel shortly after Peter and Paul had been put to death in Rome, around 61 A.D., so not quite 30 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Nero was a horrible Emperor in Rome at the time of Peter and Paul. He was looked down upon by many of the citizens of Rome and he hatched a terrible and wicked plan. His plan was to have thugs set fire to the city of Rome. He would extinguish the fire and then raise taxes to rebuild the city according to the way he wanted it built. He would blame Christians for the fire, saying that the gods were angry with these people who didn't worship the Roman gods. Christians were called "atheists" in the first century by Romans. Paul and Peter and other Christian leaders were rounded up. Peter was crucified upside down and Paul was beheaded. Other Christians were burned at the stake by Nero as entertainment for his dinner guests.

Then, in 66 A.D., Jews in Israel rebelled against Roman and defeated a Roman garrison. Nero sent 3 new garrisons to the Holy Land, wiping out hundreds of thousands in the Galilee before laying siege to Jerusalem. More than 1 million were killed in the city, many of them Jewish Christians. Most scholars believe that Mark wrote his gospel just after these two events in Rome and Jerusalem, sometime between 66 and 70 A.D., to encourage the rest of the believers not to give up on their faith. Mark was trying to say, "This is the Jesus that you are following. Don't forget him. Don't forget what he has called you to do. Don't forget the mission that he had. Don't forget the salvation that he offers you. Remain faithful to Jesus Christ."

It was an encouragement for them to hear the stories and remember who Jesus was. It was important that they be written down now that Peter was gone. Scholars also believe that Mark wrote his gospel because there was already some confusion in the early church about who Jesus was. Was he a man only? Was he a divine being who only looked like a man? Already in the first century there was confusion over the identity of Jesus. Many scholars understand that Mark was trying to clarify that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. This is why Mark tells us in the first line...

SLIDE “Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God”

Mark will also refer to Jesus as the fully human...

SLIDE “Son of Man”

Mark uses both these phrases frequently in his gospel. Repeatedly you will find the humanity of Jesus and then at the next turn you will find the divinity of Jesus. We see this from the very beginning of the gospel in a passage we looked more closely at a few weeks ago...

BIBLE

⁹ One day Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. ¹⁰ As Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens splitting apart and the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice from heaven said, “You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy.”

Mark is helping us to see the full humanity and divinity of Jesus from the very beginning, with John the Baptist calling for repentance of sins, and Jesus himself leading the way by getting in the water. It’s not that Jesus had sin he needed cleansed, but that we can see him get wet and then being called God’s child. Just as Jesus experienced these things, we are meant to know we are made by God to be loved by God.

GRAPHIC Google Earth Holy Land

Let me remind you that Israel in the time of Jesus was this region from the Galilee in the North, with the Jordan River running South, into the Dead Sea.

GRAPHIC Google Earth Dead Sea Area

Zooming in down South, we have the Dead Sea area. Qumran is on the left of the Dead Sea and where we find caves with scrolls containing some of the oldest manuscripts. These were hidden and stored because those in this monastery knew Nero was sending troops to destroy Jerusalem, so they saved those scrolls. Typically, old scrolls were destroyed after they were copied onto new ones, so it was unusual to unearth so many old documents. We believed these were Essences and John the Baptist was from this community.

You see the Jordan River runs into the Dead Sea, where nothing can live because it is below sea level. Bethany Beyond Jordan is the baptism site of Jesus with Jerusalem on your left, Jericho up top, and the Wilderness area where Jesus is tempted in the middle. That will be our focus today. You can see this area from the place where John baptized Jesus.

GRAPHIC Jordan River

The people would have been standing on the left bank while John the Baptist was on the right bank. He was preaching to them saying, "If you know you have missed the mark, if you know you have fallen short of what God wants, if you need to be made clean then join me in the water. Wade in the water and God will wash your sins away."

GRAPHIC Jordan River into the Dead Sea

From this place they could see the Dead Sea and know that those sins have been washed downstream to the Dead Sea where they could never live

again. What a powerful image of God's forgiveness and grace. This is likely the place where Jesus was baptized by John.

GRAPHIC Judean Wilderness

What I find most powerful and profound is that all this happens on the edge of wilderness, where Jesus will be compelled to go next. This is an image of that wilderness.

BIBLE (use wilderness image as backdrop)

¹² The Spirit then compelled Jesus to go into the wilderness, ¹³ where he was tempted by Satan for forty days. He was out among the wild animals, and angels took care of him.

Mark wants us to make this connection that the Gospel, the Good News, comes out of this wilderness. Imagine in your mind how these people felt who were coming to the river to get baptized. First, remember that they were sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes along with some Pharisees who were the religious leaders. When the Pharisees came the Gospels tell us that they sat back with a judgmental and skeptical eye watching as the sinners were stepping into the river. The Pharisees knew that they did not need to be baptized because they were righteous. Of course, they did not know that they were the ones who most need to be baptized. They were ones living in the wilderness, dealing with wild beasts that seemed to control their lives.

The sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes needed this. They wanted a new beginning and they understood what it would mean to be made new and washed clean. They plunged themselves into the water so John would baptize them there. Why would they do this? All of us have times in our lives where we desperately want to be made clean and new. We all would like a fresh start at some point in our lives. We want to wipe the slate clean and start all over. We all have those times in our lives.

SLIDE We all want a fresh start!

These stories of baptism and temptation that begin Mark's gospel raise very profound questions for us.

SLIDE Why did Jesus choose to be baptized and go to the wilderness?

He didn't need that. He was perfect. The Scripture says that he was tempted in every way like we are, but he was without sin. Jesus was not baptized because he needed forgiveness, but to fully identify with our humanity. Remember how Mark is telling us constantly that Jesus is fully human and fully divine. Through his baptism Jesus is identifying with us. Jesus is identifying with the sinners and the prostitutes and tax collectors who were wading in the water. He's not embarrassed or ashamed to say, "I'm with you."

What he says through his baptism and time in the wilderness is, "This is why I came, so that you might be forgiven. I came that you might be clean and whole and new again. I will give my life to be with people like this who are getting baptized. I have been to that wilderness place and I know it's not easy!"

Throughout the gospel we find Jesus eating with sinners. He associates with them and he loves them. He is not ashamed to be with them. Not like the Pharisees who stand on the side with their arms crossed. Jesus jumps in the water with the sinners. How amazing is that?!

Imagine with me a friend of yours who has a terrible addiction problem—maybe a terribly embarrassing addiction. You go to your friend and you say, "I think you need to go to this support group. I think it will really help you."

Then your friend turns to you and says, "Great idea! Would you go with me?" You come to the building and you realize there are lots of people you

know walking back and forth past the room. Maybe there are even people in the room that you know, and YOU don't have this problem, but you promised you would go. So, what are you going to do?

I have a friend who has an addiction problem that is rather embarrassing to admit. I know that if he asked me to go with him to his support group my first response would be to remind him that, "I am the pastor of this church and I don't have this problem and I don't want people to think I have this problem. So, I'll just sit in the car and wait. I'll read something and wait for you to get done."

I think I finally would overcome that. At least I would hope so, and then be able to say, "Yes, I'll go with you." I might go into the group with him, but I want to be sure and say something like, "Hey, just to be clear, I don't have this problem. He does! But not me, it's not my problem."

Jesus doesn't say or do that. He just says by his actions, "I am here with you in the murky waters, standing by all of you who need to be cleansed." How awesome is that?

GRAPHIC St George Monastery

One of the places you can go in the Judean wilderness is the monastery of St. George. It was built in the 500s with a river running down the middle of the canyon. The monks would live in silence to remember the 40 days and 40 nights that Jesus spent in this region. It's interesting that Jesus, after having this profound experience of baptism, is driven into this desolate place to be tempted and tested. It is in many ways a reminder that even when we say "yes" to God, there are still many challenges. If you look at Moses, Elijah and all the prophets, you will find this same theme, of going to a quiet place in the desert where there is both time with God and testing.

We began the season of Lent with Ash Wednesday this past week and

often during that time we give up something and fast. I hope you consider doing something which is hard to give up because that gives it more meaning over these next 40 days. When I have given something up, I often find that frustrating and difficult because I don't really like fasting. I know, it's hard to hear that your pastor, but it's true. I've given up a few things for this season, and when you know it, the first day of Lent I go in the church kitchen and someone has put a big pile of tempting food to be even for free! Seriously, who does that and put out chips and candy the first day of Lent? The good news is that most of it was expired, so that made it a bit easier to not give into my temptation. What I find, however, is that when I am tempted by that thing, I turn my heart to God and try to say, "I love you Lord more than this. It's a way for me to identify with your fasting and willingness to give up so I will do that."

SLIDE Judean Wilderness 2

Jesus came out to this place to be tested, and I think in part that is because God knew what was going to be asked of Jesus at the end of his life, and this place in the wilderness was meant to prepare him for the good news in the gospel that he would live out. I believe that early on Jesus understood the main mission of his life was to give his life for humanity. Mark tells us that the devil shows up to tempt Jesus away from that mission and I wonder what that looks like? Do you think the devil showed up in red spandex with pointy ears, horns, and a pitchfork? I have only seen that on Halloween or in the movies.

So, how does the devil tempt us? I'm not sure about each of you, but I find it to be a little voice in my head which whispers I should do something I know I shouldn't do. "Go ahead Jeff, eat that bag of chips that expired 4 months ago. It still will taste good!" Sometimes, it's a voice telling me I don't need to do something that I should do. Sometimes, when that voice is very

dark, it whispers in our ears, “You’re no good. You don’t need to go on. There’s nothing you can do about it all. It’s hopeless. You should be ashamed. Your worthless.” It’s the lies we hear in our head and sometimes they are old tapes which play from our childhood or some other abusive relationship. It’s often those voices that we can’t seem to get out of our head.

We are meant to contrast this time of temptation with the experience of Jesus coming out of the water where the voice of the Holy Spirit speaks the truth, that we are made by God to be loved by God, and to bring God great joy. The opposite of that are the voices from the devil, and I think they are similar to the ones that Jesus heard which is why this story so compelling and so important for us. Mark doesn’t tell us what the temptations are which prepare Jesus, but we do find them in Matthew and Luke.

The first temptation is where Jesus is fasting, and he is undoubtedly hungry. The devil tempts him by saying, “If you are the Son of God...” Remember that Jesus has just heard that he is God’s child coming out of the river and baptism. The voice in his head is now asking him this question, “Are you sure you heard that right? Are you sure that you really are a child of God?” Remember that Mark wants us to get that Jesus is the Of God and the Son of Man. Satan comes as this voice of doubt whispering in the ear of Jesus.

SLIDE The voice of doubt

There is a voice which is questioning his identity and I think we hear that voice sometimes to. This is the voice of doubt that comes to us with words like, “Are you sure you believe in God after all this happened in your life which is bad? Are you sure that God cares about you? Are you sure that God made you to love you? You, with all the things you’ve done, think that God cares about you? You really believe that you are his beloved child? Are

you sure you are not losing her mind? Are you sure you are not one of those people who has a messianic complex? Are you really sure that you're the Messiah?"

Satan goes on and says, "If you are the son of God, then turn the stones into bread." There are plenty of stones in the wilderness. Jesus was the Son of God, he certainly had the power to make bread. If he can cast out demons and opened the eyes of the blind, he can make bread from rocks. Jesus could have used his power to meet his own needs and he could've stopped fasting. He didn't need to do these things.

I know I have had several opportunities to give into temptation and begin eating what I gave up for Lent. It's not a very big thing, this little box of Nerds. You will notice. But for Jesus, everything hinged on this moment. We use his power to avoid fasting and gratify his own needs or would Jesus use power to serve others and to give sacrificially. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy when, which is reminding the people of Israel to remember the 40 years they spent in the wilderness after slavery and before the Promised Land.

BIBLE

² Remember how the Lord your God led you through the wilderness for these forty years, humbling you and testing you to prove your character,

BIBLE

He did it to teach you that people do not live by bread alone; rather, we live by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

Jesus is tested again when the devil takes into a high place, the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem which stood more than 100 feet in the air. He then tells Jesus, "If you are the son of God in for yourself off the cliff and God's angels will protect you and catch you."

Some scholars have wondered if this was about tempting Jesus to not go to the cross, but instead do this amazing act which then would prove to people he was the Son of God and he wouldn't have to go to the cross. Others have wondered if this was the devil's way of giving Jesus a way out now, by ending it instead of having to go to the cross and be tortured. He could just end his life now and not go through the pain. Was the temptation simply to throw in the towel and take his own life? If God is God, then maybe he will save you and you will have to go through all of that.

SLIDE The voice of despair

I know I have had moments in my life, and when I was younger, when I wondered if life was worth it. Right now, we have an epidemic of suicide happening throughout our country, and certainly in La Plata County. I have met with many people who have heard that voice that is the devil whispering, "It's never going to get any better. It will be this way or worse forever." This is where depression is so painful, only believe it will always be this way and we will never feel any better. That is the best lie the devil has, one of his most lethal tools.

The reality that Jesus would come to live and embodied is that the worst thing is never the last thing, and there is always hope. But Jesus I believe has been in the midst of those dark and despairing moments, because he was fully human. The response of Jesus is profound as he comes back again with Scripture. By the way, this is one of the reasons we invite you to do a Scripture memory verse each week, because only have those things lodged in our head, they become an answer to the temptations and lies that are the voices whispering to us these things which are not true. Jesus recites again from the book of Deuteronomy, this time chapter 6.

BIBLE

¹⁶You must not test the Lord your God...

Part of the reason I believe Jesus says these words is because God will never ask us to jump off a cliff! There is no need to test God, because these voices are not even from God.

SLIDE The voice of deity

Finally, Satan shows Jesus all the wealth and power of the world and tells them he can have it all without going to the cross. Jesus is told he can have a mansion and glory and honor and money and power and women and anything he wants if he will simply lay aside his mission and follow Satan instead. Jesus is offered the power of deity but with a small “d”. Is the power to be in charge and get everything done his way. This time, Jesus quotes the first commandment, once again from Deuteronomy, this time chapter 5.

BIBLE

⁷ “You must not have any other god but me.

You must not worship any other gods, like Satan, because he doesn’t have any lasting power. Most of us would rather be God, if we’re honest, and we have to choose every day what we worship and what we follow. We often think we are in much more control than we really are, and when we get to the end of our lives, we finally realize that we don’t have any control at all! Every day, we are faced with the choice that Jesus faced in the wilderness. The bottom line of each temptation is about whether we will live selfishly or selflessly. We must choose every day if we are going to hate or love. We are going to choose cruelty or kindness. We are tempted and faced with those choices each and every day.

Everyday we see images and hear stories of people who have listened to those voices, similar to what tempted Jesus in the wilderness. There are voices which tell us to lash out and hurt people because they are the enemy. But the truth is, we all have a choice to which voice we will listen. We all

have temptations to listen to that voice which tells us to be cruel or to cause harm or to make a choice that will lead to damage or even death.

Or, we can listen to the voice which came out of the wilderness and brought us good news. As a voice calling us to follow Christ and to hear the gospel, doing God's will and being the presence of Jesus Christ in the world. It is a voice which calls us to do the loving thing and walk in the path of peace. Jesus refused to give in while he was in the wilderness. He could've chosen not to go to the cross and not to transform that symbol of torture and hate into a symbol of love and faithfulness.

Jesus could've had wealth and power without the pain or sacrifice. He could have given in and given up, but he refused to listen to that voice. As we begin this Lenten study of the gospel of Mark, and begin the 40 day journey, I pray we will listen to the good news of the gospel which came from the wilderness of the river and the Judean desert. It is not always easy to listen to that voice, but it is the one tells us that we are God's children, and we bring God great joy. It is a voice which spoke from experience because it had gone into the river and into the wilderness to show us that God became fully human in Jesus Christ and would not abandon us when times get hard.

We choose to listen that good news from Jesus Christ which calls out from the wilderness, we find life. I pray we will be people who give into that voice and follow a Savior calls us to walk out of the darkness and wilderness and death of despair, and into the light.

Let's pray...

SLIDE Prayer

Gracious God, we pray for people devastated throughout the country with the cold and ice and snow. Help us to be your hands and hearts in those places. God is easy to give in to the voice of doubt, the voice of despair, and

the voice of darkness. Help us to be people who listen to your voice, who walk in your love, who share in your life, who recognize that it is your good news which comes from those wilderness moments. Some of us are in that wilderness place right now, so bring healing and hope. You are the God that restores and use us to be instruments of healing in our world as we listen to your voice, wholly surrendered to you. Send us forth in your mission this week. In Jesus name. Amen