

**“Through the Wilderness”**  
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**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**The Baptism of the Lord**  
**January 10, 2021**

**Scripture Reading: Mark 1:4-13 (NRSV)**

<sup>4</sup>John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup>Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup>I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." <sup>9</sup>In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup>And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." <sup>12</sup>And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. <sup>13</sup>He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.



**Sermon: “Through the Wilderness”**

This has been a tough week. As you've heard, on Wednesday a group of people - call them insurrectionists, or domestic terrorists, or simply a mob - overran the National Capitol in Washington DC and attempted to disrupt a joint session of Congress. Just when I thought the world couldn't get any crazier, that happened. But what you might not have heard is that on that same day, 3,865 Americans died from COVID-19.<sup>1</sup> Which was a new single day record for COVID deaths in this country.

Our trials and struggles of the last few months have been well-documented. There's no reason to recount them all here. But there was a sense of hope that with the beginning of a new year, maybe things would start to get a little better. Unfortunately, this year hasn't gotten off to a particularly spectacular start. But if you were thinking that today is only January 10<sup>th</sup> and maybe this has just been a ten-day free trial and we can choose to unsubscribe, I've got some bad news.

Exceptional, historic events aside, we're all adults here. We all know life is hard sometimes. Pandemics and political turmoil are just two of the most visible, wide-reaching problems we face. The fact is even day-to-day living can be exceptionally difficult sometimes. Some people struggle with illness and infirmity. Others with depression and other forms of mental illness. At-home schooling is tough on students and teachers alike. Work or the lack of work can be a source of stress and unhappiness. There are some who have benefited financially during this economic downturn, the stock markets certainly bear testimony to that fact, but there are plenty of folks who struggle with paying rent and providing food for their families and having to choose which prescription to get this month because they can't afford them all. And in the midst of that, we come to the day on the church calendar when we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord. And as random as it may seem, believe it or not, there is a connection.

We have just celebrated Jesus' birth, so it makes sense that we would observe his baptism soon after. But there's actually quite a bit of time that passes between Jesus' birth and his baptism. Presbyterians baptize infants and children early in life, but because Jesus was Jewish, and the Christian church with its sacraments and traditions did not exist yet, his parents followed the requirements of the law for their newborn child, which meant circumcision and presentation in the Temple.

According to Luke's gospel,

*After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every*

*firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”<sup>2</sup>*

It must have been just after this that, according to Matthew, Joseph took Mary and the newborn child and fled to Egypt to avoid the murderous wrath of King Herod who saw the infant Jesus as a threat to his own power.

There is very little else that we learn about Jesus’ childhood. Luke recounts one instance of a precocious Jesus who gets separated from his family during a Passover trip to Jerusalem and is discovered after several days teaching in the temple. But other than that, we skip right over Jesus’ youth and young adult years to his public ministry, the beginning of which is signaled by his baptism by John in the river Jordan.

When we baptize in the Presbyterian tradition, we usually just put a little water on the head. When John baptized, he immersed them completely in the waters of the Jordan River. Either way, water is an essential part of baptism. Water is a prominent symbol in the Bible, from beginning to end. The waters of baptism remind us of God moving over the face of the deep at the creation in Genesis and the waters of the river of life that flow by the throne of God in the description of God’s Kingdom in Revelation. And everywhere in between water is a symbol of God’s power, presence and grace. The Red Sea. The Jordan River. The Living Water Jesus offers the woman at the well.

Without water, life as we know it is impossible. Plants and animals need water to live. About 60% of the adult human body is water.<sup>3</sup> You can live for weeks without food, but only a couple of days without water. So, water is quite literally life.

But water is also the universal solvent. Given enough time, water will dissolve anything. The Grand Canyon, one of the great, majestic natural wonders of the world, is over 1900 square miles in area and a mile deep, and it was all carved by the movement of water. That solvent property of water makes it an effective cleaner, too. Which makes it an effective symbol for baptism. In the waters of baptism, all of our sins, no matter how deep, or how apparently indelible, all of them are washed away and we are made clean.

And in the waters of baptism, we are marked as God’s own child and claimed as a member of the family of God.

As Jesus comes up out of the water, the heavens are “torn apart” and we see the spirit of God descend visibly upon Jesus and a voice from heaven proclaims, “You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.” It’s a special moment. A moment of glory. I remember when both of my sons were baptized, I was overwhelmed by a sense of God’s power and God’s presence and of God’s great love. And I imagine Jesus was just as overwhelmed, if not more so.

And if that were all there is to this story it would be enough. But here is where this story of Jesus’ baptism intersects with our own lives today. In Mark’s telling, we hear the booming voice of God saying to Jesus “You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And then the very next sentence of the story is this: “And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.” The next thing that happens after his baptism, after God calls him “my son” and “beloved” is that Jesus is sent out into the wilderness. And not “sometime later” or “after a while.” *Immediately*. The Holy Spirit *Immediately* drove him out into the wilderness. And in the wilderness, Jesus is alone. In the wilderness there is no food. In the wilderness Jesus is tested for forty days. In the wilderness he encounters and is tempted by Satan.

With all due respect, if that’s what happens when God says God is well pleased with you, what must it be like if God is disappointed in you? When God calls Jesus “my son, the beloved,” logically you’d think that would be followed by some kind of reward, a new privilege, power, a nice comfy appointment in a pleasant place. But no. Jesus gets booted straight out into the wilderness.

Which is instructive for you and me because it reminds us that while Baptism is a sign and seal of God’s grace, mercy, and steadfast love freely given; a symbol of our inclusion in God’s covenant promises, being so marked as a child of God, and being so claimed as a member of God’s own family, is not an invitation to privilege.

Think about all of the Biblical heroes whose faith journeys took them not to places of privilege, but to wild, untamed, dangerous places: Moses fled his home and was forced to start a new life in the wilderness, Elijah fled into the wilderness when his life was threatened by Queen Jezebel. David fled the violence and threats of King Saul by going into the wilderness, the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness 40 years on their journey from slavery to the Promised Land. John the Baptist began his ministry in the wilderness. And what is truly interesting is that all of these people, when they went into the wilderness, found God already there.

Being a part of God's family does not give us a free pass to avoid the wilderness. But it does give us courage and the confidence to face our wilderness journeys when they occur, because we know that we do not have to face them alone.

Jesus said I came that you might have life and have it abundantly. And when things are difficult, we sometimes think "Why me?" One of the great questions of humanity is the question of evil: "Why do bad things happen to good people?" But what we see in the life of Jesus and in the Biblical heroes of faith is that our life journeys can and sometimes do take us into difficult places where we face troubling circumstances. Nowhere are we promised an easy path or a life free from challenges to overcome.

But what we *are* promised is that we will be given the strength, wisdom, and courage to face whatever comes. We are promised that we will not have to face life's difficulties alone. We are promised that whatever wilderness paths we walk, God goes there with us. Remember, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm doesn't promise us that we will never have to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. It promises that we won't have to walk through it alone.

So, remember your baptism. Rejoice that you have been marked as God's child and claimed as a member of God's own family. You are blessed. You are chosen. You are empowered. You are loved. And no matter what our politicians do or say. No matter what worry this pandemic may cause. No matter what difficult turns your journey may take. No matter what your struggles. No matter what your sins. Nothing can change that fact. Nothing can erase the baptismal mark God has put on you. Nothing can revoke the baptismal claim God has made on your life.

You are God's blessed child. With you God is well pleased. Now go and live each day; face every challenge you encounter with confidence in that truth.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> "Coronavirus Live Updates: U.S. Deaths, Hospitalizations Set New Records." WSJ, 7 Jan. 2021, [www.wsj.com/livecoverage/covid-2021-01-07](http://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/covid-2021-01-07).

<sup>2</sup> Luke 2:21-24, NRSV

<sup>3</sup> "The Water in You: Water and the Human Body." 7 Jan. 2021, [www.usgs.gov/special-topic/water-science-school/science/water-you-water-and-human-body?qt-science\\_center\\_objects=0#qt-science\\_center\\_objects](http://www.usgs.gov/special-topic/water-science-school/science/water-you-water-and-human-body?qt-science_center_objects=0#qt-science_center_objects).