

We're Going on a Journey

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Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Mark. (Mark 1: 9-13)

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 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. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

We're going on a journey! Our theme this fall is "The Journey." The journey that starts with baptism and goes through our whole life and beyond. So let's get to it!

If you could go anywhere, anywhere, where would you go? If you had no limits, no cost restraints, no health restraints, no work or school restraints, you could go anywhere, where would you go? Where would you travel? Would you go somewhere close, or far away? Would you go somewhere that's well known to you, or somewhere exotic? Some place safe, or not so much? Would you go for a respite or for an adventure? I'm trying to decide myself between somewhere beautiful, like hiking on the Appalachian Trail, to something completely new, like conversation at a Buddhist temple in Asia. Where would you go?

In the *Lord of the Rings*, there is a scene where Frodo, this young, naïve hobbit, has just set off on a long and dangerous journey. It's the classic hero's journey. He knows it will be difficult. He knows he is unprepared for it. And in the beginning of this journey, he remembers the words of his Uncle Bilbo, saying:

"He used often to say that there was only one road; and it was like a great river. Its springs were at every doorstep, and every path was its tributary. 'It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out of your door,' he used to say. 'You step on to the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to.'"¹

¹ JRR Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, (collector's edition) Houghton Mifflin (1974), p. 83.

I think we should inscribe those words on our baptismal font. *“Only one road; like a river. You step on to it, and who knows where it will take you.”*

We start our journey of the Christian life with baptism. We gather around the font, usually with a child dressed in white, with nervous, smiling parents standing by. And we put that child on the road, like it’s no big deal. We inscribe the sign of the cross on them, and pray for the Spirit’s power to infuse them. And then we go home and have lunch. But it’s a dangerous business. *“There is no knowing where you might be swept off to.”*

I wonder if John the Baptist knew what would happen when he invited Jesus into to that river and on to that road. I wonder if Jesus, in the mystery of being fully human, knew what would happen when he entered the river that day. Mark’s description is so spare, so sparse. Jesus came. John baptized. There is no deep conversations, no difficult decisions, nor pre-baptism class. Jesus came. John baptized. But it’s a dangerous business going out your door and into the water.

Suddenly, Jesus saw the heavens torn apart. The sky is ripped open. Torn, ruptured, burst through. There is violence in those words.

Have you ever gone through a door that was closed, like backing your car through the garage door when it wasn’t opened yet? Or carrying that tray of food outside through the screen door when it was still closed; the tearing of metal or fiberglass or screening?

I wonder what the sound of the heavens ripping open was. Did it sound like thunder, or an excavation, or the world coming apart?

Everything between where God is and where we are was torn, shredded. God is so eager, so determined to come, that nothing, not the heavens themselves, will stand in God’s way. The heavens were ripped open, and the Spirit descended like a dove.

A dove. Aren’t doves sweet little, peaceful, fluttery things? I did some reading this week. It turns out doves are fast. They fly with powerful wings, sudden ascents, descents, dodges. Mourning doves have been clocked at fifty-five miles an hour. Rock doves can cover six hundred miles in one day. These are birds that can soar, and swoop, and dive. So can you imagine the heavens ripped open and the Spirit diving down, single-minded, determined that nothing will stop its flight to this human one?

Rachel Held Evans describes the day of Jesus’ baptism like this:

“The people didn’t have to go to God anymore; God was coming to the people. And God, in God’s relentless love, would allow no mountain or hill – no ideology or ritual or requirement or law – to obstruct the way.

“Temples could not contain a God who flattens mountains, or ceremonial baths, a God who flows through rivers. The kingdom isn’t up there; it’s right here.”²

Jesus is caught up in this unstoppable will of God. When Jesus is baptized, he is opened up to this power of this God who will not be separated from God’s people. God will be in this world to make all things new. The world will become infused with God’s love and power, and will move into God’s good future through the one who was baptized.

The heavens are ripped. The dove dives. And Jesus receives the Spirit that gives him power and sends him to do God’s work of generosity, and welcoming, and forgiving, and loving the unlovable. This is the inevitable end of every baptism. The Spirit comes.

We picture the cooing baby in the white dress. But perhaps we should be envisioning the dive-bombing dove who will not be separated from that child. The ever-determined Spirit who will not let go. The Spirit that will fill the baptized one with God’s relentless love, and giving and hoping in every situation. That Spirit who gives us the power to be God’s presence here, equally determined, equally unstoppable.

It’s a dangerous business, going out your door. You step on the road. *“And if you don’t keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to.”* We are the baptized, pursued and filled and sent, not knowing where we will be swept off to. We are the baptized, loved, and empowered, and sent into the wilderness.

Mark writes: *“The Spirit immediately drove Jesus into the wilderness.”* Drove him, pushed him, threw him into the wilderness. The place of unknowing. The place where there is doubt and fear and temptation. The place where there is no security or power or illusions. The place where the beautiful promises of God meet the terrible experiences of this world. The place where we are most tempted to believe we are all alone. The wilderness.

Jesus was driven into the wilderness. Again, Mark’s text is sparse, spare. We can only imagine what the temptation was like; the struggle to trust what is really real. We can only imagine that struggle through our own struggles. Is God even here?

What does it look like to be obedient, when we really want to be in control? How can I trust that anything I’ll do makes a difference? How do I use what gifts I do have? I have a power from my place in society. What do I do with it? How do I love the unlovable, the people that make me sheer crazy? Is God real? Does God care? Where is God?

² Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*.

We know the questions. We know the doubts that come in the wilderness. It's a dangerous business, going out of your door. We are tempted to forget who we are. We need to hear again and again about the relentlessly loving and pursuing God who does not let us go.

Mark reminds us that in the wilderness Jesus "*was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him.*" It's not one, then the other. It's both.

We Christians are on a dangerous journey. We don't know where we will be swept off to. But there is help on the way. We encounter angels. The community gathers every Sunday to remember God is unrelenting in God's pursuit of us. God does come and will come with love more powerful than death.

When we see goodness and kindness in this world, we are reminded what can be. When we see crowds stand up and speak out, when we stand up and speak out, we know God is guiding us into a different, more hopeful, transformed world. When someone listens, really listens to us, we see in their face the unrelenting God who will not let us go.

We are going on a journey, an adventure. We've stepped on to the road at baptism. And we know it will take us through the wilderness. But we walk in the name of Jesus and with the power of the Spirit. And who knows where we may be swept off to.

Amen.