

THE GOSPEL OUTSIDE - LET JUSTICE ROLL DOWN Lent

Mark 1:12-13

A Sermon Preached by Pastor Amy Roon
University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
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Scripture – Read by Liturgists (Mike and Jane Emerson)

Listen for the word of God.

Mark 1:12-13¹

And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus 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.

Pastor Amy Roon

Yup. That's it. That's it! (Sorry, Jane, you'll have to be a liturgist some other time when we pick a much longer Scripture.) *Jane's response:* "Half a sentence!" ... Just.

Now what we know is those two sentences could be an epic. They describe a much longer journey, don't they. In fact, what Matthew, Mark, and Luke are all doing with this ... Sorry, Matthew and Luke take a little bit more time to do it than Mark does -- but they're trying to get the listeners to think about Jesus's life as a Jew. When else? You didn't have 40 days; you had 40 years in the wilderness. And on our migration journey we're supposed to be *remembering* some Exodus truth about spiritual journeys. About how it only takes these few lines, but in every journey at some point in order to start, the spirit makes you say,

"I can't stay in this thought anymore.
I gotta go!
I gotta go!
I gotta go!"

And the spirit takes you and you're off. And you're off! ... And then ... And then you're off. ... And ...

I mean my itinerary says -- and God bless -- Heidi and I actually were traveling to the East Coast on the same days and the return days. And I have horrible, horrible long waits in the airport on the way out and she had horrible waits on the way, and texting back and forth -- spirit partners. Our itinerary *says we should* be getting on the plane! The itinerary *says we should* be on our way. We're going somewhere and yet ... We're not. We're wandering, whether it be the wilderness of the airport, whether it be the wilderness of thinking, "This is what I thought high school was going to be like ... Or college is can it be like with this new job is can be fantastic I'm so excited. And then ... Nothing.

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Old Testament. ©1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. .

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With the spirit now the spirit got me here but now all of a sudden I'm just in the wilderness. And frankly I think, I think Satan's back there trying to tell me to go home again, tempting me about something.

There are fierce wild beasts around every corner.

And may angels wait upon you.

There are angels in the wilderness, too.

There is an Exodus truth in every journey.

The other truth that I remember learning in seminary and it has just stuck with me: Just that, you know, we learn the Exodus story. And there's a reason we're ... As human beings, we are hard wired for story. We like a narrative. We like it to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. I know this because some of you critique my sermons, and say they wander and they can't tell. You like it to have a beginning and a middle and an end. And I'm like ... Oh, my goodness. ... You didn't pray this time. Is this still an intro, is this the middle or ... where are we? We like a narrative to drive us through the story, but we know -- and yes sometimes why I intentionally do this to you in the middle of the sermon -- that human life is not like that. That only in retrospect and only looking back once you have found the ending of -- I don't know, anything -- some chapter, you can go back and construct and see I will the beginning and that was the middle and now with the end, and now I'm somewhere different. But in the middle of it, you don't even know you're on a journey.

And so this is actually very true for the whole Exodus story. See their there is not a historical period, at least in Egyptian history that marks this huge moment of Israelites being enslaved for years and years and then leaving and going on an actual physical journey. And where exactly the wilderness was. And then landing in Canaan and having this time where then they were established.

In reality, as best we can figure, it happened the way most of our stories happened. A nomadic people that didn't have a set sense of place, that didn't have a set ruler or a kingdom, moving from place to place. And any time you're moving there are advantages to moving around and being able to, to pick up everything with you, but it also leaves you very vulnerable.

You are certainly very vulnerable within the context of an empire. And the people you will relate to, your sons and daughters, may be taken hostage or to be enslaved. It is a fragile and dangerous existence.

And so these nomadic peoples over a *long* period of time began to find some roots. They met ... There's a long history despite, despite the larger narrative of saying that the Jews are the chosen people of God and that it's a very, it's a very separate existence specifically to be a part of the Hebrew people. In fact, you read your Old Testament year to constantly hear about Ruth, the Moab or other peoples who will become a part of the Hebrew people -- by bonding, by re-creating family, by deciding to be one people. And only thousands of years later are we going to now say that were all one blood and do all of that. No, no, no. In fact, over thousands of years people are finding family and deciding to be one people.

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And once they're established, you can go back and write the story to suggest that you left Egypt, you wandered for 40 years. Thank God it was a very specific period of time, right, so you knew that it would end because you're writing that story once you found the end.

This past week I was in Washington, DC with Benjamin on what we hope will be the first of a sort of little tradition for our family, figuring out how we can celebrate Black history month and find our place as a black family in the US. And it's challenging in Seattle, especially living on the north side. So we flew to DC. I wanted Benjamin to be able to go -- and I wanted to go -- to the National Museum of African American History and Culture. And I wanted him to be able to experience and walk through the history of the last 400-500 years, as hard as it is. I told him over and over again to say, "What you see as hard as this is, you live because they lived. You are from the most resilient peoples in the world!"

Then the hope was that we'd go through that, and then we would get to the upper levels of the museum and see the blessing, the rich blessing of the culture! The music! Glory! And it was a hard trip because actually he was fighting a cold the entire time. So I mostly became acutely aware that this was perhaps the most depressing and sad trip I've ever taken my son on because we couldn't get to the second level. I could bring him the truth, and then the truth of parenting took over, and I said, "Yeah you got it to just nap today." And so after 500 years of history and culture, I can in ... in ... in my privilege that we've earned, you have a really nice hotel bed to nap in.

And while he napped, I checked my Facebook feed or checked some Olympics. We were in DC. The local news had a lot, a lot of coverages -- voices that I actually spent a fair amount of time avoiding. And I have this really mixed feeling: I'm so thrilled and proud to the teenagers from Parkland, Florida for standing up, for having an immediate response of resilience and strength and saying, "No more!" Amen!

And I found myself ... I actually felt this a lot, as I was grateful and I remain grateful for the voices and the #MeToo movement and the reckonings that have happened, and the naming, the accounting, somebody being held accountable! Not going to do everything, not going to get in and out of this in 40 years much less 40 days. But I gotta tell you this is what, if you're doing any of your antiracism work, if you are here in the congregation, if you've been in church life for a while, then you know that I am your intersectional person. Okay?! What that means is I hit all of these movements and I don't get to put one down and trade it for another. In my experience of this past number of years, for many of us who are African-American it's a ... it's a strange welcoming to the wilderness with some worries for you because, because there are African-American teens who been wondering in this wilderness since the Spirit drove them to the streets, to the blood soaked streets. And that was an awakening. It was an awakening for me! It wasn't a new truth but was finally a truth we were talking about. And I encountered here in this congregation, in many places in Seattle, all resistance to that truth at first. And I'm glad we've moved the needle so that I am no longer nervous to preach before this congregation and say "Police brutality against African-American people of color is real, is constant. It has a psychological and physical toll." And [I can] know that most of you have at least read about that -- and I'm getting more nods going yeah, yeah that's for real.

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But it's been years since I gave that first sermon. And the fragile #Metoo movement is just stepped out within *months* of women declaring their story, there was pushback. But you know there are a lot of guys that are really just great guys and we don't, we don't want them to feel alienated by your story. And so as a woman that feels an awful lot like the first wave of "police brutality is real." Yes, but not all police. Sexual violence is real. Of course not all people, but enough that we could say enough, right?

Gun violence is an epidemic. Of course, not all gun owners are horrible. Of course not.

Do we all need to own guns? No!!!

The spirit drives us to move off our spot, to move off the spot that said, "(*Sigh*) This is just where we are. There's nothing we can do. This is just life ..." The Spirit moves us and pushes us to say, "We can't live here like this anymore." And I am so proud and thrilled to have all of our young people -- all of our children and teens -- to join me in the wilderness, saying "I'm not living there anymore! Do not call that home!"

I don't know how long we'll be in this wilderness. What I've learned is that it's not a time to wait and sit and just be. And it's not a journey *through*. It would be great if I could go through these movements in a linear way and say, "Yup! Less gun violence over *here*. We're just gonna keep walking forward. We just keep moving. Bring our best in. Keep our energy up and we will get to the Promised Land! ... Hoh! Thank goodness we made it." The wilderness ... The wilderness will teach us something. And who we meet out here, how we spend our time, is the most important thing we can do in the wilderness. The most important thing we can do when we are in the wilderness and we have left home is re-create who are peoples are, to welcome one another and say "I'm so glad you're here! Join me. I'm so sorry for what drove you here. Let me help you learn to love here."

What did the Israelites really do in the wilderness? They moved around they met other peoples who needed a home, too. They built coalitions. They sang songs. They had children. Their children had children. They made peace right where they were. And over thousands of years at some point that story shifted to say, "This is home." What do you do in the wilderness and the Spirit leaves you with the wild beasts around you, you sing. You sing it into reality, in the midst of the wilderness against all odds,

Peace before me, peace behind me, peace under my feet.
Peace within me, peace above me, let all around us be peace.
Oh, oh, oh, let all around us be peace.²

In the face of anger you sing,

Joy before me, joy behind me, joy under my feet.
Joy within me, joy above me, let all around us be joy.
Oh, oh, oh, let all around us be joy.

And when **hate** smacks you down, you look it in the face and you sing,

² Words from a Navajo prayer. Music of "Peace Before Us" by David Haas, ©1987 GIA Publications, Inc.

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Love before me, love behind me, love under my feet.
Love within me, love above me, let all around us be love.
Oh, oh, oh, let all around us be love.

[And an addition from the pews]

Justice before me, justice behind me, justice under my feet.
Justice within me, justice above me, let all around us be just.
Oh, oh, oh, let all around us be just.

-- Amen.

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Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2018/03/08/2018