



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“A WITNESS IN THE WILDERNESS”

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 43:1-7; Mark 1:4-13

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, January 10, 2021
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Mark 1:4-13

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

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 for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I love a story that comes to us from the year 1866...just one year after the end of the Civil War. The pastor of our church family at that time was the Rev. Dr. John Forrest, originally from Edinburgh. If you were to go into the sacristy, you'll see a portrait of him on the wall, he's a very distinguished looking Scotsman! Dr. Forrest served our church family for 47 years, longer than any other pastor, and I think he would have continued serving as our pastor had he not died at the ripe young age of 80, just a week after having delivered what would be his final sermon.

Dr. Forrest's tenure also placed him here during the Great Fire of 1861...a great fire that ripped through the mid and lower portions of peninsular Charleston destroyed over 540 acres. It was a catastrophe for numerous homes and businesses and even some churches. So clearly, Dr. Forrest's time with us was not without turmoil; and yet, it was during some of the most difficult days in our community's life, and, even our nation's life, that a very gracious and enduring legacy happened to be born.

Shortly after the war, and as people who had begun to return back to Charleston, and as we begin to resume in-person worship, we came to find out that our baptismal bowl had been lost. And so, Dr. Forrest and his wife gave to our church families several silver cups that had been used to commemorate the birth of their children. And it came to pass that the silver from those cups was used to fashion the baptismal bowl that we've been using for the last 150 years and used again this morning!

My point in sharing that story is that be it a fire, a war, an earthquake, a pandemic, social or political upheaval...in whatever wilderness we find ourselves, we can always find a witness to the love and the power of God! The idea of a wilderness is not uncommon or unfamiliar to us, and it is certainly not unfamiliar within the people within God's biblical history. It's often been the case that, in the wilderness – a desert – a seemingly barren place...that some of God's most revelatory events take place!

We will recall how it was in the wilderness of Mt. Sinai that God came to Moses in a bush that was burning but not consumed. It emboldened him to go to Pharaoh and say, "Let my people go!" Some years later, remember the prophet Elijah...we just have this image of him, tail tucked, running for the hills...fleeing from King Ahab and Jezebel. He found solace in a lonely cave; and yet there, in that wilderness, God called him out, gave his life new meaning and purpose again!

Oh, be it by way of the prophets of old, or perhaps through their own experience of wandering through the wilderness for such a long period of time, God's people have learned very well over time about the role the wilderness plays in the history of God's people, in His story of salvation. And so now, here comes John, also known as the Baptizer -- the forerunner of Christ, the one who we're told is preparing the way of the Lord, and he did it in the wilderness! It gives me great comfort to know that Jesus also found himself baptized in the wilderness. And no, it wasn't because Jesus was in need of repentance; ah, but the people whom he represented were.

In another of the four Gospels, Jesus tells us that he was baptized in order to fulfill all righteousness, which tells me that dying on the cross -- as critically important as that was as was the resurrection -- that dying on the cross was not all that Jesus came to do. I mean, we don't need a baby to be born in Bethlehem and an entire life's witness to follow, if all Jesus needed to do was die on the cross. God could have hoisted his Son up there at any time, it would have been all said and done!

So, what do we make of the 30 some odd years that Jesus lived this life on earth before God's particular and redemptive work on the cross, and what does that have to do with Jesus fulfilling all righteousness? Well, righteousness – the very holiness of God – it is accomplished by living an altogether faithful life...and to live a perfectly faithful life, one needs to follow God's will and God's ways, God's commandments and God's covenants, and that's not something we could do – not perfectly that is, but that is something Jesus Christ could do! And for having done so, Jesus obtained that very blessing of righteousness for us, which means that, when we die and when we find ourselves standing before our Judge who is also our Redeemer, not only will we be able to share in Christ's victory over death, but God will also see us by the gracious work of Christ as righteous, because we will be covered in the righteousness of his son!

After Jesus was baptized, he was led into of all places, the wilderness. And it was in that place where Jesus, as weak and hungry as he was, would be tempted – tempted to doubt the word of God that had already spoken at the time of his baptism: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Well, praise be to God, Jesus held his ground...he faced that temptation – faced three temptations there in the wilderness, and he proceeded from there to begin his earthly ministry, to continue to live a life that glorified the Father!

As I pondered what these few verses mean for us today, I couldn't help but to think about what they may have meant to those people who heard them for the first time. History will suggest that the Gospel of Mark first appeared in the year 65 AD. History also tells us of another significant event which happened just the year before...the Great Fire of Rome. And we think the Great Fire of Charleston was bad – well, the fire in Rome, it burned multiple quarters over multiple days and 80% of the city was destroyed.

Emperor Nero would eventually blame the Christians. They could no more stand in front of the congregation as our Confirmands will do in just a few moments, than fly to the moon. No! And it was in that place, into their lives, into those dreadful circumstances that this Word of God came! And when they read about how John was clothed in camel's hair, don't we just know that that would have resonated with them? After all, that's what Nero did to so many of their neighbors – had them clothed in the skins of animals and let the wild dogs have their way. Nero would cover their bodies with pitch and use them to illuminate his gardens at night...that was the sorrowful state of Christians at this time in history.

Oh, but what a comfort it must have been, to have been able to hear and read about the life that Jesus lived...to find here in Mark's Gospel that Jesus' temptations happened in the wilderness, and in a place that was surrounded by wild animals. And I think that's important because these were the people who were forced to watch a great many of their brethren face their wild animals – animals like the lions in the coliseum.

Oh, that Christ tasted the entirety of the human experience...that he drank to the dregs of that cup that would not pass him by. That is the message of a God who does not reside in the heavens but chose to live among us by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit, and still lives among us today. This is the one who feels our pain, knows our anguish, the one that has been tempted in every way as we are! Yet has been victorious and risen above it all!

When we gathered around this font and baptized young Benjamin, we were not suggesting that he is perfect, though I suspect that Ben and Lauren suspect he's awfully close to perfect; nor were we affirming that his life would be grief or sorrow free...that he would never have to walk through the wilderness. That is not the Gospel! What we did affirm, however, is that God has claimed Benjamin as his own, and nothing on earth can change that! Throughout Ben's life, we will all have the awesome responsibility of leading him to future repentance of faith; to help him to know that God has loved him from even before that time; we must help him to know that there is no where he can be where God is not...and that includes the wilderness! That, dear friends, is the promise of God for you and for me as well...that into the wilderness of the world – into the wilderness of our lives...our Lord comes! And great is the story of redemption that God continues to tell through his children!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.