

## Mark 1:1-8 - New International Version

1 The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, <sup>2</sup>as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way” —

<sup>3</sup>“a voice of one calling in the wilderness,  
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.’”

<sup>4</sup>And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. <sup>6</sup>John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. <sup>8</sup>I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

### A Straight Path

#### I. The Wilderness

This week, we begin the story of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. Mark’s account of Jesus’ life was written before the other Gospels. It is the shortest of the four. It has a sense of urgency and it moves rapidly through the story, as if Mark had a fervent passion to get it to us. But in the first verses, the story doesn’t begin with Jesus. It begins hundreds of years earlier when the Israelites were in captivity in Babylon.

If you look at a map of the region, and measure the distance, you will see that there are about 1,600 miles between Jerusalem and Babylon, or present day Bagdad, Iraq, where the Israelites were driven in exile. What you might not see on a regular map are the mountains and deserts along the most direct route. A straight walk from Jerusalem to Babylon would have been impossible. Instead, the people would have had to walk north through Jordan and up to the Euphrates River and followed the waterway. That probably doubled the length of the journey and made the distance seem even more epic. Imagine being thousands of miles from home and how long a journey like that would have taken on foot. Isaiah says:

**make straight in the desert  
a highway for our God.**

**<sup>4</sup>Every valley shall be raised up,  
every mountain and hill made low;  
the rough ground shall become level,  
the rugged places a plain.**

The imagery was very powerful for the people of Israel. They wanted a straight, level, uncomplicated way to get home. Don’t we all?

By the time of John the Baptist, the people of Israel had a very special relationship with the wilderness. The wilderness was where Moses and the people wandered for forty years after fleeing from Egypt. The wilderness was the place where the prophets encountered God. The wilderness was the place they were driven in exile. This location loomed large in their imagination. The wilderness is nature herself in her raw, chaotic form. It can be merciless and unforgiving. It can “take you out” if you are not connected to some source of life greater than yourself that can sustain you.

For many modern people, who seldom venture out of climate controlled houses, vehicles or offices, there is a lost sense of the imaginative power of wilderness. Watching a national geographic special about the windswept tundra or the Sahara desert doesn't do justice to the experience of being in such a place. But despite that, we all are familiar with the wilderness. We all carry it within us. We try to avoid it, but we come smack up against it in times of loss, fear, deprivation and confusion. The wilderness is where we find ourselves when someone we love dies. The wilderness is where we are when we are terrified of losing our job or scared stiff because we don't know how we are going to make ends meet this month. The wilderness is where we are when someone we trust betrays us and we feel cast into uncertainty, deprived of any form of love, warmth and kindness. The wilderness is where we are when confusion takes hold and we don't know who to trust or what decision to make.

I have encountered the wilderness in the downtown homeless encampments in Los Angeles. And I have encountered it while all alone in my home when confronted with matters that weighed heavy on my heart.

It's not just individuals who go through wilderness experiences. Sometimes whole nations can be lost in the wilderness, gripped in the vice of fear, violence, destruction, confusion. I would point to the Viet Nam War and the days after September 11, 2001. What about the housing crisis, or the Covid crisis? Where are Israel and Gaza now?

**The wilderness isn't just out there. It exists within each human soul and in our collective experience.**

After Jesus is baptized, Mark writes, **“The Spirit immediately drove him into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him.”** (Mk 1:12-13) So the real desert and the desert of the soul are also places where we can be driven to face temptation — places where we are tested. And places where we can be ministered to among the wild things.

I get the sense that the image of the wilderness keeps getting more colorful and varied and rich, not just with danger, but with possibility. It is a place where we can be driven by the Spirit. It is a place where we can voluntarily go to seek an encounter with life itself. It is a place where we leave behind the old order, however good or bad it may have seemed to us before, and step into the unknown.

## II. A Voice in the Wilderness

In Isaiah 40 we hear that, **“A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”** In Isaiah, it sounds like the voice comes from outside the wilderness and calls for a way to be prepared in that wilderness.

Mark quotes Isaiah, but places the voice within the wilderness. It is a minor difference, but I think it is important. We are talking about John the Baptist, heralding the coming of Jesus. The gospel of John tells us that John the Baptist, **“came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light.”**(John 1:7-8)

What is role of the prophet? The prophet brings something to our attention. The prophet bears witness. Bearing means to carry something. To witness is to see, to be aware, to have vision. John is not the Christ, the light of the world, but he carries the vision of God and gives voice to that vision. He proclaims the one who is coming. The prophet is a messenger and this prophet, John, is in the wilderness, in the place that is “out there” — chaotic, dangerous and pulsating with possibility. A place where we are called or driven sometimes. A place where we encounter the truth of being.

I already described the wilderness location as one that is not just a geographic location, but an inner landscape, a soul location. I want you to imagine that the voice of John the Baptist, calling from the banks of the Jordan was a voice that spoke to the hearts of people. It called to them in the wilderness of their souls. If it hadn't touched them deeply, they would not have come to him from Jerusalem and all over Judea. That voice, is still crying out. It cries out to us even now, two thousand years after John preached. The voice of the Baptist is within us. We are being called. We are being prepared. We are watching and waiting. The light is coming into the world and the voice that is not just “out there,” but also “in here,” is calling to us, beckoning us into the full experience of our personal wilderness, for that is the place where our rebirth will take place.

## III. A Path in the Wilderness

So we are in the wilderness. And a voice is calling us. What now? What are we to do? We are told to **“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight—”** (1:3) We think of the Israelites and the long journey they had to make to go back to Jerusalem.

We think of the challenge of making any sort of straight paths for ourselves through any sort of wilderness that we may be experiencing in our lives. But the voice is not telling us to make a straight, easy path for ourselves. The text clearly states that we are to prepare a straight path for the Lord. What does that mean?

If God is everywhere and can do anything, why does the Lord need me to prepare a straight path for the Lord? I'm the one who needs a straight path out of my troubles. I need a straight path out of my poverty, my messes, my sickness, my family disfunction, my wilderness, my, my, my... But no. I am told to make a straight path for the Lord. The Lord is the one who needs to travel, to have a clear way, a highway to travel on.

Where does the Lord need to go? The only place that the Lord needs to be invited in is within our selves. The only wilderness that we are really concerned about here is the one within us that shuts out hope, peace, joy and love and truth, the light of the one who made us. The only obstructions, the mountains, valleys, rough places, are the ones that we carry with us. The path is not for us, but the Lord.

What are the obstructions to making the straight path for the Lord? Quite simply, they can be pride, desires for material gain, hatred for others. There are so many possible roadblocks in our relationship with God. Holding on to anger and resentment is one way to shut God out. Loving money as if it was a god is another. Thinking of yourself as better or worse than other people is another way to hold God at arms length. What are your roadblocks to allowing the Lord a straight path to your life? If you ask the question, you will get an answer. It will be that voice crying in the wilderness of your soul that you will hear. What are you doing that prevents God from having a straight path into your life?

Whatever it may be, there is hope and there is a way.

Remember: **“John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”** There is a two-step plan to make a straight path for the Lord: repentance and baptism.

Repentance comes from a Latin word, **“repentire,”** and we often associate it with the rearward focused feeling of regret. But the Greek word for repentance is **“metanoia”** which means a change of mind, or a turning, a change of direction. To repent in this sense, is to turn away from an old way of thinking, an old way of being, and to turn towards a new and better way. It is simply saying, **“I’m not going to go about things foolishly like I used to do, but I’m going to make a change.”**

The sincere act of repenting, or turning oneself around, is followed by a new life. New life is symbolized by baptism, a rebirth. In baptism we submerge and then reemerge from the water. It is like being born again from the womb. Out of the chaos of the

wilderness and the constraints of the old life, a new life rises. And just like that, there is a path, straight as can be, where the Lord can visit and dwell with us. Immanuel means God with us — born anew within us when we prepare the way in the wilderness of our souls.

Let us pray,

Dear Lord, The voice of your messenger cries out to us through our crowded busy thoughts and the chaos of the world in which we live. Open our ears that we may be attentive to the prophet, the outsider, the one who points the way and bears witness to the light. Help us to clear out all obstructions, all mountains and molehills, chasms and stumbling blocks, in between our hearts and you. May your healing light and love have free rein within us to transform us into more complete, whole, healthy and loving images of you. Amen.