

Episcopal Church in Minnesota 2024 Epiphany Series

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Hello. I am Anna Ostenso Moore. I am a wife, mother, Episcopal priest, and picture book author. I am a part of the Episcopal Church in Minnesota's racial justice and healing team. I am passionate about how our sacred stories intertwine with our own lives and delighted to be your guest preacher today.

It was not until my early twenties that I realized that all of the gospels did not contain the story of Jesus' birth. I assumed Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were all on the same page as to how to begin their gospels.

With the short length of Advent and Christmas, I missed that only Matthew and Luke begin with stories leading up to Jesus' birth. I also missed how these two gospel writers tell the stories from very different perspectives, which we tend to mash together for our beloved Nativity recreations.

The gospel of John begins cosmically with poetry. "In the beginning..."

The gospel of Mark, which we read today, begins with prophecy, in the wilderness, and then Jesus' baptism as an adult.

Upon discovering this, I was unimpressed with the narrative choices of whomever wrote our oldest gospel. I thought they had missed an opportunity to fill in some of the gaps. I craved more details than we have about Jesus' birth and childhood. What was Jesus like as a toddler? As a big brother? Did his parents see signs of his divinity when changing his diaper one more time? What happened to Joseph?

When I stepped back from this disappointment, I realized the differences invite us to enter into the question: **What Holy truth does this sacred story reveal?**

What Holy truth does this sacred story reveal?

As an adult, now well out of my twenties, I appreciate the Gospel of Mark beginning in the wilderness.

To our ancestors of faith, wilderness in Scripture was metaphorical and real.

Wilderness was a place outside of the control of the structure of city and society. Most would think of the Judean desert – wild, beautiful, dangerous, and breathtaking.

The wilderness was the setting of the Exodus, where Moses led his people after their freedom from the Pharaoh. A wilderness where they wandered for forty years. A wilderness where at times they rebelled and claimed that captivity was better than the wilderness they were in.

Most original listeners of Mark would know that wilderness was a metaphor.

Time in the wilderness is when people of faith wander, rebel, are tested, and experience God's saving acts and grace.

Wilderness is a place that I don't understand, a place where I am aware of a world beyond my control, a place where I could get lost.

There is a quality of wilderness to adulthood that I never imagined as a child. I always imagined that I would be fully formed and have made all of the clearly right decisions all of the time.

Just reading the headlines feels like wilderness to me. Thinking about the global future, especially for my child, feels like wilderness to me. Injustices, environment, politics, most thing that ends in -ism, just navigating health care. These are wilderness moments.

The Gospel of Mark provides hope for me in the wilderness. Mark reminds us that God is there, with us, working through people like John the Baptist.

God is still working in this way today.

When we are in the wilderness, we are invited to look for God's presence through other people.

What also delights me is how during Jesus' baptism in this Gospel the heavens are torn apart for the Spirit to appear. In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, the heavens are merely opened. I imagine that the Holy Spirit is so excited to dive bomb Jesus in all-encompassing love that the heavens are ripped because they can't contain that love.

And then we hear the voice from heaven saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

The Gospel continues beyond what we read today with: *"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."*

Mark reminds us that God incarnate, God-with-us, shows up in wilderness.

Jesus' first appearance in Mark is at the River Jordan is the boundary between the wilderness and the land of milk and honey.

Wilderness is a reality of Jesus' ministry.

Wilderness is real for all of us.

Sometimes we go willingly.

Sometimes wilderness is thrust upon us.

Sometimes we go because that is the only way to claim our identity as God's children.

Although my instinctive response to wilderness at most times is “Get me out!”

In Jesus I hear an invitation to ask: Where is God? Where are we called to join God’s movement and work?

I imagine the Holy love we see in this sacred story for each of us. A love that the Holy Spirit will rip open the heavens to be with us. A love where God claims us God’s beloved children. A love that we or our parents say YES to in our baptism.

Sometimes wilderness is thrust upon us.

Sometimes we go because that is the only way to claim our identity as God’s children.

When that happens, look for the love:

The hand reaching out to help.

The moment to sit with someone who is in pain.

The childlike wonder.

Lines of difference that you can cross.

The stories of Holy love that cannot be kept out.

The person asking for what you can give.

Look for the love in wilderness.

You will find the Holy there.

We will spend a lot of this next year dwelling with the Gospel of Mark and wondering what it reveals about our world and lives now. We will spend time wondering:

When is God calling you into the wilderness?

When you are there, what is God revealing?

What Holy truth does this part of the sacred story reveal to you?