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Mark 1:11-13

*And a voice came from the heavens, "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, tested by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him.*

Mark 1:35-39

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout all Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Okay, let's start with a show of hands... How many of you have ever been hired for a job, and then immediately announced that you were going to start with a month-long vacation? (SLIDE)

It sounds preposterous, right? What kind of audacity would a person have to have to believe that the job would still be waiting for them when they return? And how would one go about rationalizing it?

In our culture and context, we see time away or time off as a reward given after a person has put in the proper amount of work. Work comes first, space to breathe and reflect comes second. First you work hard, only then do you get time to relax.

But our passage this morning offers us quite a different road map. (SLIDE) The first chapter of Mark's gospel introduces us to the person of Jesus. John the Baptist is out in the wilderness, hollering about preparing the way for a messiah who is soon to appear. And what happens? Jesus shows up and John has an ah-ha! moment where the puzzle pieces come together and he proclaims that Jesus is that one they've all been waiting for. A voice from the heavens confirms this, as the Spirit descends on him, explaining that he is God's beloved child.

Amazing! A movement is launched, now things will take shape! A new world is unfolding, Jesus, son of the almighty God, is here to proclaim the good news.

But what happens next is not what we expect at the beginning of a movement, and it should make us take note. Jesus doesn't come up out of the river after

being baptized by John and make a bee-line to the nearest big city. He doesn't waive down a passing chariot and urgently tell the driver he has places to go, people to heal.

Instead our text says that the Spirit guided him out into the wilderness for forty days. (SLIDE)

This **wilderness** word is a significant one in scripture. The Israelites wander in the wilderness on their journey to the promised land. Elijah and Moses both retreated to the wilderness in fear, for time and space away to process where they were supposed to be heading. And now Jesus begins his ministry, not by surrounding himself with the people he has come to save, but by retreating out to the wilderness.

I believe I have shared before that my Hebrew teacher in seminary emphasized over and over again that we should refrain from thinking about the wilderness of modern Israel/Palestine as a deserted void. Instead, we need to think about it as middle space.

His preferred translation as my Hebrew class while working through various Old Testament passages was not the wilderness or the desert, but rather **a semi-arid steppe**. (SLIDE) He explained that this was middle ground... It was space that had just enough resources to keep people alive, but they had to struggle for it. It was also a middle ground in the geography of the region which had the inland desert on one side, and the coastal land of good and plenty on the other. Wilderness wasn't about separation, wilderness was really about standing in the middle of the possibilities of things that bring life or death.

Today we reflect on the spiritual disciplines of silence and solitude. (SLIDE) I've admitted to a few of you that I struggle with these concepts, in fact admitting this during a visit to Karl Bartch this week, he pointed to his chest and mouthed the words in his quiet voice, "Me too." It was a kind gesture, even if I think Karl does better at this than many of us. But every once in a while I encounter these disciplines of silence and solitude and am deeply grateful when I do.

Silence and solitude provide the essential middle space in any spiritual journey. And retreating to a wilderness middle space allows us to separate ourselves from

the noise, distractions, and demands of daily life, so that we can listen deeply to the voice of God.

This week I ventured up Mount Nittany, a short hike that I haven't done for several years. My general posture when I'm hiking by myself is to load up the next episode of a favorite podcast, make sure my Strava app is recording, perhaps open up the Merlin Bird app that we talked about last week, and start to hike. But this time I tried to make it a bit simpler. "Keep your phone in your pocket," I told myself. "Let's not make this about identifying birds, or setting a personal best on the climb up the hill. Just use this time to savor being outside."

As I walked I noticed that this particular local hike also provided me with a reminder of middle space as well. (SLIDE) Despite being out in the woods, there were glimpses along the way through the trees that pointed back to busy and bustling State College. I was separate from that space, yes, but also within a short distance. The pathway kept me centered - straying too far off would have made me feel much more vulnerable, and so in that way I held on to the security of the town I recognized off in the distance, while also being able to be close to the depths of the forest.

As I mentioned in my mid-week video this week, (SLIDE) there is a Japanese practice known as shinrin-yoku that some of you are probably familiar with. Created in Japan in 1982 by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries, the term translates literally to "forest bathing" - meaning to bathe in or absorb the forest atmosphere. Not a literal bath with water, but simply being present out in nature.

This practice is not meant to be an intense hike, workout, or jog, but rather a slow, deliberate form of nature therapy, trying to recognize and move through all of our senses. Clinical studies have shown that forest bathing lowers levels of stress hormones, decreases blood pressure and stabilizes heart rate, it improves mood, focus, sleep quality, and feelings of restfulness... It even, believe it or not, has been shown to boost human immune systems through the inhaling of natural organic antimicrobial oils naturally released by trees.

(SLIDE) Quieting my mind is trickier than quieting my phone, but with last week's reminder to look up and take notice, I couldn't believe how rested and centered I

felt, even as I climbed up the mountain. Letting go of the things that distract, inviting silence to be my companion rather than a podcast, was a powerful way to start my day. I began noticing the squirrels in their fall efforts to knock down as many nuts as they could, the squeak and rustle of chipmunks, and the angry warning calls of the blue jays, no doubt still in shock and sharing my pain of missing out on the baseball playoffs.

It was, plain and simple, an intentional act that provided me with an incredible gift - time to just be.

Just as Jesus relied on time away to ground himself in his identity and purpose, stepping into intentional solitude allows us to reflect, heal, and discern where we are being led. (SLIDE) And let's be clear - solitude is intentional, and different from the unintentional loneliness so many people feel today. Rather than being an empty void, silence and solitude open up a space of possibility—a sacred environment where spiritual transformation can take root and where we find the strength to engage the world with clarity and compassion.

It's interesting to note that beyond his forty days at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus also intentionally leaves his followers behind and goes off alone to pray. (SLIDE) The Gospel writer hadn't even wrapped up chapter one, yet we have already learned that twice now Jesus has chosen silence and solitude as best practices early in his ministry, and it won't be his last time of solitude either.

(SLIDE) I wonder what differences would show up in our culture and our context if we saw space for retreat, for silence and solitude, not just as a reward for working hard, but instead something that we practiced before we got to work. What if we borrowed from Jesus' posture and began with time away rather than having to work to build up vacation time?

As we move to the communion table this morning, we are invited to enter into that very same middle space. Here, in the quiet presence of one another and of God, we remember that we do not need to earn our place or strive for approval before drawing near. Bread and cup are set before us as simple reminders of a God that meets us right where we are, calling us into rest and rejuvenation before sending us out into the world.

It also happens to be World Communion Sunday. During a time where we reflect on silence and solitude, we are also reminded that we are part of something much larger than ourselves, that in times of loneliness and disconnection we belong to something broader than our corner of the globe.

(SLIDE) And so as we enter into this space, I invite you to join me in a confession, in your bulletin and here on the screen. (SLIDE)

Confession

One: God of the wilderness, you invite us into middle spaces... Places of quiet, away from the demands and distractions of our busy lives.

All: Yet we often choose noise and endless doing. We measure our worth by our busyness rather than resting in your love.

One: Forgive us when we fear silence and solitude, and when we forget that you call us your beloved before we accomplish anything at all.

All: Help us step into intentional rest. Draw us into your presence, so that we may be renewed and centered in your grace.

One: Hear this good news: In the quiet of the wilderness, God meets us with boundless mercy and love.

All: Thanks be to God.

I invite our communion servers forward.

Friends, as the bread and cup are passed this morning, let us hold space together in silence. Let this quiet time be a wilderness moment for this morning - different from our usual practice of piano accompaniment, transforming into a place to set down your distractions, listen deeply to the Spirit, and receive the nourishing love of God before we return to the work of our daily lives.

Don't worry if sounds of life join us - the noises of our movement, our stiff bodies after sitting, our enthusiastic children, even our breathing... just let it be part of the wilderness.

On the night of his betrayal, Jesus sat and broke bread with his disciples, inviting them to the table. We invite each other to do the same this morning. Come to receive, and when all have been served we will share together.

There are also grapes and gluten free crackers available.

Please join me in a prayer of blessing for our communion table this morning.
Creator God, in the quiet of this moment, we give you thanks for this table set before us. As we share this bread and cup, quiet our restless hearts with your presence. Nourish us with your grace, ground us in your love, and refresh our spirits as we rest in your wilderness. Amen.

Come, friends, the table is open.

On the night he was betrayed...

Prayer to close communion