

# **“On the Fringes, Finding Hope, Moving Toward Change”**

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Providence United Methodist Church

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Today’s gospel lesson is taken from the book of Mark, chapter 1 , verses 1 through 8. I’ll be reading from the Common English Bible. The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, God’s Son, happened just as it was written about in the prophecy of Isaiah: Look, I am sending my messenger before you. He will prepare your way, a voice shouting in the wilderness: “Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight.” John was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins.

Everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and were being baptized by John as they confessed their sins. John wore clothes made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. He announced, “One stronger than I am is coming after me. I’m not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” This is God’s word for God’s people. Thanks be to God. Let’s pray. God of all people everywhere, bless the reading of your word. Grant a clear mind with understanding that gives clarity with each person seated here. Draw near to us dear Lord as we draw near to you. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

One would think that with such a great proclamation that John was making that God would’ve chosen another place for the world to hear this message of good news. Instead of in a great city, like Jerusalem, God chooses a wilderness. God

chooses a wasteland, a place on the fringes of civilization and away from great hordes of people. God chooses a desert; a place on the margins. Yes, on the fringes of the world. It was in a dry wasteland that God announced to the world that the good news of grace through Jesus Christ would soon be coming.

On the fringes of what's happening in the world and along the boundaries God's love is revealed. It was in a place between the centre of Judaea and the Dead Sea. Scholars say it's one of the most dreadful deserts in the world. It's a limestone desert and was sometimes called *The Devastation*. Josephus, the Jewish 1<sup>st</sup> century historian, said it was the wilderness of Judea. It was full of hot rocks, and it felt like a blistering hot furnace underneath your feet. Yet, that's where God chose to reveal the good news through John.

I've always felt John wasn't the kind of man that liked city living. He looked different than an urbanite. He wore the clothes that desert animals would provide—a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt for his waist. He ate food that wasn't something one of the sit down restaurants in Jerusalem might have on their menu. Basically—he ate bugs—locusts. Or . . . . . one might interpret the word locust as a bean or nut. This food was some of the poorest of the poor. None the less, all kinds of people came out to see John. He was found zealously screaming and proclaiming the good news in an out-of-the-way kind of place. I can hear the crowd thinking out loud as they listened to this crazy looking and acting man. “Is this where God is? In this lonely place—along the fringes and the boundaries of nowhere? Is this where we find God? Is this the kind of guy God uses?”

The people who came to see John, they must've needed something. They must've been looking and waiting for a Rescuer and some kind of a Deliverer. John shouts and screams, “Prepare the way for the Lord . . .” Maybe that's what

they were looking for—some kind of change! So they came to the desert to hear John and find change.

I bet the people that went out to hear John thought about the life they were living. They were looking for something like most people are. I bet in our own lives, when we encounter a wilderness experience, we're hoping and waiting that something or someone will pull us through. It's always a wilderness place in our lives that causes us to think and evaluate how we're living and if we need to change something.

We know it's not just a New Year's resolution that would solve our problems. We already know we need much more than that. God tells us in this passage we need baptism, and it's coupled with confession to ourselves. That's what comes first. We want to change our heart and life; so we begin by seeing a need for change. One of the things people are best at is living a life of denial. It's easy to shut our eyes to the truth of our deepest need. The most difficult thing to do is to face who we are as a person. We know we fall short, and we know we can't achieve what we need on our own. First, we confess our shortcomings to ourselves. We get real. We begin by looking inside.

Then, we turn to a higher power—God. This turning to God, it frees and empowers us. We realize—we're not alone in the desert. There are all kinds of other people there too. And it's this comradeship we have with other believers and God that brings us hope. It enables us to change and to become who God wants us to become. It's good news from God that life can be different, and we find hope for change.

We go from a state of weakness and from a chronic inability to reshape our lives. But with the good news, we go to a state of power that frees us and places us into the hands of God. And this good news—it never stops flowing to us. It

produces this hope within us that we can do it, because God is with us! We can achieve all God wants us to achieve as we continually lean in God's direction!

This is the stuff that faith is made of when we receive good news from God. Our future is filled with hope for change, but we can only change if we change our lives moving forward with God. So if you need or know someone who is looking for change reassure them of this. Being in a wilderness experience, and turning to God, has this miraculous way of bringing us hope. God is right smack dab in the middle and along the fringes of those wilderness experiences. God offers to us hope as we move through change. Be encouraged. God is with you.

Let's pray. God of hope, and change, bring us through transition to a place of change that brings comfort and peace. Lift our heads up lover of our soul. Move us to receive good news that brings that change in our lives that's needed. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.