

“A Rollercoaster Ride with Jesus”

Psalm 25:1-10 & Mark 1:9-15

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The gospel of Mark in just six verses describes an abundance of twists, turns, highs, and lows in Jesus' life. We can take comfort in the fact that we have a Savior that has been through it all, yet emerged perfect, free from sin, devoted to God, a passionate server, and extravagant in love with us.

One spiritual exercise I like to share with people is making a faith timeline. You take a sheet of paper and on the horizontal axis make a time line of your life from birth to today noting key happenings along the way. On the vertical axis you chart how close you felt to God throughout your life. Of course this is our perception of God's closeness for in reality God is always with us. When one connects the dots, the result is usually a faith journey that is full of ups and downs of all shapes and sizes. For the vast majority of us our spiritual journey is an intense rollercoaster ride. Fortunately, Jesus rides with us. God has built safety features into the ride that keeps us safe along the way even when the bottom drops out, appearing that everything is out of control.

Jesus certainly had a wild ride here on earth. It began with every circumstance stacked against Jesus. He was born in a manger to unwed, poor parents far from home. The rollercoaster climbed as the Angels announced his birth and the shepherds and wise people worshipped him, then things plummeted as an evil king tried everything to kill Jesus including slaughter all children under two. Jesus' life took a sudden twist as God told Mary and Joseph to take Jesus to Egypt for safety. Traveling with a newborn through hostile territory, through a desert, and into a country where you were despised for your race must have made the journey to Bethlehem on a donkey nine months pregnant seem luxurious.

As a young boy, Jesus, made the dangerous journey back to Nazareth, a despised town avoided by devote Jews, the educated, and wealthy. Our scripture today explains what happens around Jesus' 30th birthday. Mark says Jesus came from Nazareth. Mark wants us to know that Jesus had every circumstance stacked against him. Most believed that there never would be a single good person or thing from Nazareth.

When Jesus was baptized, the heavens tear apart and the Holy Spirit descends on him like a dove. Definitely a high point in Jesus life, a mountain top experience. It gets even better. God says, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” God often makes the spectacular from nothing. All of creation started that way, God created from nothing. Jesus' life began with every earthly circumstance against him and Satan out to destroy him; yet, God got Jesus through the dangers, horrors, and the wilderness to this mountain top experience. The journey looked absurd, certain to crash and burn, totally hopeless, but God got Jesus through to his spectacular baptism.

I hope you have had at least one experience of God where you sense God's love in a powerful way realizing that you are God's beloved child. If not, I am sure you will have this experience at some point. Knowing you are a beloved child of God is critical to abundant life. With God anything is possible regardless of the circumstances. One message of our scripture is when you know yourself to be a child of God, you can overcome any and all circumstances. Life is difficult. Some of us come from nowhere with the odds stacked against us. Whenever you are free falling remember you are a beloved sibling of our risen savior Jesus. God is saying to you, "You are my child, whom I love." God promises to give you a thrill ride up beyond your grandest dreams.

Verse twelve has sparked a great deal of debate, "and the Spirit (capital S therefore meaning God) immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness." Why would God send Jesus to a place where he will be yanked left and right, flipped upside down with every type of temptation the devil has in his arsenal.

Perhaps God allowed Jesus to be tempted, so Jesus can identify with us and better help us as we deal with temptation. Perhaps to give us hope that we are indeed capable of overcoming every temptation growing in love. Perhaps to ensure us that after every terrifying drop there will be an uplifting, healing climb. The difficult aspect is the flip side is also true after most mountain top experiences is a time of wild twisting and turning bareness. Yet, the ride always ends in the glory of eternal resurrection life.

Perhaps God sent Jesus out to be tempted by Satan, because God knew the timing was right. Jesus was strong. Jesus just experienced a thrilling high point, so this is the best time for Jesus to overcome temptation. God sees the future. When God anticipates temptation looming in our life, God often gives us a trust-building high. In the midst of the temptation, God often bolsters us up with some hills. God has promised to never allow Satan to tempt us beyond our ability to overcome temptation. God has promised to always provide us with a way out of the wilderness.

Perhaps Jesus was sent out to be tempted, so Jesus could show us how to overcome every temptation with love. Perhaps God allowed Jesus to be tempted, so Satan's heart can be softened with love. Maybe God is hoping that Satan will repent and come home to God's love. Maybe we endure temptation to draw others, even Satan, closer to God. When Peter, James, and John went with Jesus up to the mountaintop where Jesus was transfigured becoming dazzling white, God said, "This is my Son, the Beloved." Peter was amazed, inspired, and told Jesus I will build dwellings for us up here so we can stay on the mountaintop; but, Jesus took the disciples back out into the world so more and more people could hear the good news. Maybe you have had an amazing mountain top encounter with God and now God is calling you to go back down out into the world so that your witness will help more people have an experience with God.

As you ponder why there is temptation keep in mind that God loves you, desires the very best for you, and is always working for your eternal well-being. Immediately after Jesus' baptism and God's powerful affirmation, Jesus was plummeted into the bleak, lonely, and dry

Judean wilderness for forty days. Forty days of intense battling with Satan. Scripture makes it clear that we battle with more than bad breaks for we battle with Satan.

Wilderness time is a part of our lives. When we love boldly and serve extravagantly, when we hope, dream and give our all for excellence. Sometimes we get hurt. Often we fall short. Wilderness times are those times when we feel we are pushed to our limits, crushed by our circumstances, times when we invested every ounce of our energy into a worthy goal but do not attain it. We describe these times in wilderness terms: dry, desolate, lonely, trying, difficult, agonizing. We speak of hunger, thirst, and longing in the wilderness. This is difficult spiritual territory but often good comes out of it. The wilderness time can be a time of accelerated learning about priority—what really matters in our lives. Patrick Morley in his book, *The Man in the Mirror*, relates the lack of a clear sense of priority to a trip to the grocery store on an empty stomach without a shopping list. Nearly everything looks delicious and you wander through the aisles without a plan, loading up the shopping cart with goodies. After the shock of the bill at checkout, there is the shock of your spouse when you arrive home with bags of snacks and food for only three real meals in the whole bunch! Life presents us with many options—a myriad of ways to use our resources, time, abilities, and influence. Without a clear sense of what is most important, we can spend it all and at the end of the day find that we have not taken care of what matters most. Jesus' time in the wilderness—coming just before he was to begin his public ministry—was a time for sorting out what mattered most and to get clear about God's will for his life. The longer accounts in Matthew and Luke tell us that Jesus was tempted by wealth, fame, and power to deviate from his ministry. When you're in the wilderness remember that you are a beloved child of God. God is with you. Ask God to help your wilderness wrestling so you can come to good decisions, Godly values, and well-ordered priorities. As painful as wilderness experiences are, they can yield great spiritual growth. They can be times of learning about ourselves, about God, about what is most important, and about where life is headed. Without times of learning, life can just go along without much thought.

My favorite story of priorities regards a businessman and a fisherman. A stressed out businessman went for a walk and noticed a small boat with a fisherman and several large fish. He complimented the fisherman on the fish and asked how long it took to catch them. "Only a little while," the fisherman replied. "Why didn't you stay out longer and catch more fish?" "I have enough to support my family's needs." The businessman then asked, "But what do you do with the rest of your time?" The fisherman said, "I spend time in prayer, play with my children, take a siesta with my wife, and stroll into the village each evening where I play guitar with my friends. The businessman scoffed, "I am a Harvard MBA and can help you. You should spend more time fishing and with the proceeds buy a bigger boat. With the proceeds from the bigger boat you could buy several boats and eventually have a whole fleet of boats. You would cut out the middleman and sell directly to the processor, eventually opening your own cannery. You would control the product, processing, and distribution. You would need to leave this small village and move to Los Angeles, and eventually New York City where you would run your expanding enterprise." The fisherman asked, "But, how long will all this take?" The MBA replied, "Fifteen

to twenty years.” “But what then?” the fisherman asked. The businessman laughed and said, “That’s the best part. When the time is right, you would announce an initial public offering and sell your company stock to the public and become very rich; you would make millions.” “Millions?” the fisherman asked. “Then what?” The businessman said, “Then you would retire and move to a small coastal fishing village where you would spend time in prayer, fish a little, play with your kids, take a siesta with your wife, and stroll to the village in the evenings where you play guitar with your friends.” Puzzled the fisherman asked all that to get back to what I do right now.

In the wilderness Jesus figured out what was really important and how to go about it. Sometimes life can be especially difficult just as Jesus emerged from the wilderness exhausted he received news that his good friend John was arrested, and Jesus knew it was only a matter of time before John would be murdered. Jesus knew crucifixion was in his future. Jesus was steadfast to his values, priorities, and ministry proclaiming the good news of God saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near repent and believe in the good news.” Jesus earthly ministry was full of twists, turns, highs, and lows ending in the plummeting low of crucifixion before the eternal high of resurrection.

We are called to repent, to make love our top priority. The good news is we are God’s beloved children, have a savior that has experienced everything we can ever experience, and have the Holy Spirit to guide us along the way. We are all on a spiritual rollercoaster but be assured Jesus rides with us and God is in control. Amen