

Lent 1, 2015. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland. Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Mark 1: 9-15.

Today's gospel comes in three parts:

1. The gift of the Spirit is given to Jesus
2. He goes out into the wilderness - the wild places - for reflection on the meaning of that gift, and,
3. He doesn't stay there! He returns to the ordinary, everyday world. The encounter with God, Mark says, is in the ordinary and every day, in our world.

That movement shapes our journey. Today we take our opening steps on a journey that leads toward.....well, I'm not quite sure where it leads. There's a corporate answer – a common story that is predictable and straightforward – and good. The corporate answer is a good answer.

But the truth is that there are as many answers to the question of where this Lenten journey leads it as there are people here today; for each of us, the answer can be anything from slightly to greatly different – divergent – from the traditional answer.

And for each of us our answer – our destination – is contingent on how we make the journey, who we make it with, and what we hope we will find at the journey's end.

For me, this Lent, I find myself standing with those Greeks described in John's gospel (12:20-22) who went up to Phillip on Palm Sunday after Jesus had entered Jerusalem and said "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." There's something very simple, and authentic about that request, something heartfelt, something spiritual: the hope and desire for an encounter with God.

In the end, all iterations of religion start with that hope. In the end – if what we ally ourselves with is true religion – that's our hope, too.

But it's tricky. All religions, in one way or another – or perhaps it's all people who are religious – have another side to that hope for encounter with God and that's a fear of that encounter.

I think it's because religious faith at its core demands an act of surrender, a letting go, a self-recognition that we human beings are not in control, not in charge, and that's very hard for any human ego to admit. It should come as absolutely no surprise that the biggest turn-off to organized religion for most folk is that it always seems to involve fights over power.

Perhaps that's because of the cyclical way religious identity always develops – it starts off as a free-flowing, charismatic, relational thing, and evolves into rule-bound institutionalism. When the institutional center inevitably collapses under its own structural weight, new life springs up at the margins.

Where we are in that cycle has a real and significant effect on how vital our personal faith is. In our day and age I believe that it's very hard for us who find ourselves located in the institutional part of Christian faith to be open to the free-flowing movement of the Spirit.

We're headed for a struggle much like that in the New Testament era, where the struggle was between a rule-bound, institutional identity and a free-flowing unstructured one. That was the story of Jesus.

What's called the 2nd Temple system is very similar to institutional Christianity today. Hierarchical structures; official holy persons called priests; metered, costly access to God only through the institution. It is, for want of a better phrase, "God in a Box;" put there by human beings. God under our control. It feels safe, of course, but it also (in the end) feels dead. The traditional answer to institutional Lent – the one we're familiar with – is like that; in the end, it makes it harder, not easier, to find new life; It does feel safe, of course, but it also (in the end) feels dead.

In the end, that sort of religion almost always leads to a response seeking a new, more vital community. You can see it in the 1st Century's reform movements: Pharisaism (yup - the Pharisees were reformers!), the Essenes, and what is coming to be called by contemporary scholars the Basileia movement (meaning the "Kingdom Movement") of which Jesus was by far the most prominent leader.

The other really prominent leader of this Kingdom Movement was John the Baptist, and he proclaimed exactly this new community. In John, we're being challenged us to "think outside that box" we prefer God to be in. And not just "think" outside that box, but live outside it, feel outside it, be outside it. For John – and for us if we follow John – God is no longer in a box. In John and the Kingdom movement we're invited to go out and visit God in the wild places.

So first lenten invitation is to let god out of the boxes of our own making. If we accept it we will be changed. And we'll be ready for what comes next.

Today's gospel talks about the transition from John to Jesus. It's clear in the New Testament – and has been held as a core believe in Christianity every since – that in Jesus we meet God.

The tricky thing is that not only is it – when we meet Jesus – that God is no longer in a box; not only is it – when we go out metaphorically to John – we encounter God in the wild places of our lives.

The really important thing is how we should think about Jesus. **In Jesus the wild, uncontrollable God comes to visit us.** He always seems to be doing the very last thing you'd expect; saying things that leave folk with their jaws on the ground; telling stories that end in exactly the opposite way than you expect.

That wild, uncontrollable side to God is anathema to institutional religion! Institutional religion is always crucifying that sort of God – Official 1st Century Judaism wasn't the first to try, and it hasn't been the last.

The takeaway in all this is really a series of questions:

1. How much of the institutional life of this particular iteration of Christian faith are you

- willing to give up to make room for that wild, unpredictable Spirit of God this Lent.
2. What are you willing to do to open yourself to the presence of God during this Lent?
 2. Is there anything you absolutely refuse to let go of in your journey of faith?

I invite you to consider those questions in the silence that will follow, and return to the answers you arrived at, as we continue this Lenten journey.

