



Staying on Track

KATHLEEN RUSHTON explains the significance of the story of Jesus's baptism and testing in Mark 1:9-13.

Mark tells of the baptism and testing of Jesus in just five verses.

Jesus from Nowheresville

Mark's Gospel builds up dramatically for the entrance of the main character (Mk 1:1-8). However, Jesus enters the story as one of the anonymous crowd coming to John the Baptist (Mk 1:9). His unspectacular entry is intensified – he “came from Nazareth of Galilee.” Ched Myers said this is like saying: “Jesus from Nowheresville.” His

home village is not found in ancient sources. The humble origins of Jesus are referred to as the Gospel unfolds (Mk 1:24; 10:47; 14:67; 16:6). Galilee, the northern border of Palestine, was separated from Jerusalem and Judea by Samaria and regarded with suspicion by many southern Jews. A tension is implied between the centre and the margins.

The Margins

The story of Jesus has hardly begun and Mark already subverts key

understandings. The wilderness, representing the peripheries, is found four times in the prologue (Mk 1:1-13). Jerusalem was considered the hub of the world to which all nations would come (Ps 69:35; Is 60:10-14). Instead, “people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem” are seeking John in the wilderness. Rather than making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and its temple presided over by the Jewish leadership, crowds flee to the wilderness – to the margins – for

purposes of renewal.

Mark leaves us with two facts. Jesus is the One whose coming Isaiah promised: "Prepare the way of the Lord." And Jesus comes in solidarity with thousands of others who underwent a rite of repentance and renewal from John who is "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mk 1:4).

Baptism of Jesus (Mk 1:9-11)

In Jesus, a person of doubtful social origins and in this out-of-the-way place, the divine is revealed. Startling imagery is inserted into the narrative which up until now has been rather Earth-based and mundane. The whole cosmos is affected. Creation is ongoing. When Jesus comes up from the waters of the River Jordan, he – and he alone – sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And only Jesus hears the voice from heaven. It is a reminder of God's Spirit hovering over the waters in Gen 1 and the dove signalling a new beginning for the world after the flood in Gen 8:8-12.

The heavens are "split apart" (Mk 1:10) as the veil of the temple sanctuary is "split apart" after Jesus dies (Mk 15:38). The linking of these two scenes suggests that Jesus is opening up God's dwelling place. The vision of the heavens being torn apart along with the sound of a voice coming of heaven also recalls the prophetic hope of Isaiah 64:1: "Oh that you would tear the heavens open and come down". Could this unknown Nazareth villager be the fulfilment of this ancient longing? The scene, however, ends with an anti-climax. Jesus goes into the wilderness (Mk 1:12).

Tested in the Wilderness (Mk 1:12-13)

This event is usually named "the temptation" of Jesus. The Greek word in this episode, also used in Matthew and Luke, can mean "tempt" or "test". "Tempt" better suits the Matthew-Luke accounts where Satan puts three courses of action before Jesus. Test better suits Mark where there is no evidence of a struggle. It evokes other biblical characters who were tested

and remained faithful – Abraham (Gen 22), Job, and the people during the Exodus from Egypt (Deut 8:1-5).

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Against this background, we can recall that Jesus had just seen the Spirit descend on him. He is assured of his filial relationship with God. Jesus is, perhaps, reliving the experience of Israel being tested and being attuned for what lies ahead as he lives into the reign of God in the world where the powerful will oppose him.

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The Spirit drove him immediately into the wilderness – this language is strong. The human Jesus is steadfast between wild beasts and ministering angels. Maybe the wild beasts evoke the relationship which Adam once had with animals (Gen 2:19-20) or the harmony of the messianic age (Is 11:6-9). That the wilderness is also the home of wild animals adds to the danger, isolation and distance from the known. In this situation, the ministering angels suggest divine care and protection.

For Us Today

We have been immersed in and have come up out of the waters of baptism a new creation – as God's daughter or son. With Jesus, we can recall and renew our relationship with God.

We have seen how being tested is a way Scripture interprets the experience of hardship which comes to those committed to God. Mother Teresa wrote in her journal at the end of her life that for many years she had not felt the presence of God but that she continued her work knowing it was true to the Gospel. For us, too, divine care and protection are there even though we may feel they are absent.

We experience "testing" in various ways. Laura Waters' book *BeWILDered*

is an example. She explains how, after a toxic relationship and crippling bouts of anxiety, she set out to walk Te Araroa, 3,000 kilometres of raw, wild, winding, mountainous trail the length of New Zealand from North Cape to Bluff. Laura was tested not only by the treacherous terrain but by her self-doubt and anxiety. She learned how to trust her gut and judgement. She emerged "rewilded" and transformed.

During the season of Lent there are many ways to pause, reflect and recommit our lives. Mark 1:9-13, where river and wilderness permeates the baptism and

testing of Jesus, can invite us to be "rewilded", to be set free, to be healed by the natural world.

We can take time to be "rewilded", to immerse ourselves in nature – in our garden, gazing at the night sky at the end of a long day, or walking in a local reserve. According to our situations, we will have different places and spaces for reflection time. Guided by the Spirit, we can reassess if we are being true to our Christian calling or if activity, consumerism and noise are distracting our focus and energy.

These intentional pauses, however long or short, allow us to ponder and find ways to practise being more loving – whakawhanaungatanga/ making right relationship happen with God, with our family, our neighbours and all people and our common home, Earth. ♡

21 February

RL – First Sunday of Lent: Mark 1:12-15

RCL – First Sunday in Lent: Mark 1:9-15

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Kathleen Rushton RSM is author of *The Cry of the Earth and the Cry of the Poor: Hearing Justice in John's Gospel* (SCM Press 2020).