

THE WILD PLACES: WEEK 5

STEVE WATSON | DAILY BIBLE GUIDE | 2019

Monday, April 8

The Jesus tradition teaches that in Jesus, God became flesh and lived – and still lives – among us. One fancy word for how Jesus did this is kenosis – the emptying of God’s status and power that was part of Jesus being fully human, just like us. Jesus, divested of all his privilege, went again and again to the wild places of our lives. This week we meet Jesus in the literal wilderness, and in the wild places of hunger, temptation, fear, chaos, illness, and death.

Matthew 3:1-17 (CEB)

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea announcing, ²“Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!” ³He was the one of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke when he said:

*The voice of one shouting in the wilderness,
“Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight.”*

⁴ John wore clothes made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey.

⁵ People from Jerusalem, throughout Judea, and all around the Jordan River came to him. ⁶As they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. ⁷Many Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized by John. He said to them, “You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? ⁸Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. ⁹And don’t even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham’s children from these stones. ¹⁰The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire. ¹¹I baptize with water those of

you who have changed your hearts and lives. The one who is coming after me is stronger than I am. I’m not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹²The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can’t be put out.”

¹³At that time Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan River so that John would baptize him. ¹⁴John tried to stop him and said, “I need to be baptized by you, yet you come to me?”

¹⁵Jesus answered, “Allow me to be baptized now. This is necessary to fulfill all righteousness.”

So John agreed to baptize Jesus. ¹⁶When Jesus was baptized, he immediately came up out of the water. Heaven was opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and resting on him. ¹⁷A voice from heaven said, “This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him.”

Points of Interest

- In business, a disruptive innovation is an innovation that changes the status quo and creates new opportunities. John the Baptist is a human force of disruptive innovation. Conventional religion thought God was at work in the temple, in the center of religious life in Jerusalem. It said the glory days of God’s work are in the past and that some people are God’s favorites more than others. And it kisses up to the in crowd, comforting and assuring them while judging others. Conventional religion still does stuff like this. John

does the opposite – says God is at work in the wilderness, the glory days of God’s work are ahead of us, all people can find God, and all people need to change to make room for God. It’s radical, it’s disruptive, and it is somehow making room for the life and work of Jesus.

- And surprise, surprise, Jesus shows up, not first to lead but to participate. Baptism likely has its roots in the Jewish mikvah – a ritual bath that cleanses you from sin or impurity, represents conversion into God’s family, or prepares your dead body for burial. Jesus – sinless, Jewish, and very much alive – needs none of this. John is as surprised as we are.
- Yet Jesus begins his public life as he would continue it daily, by identifying with us in all things, even in the most bewildering parts of being alive – our sin, our alienation from God, and our death. Through his actions, Jesus says: every way you’ve screwed up and are not good enough, even in your dying body, I’m with you there.
- In Jesus’ humble identification with us all, he is touched by the Spirit of God, flooded with a mystical, deeply felt experience of God’s love and delight. This is uniquely Jesus’ experience in some ways, but also part of the God-with-us experience for us all.
- As a side note, baptism rocks! If you’ve never been baptized but consider yourself a follower of Jesus, talk to a pastor about it. It’s a beautiful way to identify with Jesus and experience God.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray that your city would experience disruptive innovations in its religious life – that radically new and good things would happen in many faith communities, reshaping the experience of God in your city.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

God with Me Mediation – We take a few minutes of quiet and welcome Jesus to be God with us. Ask Jesus, how are you with me right now? How do you see and know me? How are you present with me in all my strengths and weaknesses, in all my joys and stresses and sorrows? After a few moments of imaginative prayer, welcoming Jesus’ presence with you, close by praying this excerpt from the ancient prayer, *The Breastplate of Saint Patrick*:

*Christ beside me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ within me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.*

Tuesday, April 9

Matthew 4:1-11 (CEB)

Then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him.² After Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was starving.³ The tempter came to him and said, "Since you are God's Son, command these stones to become bread."

⁴ Jesus replied, "It's written, People won't live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God."

⁵ After that the devil brought him into the holy city and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him,⁶ "Since you are God's Son, throw yourself down; for it is written, I will command my angels concerning you, and they will take you up in their hands so that you won't hit your foot on a stone."

⁷ Jesus replied, "Again it's written, Don't test the Lord your God."

⁸ Then the devil brought him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory.⁹ He said, "I'll give you all these if you bow down and worship me."

¹⁰ Jesus responded, "Go away, Satan, because it's written, You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him."¹¹ The devil left him, and angels came and took care of him.

Points of Interest

- The same Spirit that revealed God's love and pleasure to Jesus also led Jesus into hunger and thirst and danger in the wilderness. So suffering is not a sign that God is not with us or that we have lost our way. Also, sometimes we need to set aside luxury and privilege to encounter God in harder places.
- Jesus meets another force in the wilderness – one that is called the tempter, the devil, and Satan – an untranslated Hebrew word that means accuser or adversary. Whatever this being is, it knows the Bible (the second temptation is a quotation from Psalms) and encourages independence and manipulative use of power. Turns out the Bible can be used for good or harm, and abuse of power remains the greatest and deepest temptation for most leaders.
- I've read a hundred things about Jesus' responses to the temptations he experiences. Four of them most interest me today.
 - One, Jesus is grounded. Each of his responses come from just two chapters of the book of Deuteronomy. I have to think that in the days preceding his time in the wilderness, he'd been reading these two chapters extensively, committing them to memory, meditating on them. All that served him.
 - Two, Jesus shows us the power we all have, in all times and all places. No one can take away our power to guide our mind toward truth and light.
 - Three, Jesus is just not interested in reputation and external power. He is also secure in his vulnerability and leans in to love and trust of God.
 - Lastly, Jesus is keen to experience the full range of human vulnerability, including bewildering choices and hard temptations. Jesus knows what it means to not have enough food and to not have great reputation or power. In all our wild places, Jesus can be with us still.

- Finally, I have no idea how “the angels came and took care of him,” but I take it that whether visible or invisible, literal or metaphorical, we should expect to encounter true and untrue thoughts and forces, nourishing and destructive forces when we are alone with our thoughts and feelings, or otherwise looking for God.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for any friends or family who are experiencing hunger, setback, or hard choices – that they will find a way to lean into God’s care and love, and find God providing them the guidance or help they need.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

God with Me Mediation – We take a few minutes of quiet and welcome Jesus to be God with us. Ask Jesus, how are you with me right now? How do you see and know me? How are you present with me in all my strengths and weaknesses, in all my joys and stresses and sorrows? After a few moments of imaginative prayer, welcoming Jesus’ presence with you, close by praying this excerpt from the ancient prayer, *The Breastplate of Saint Patrick*:

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Wednesday, April 10

Mark 4:35-41 (CEB)

³⁵ Later that day, when evening came, Jesus said to them, “Let’s cross over to the other side of the lake.” ³⁶ They left the crowd and took him in the boat just as he was. Other boats followed along.

³⁷ Gale-force winds arose, and waves crashed against the boat so that the boat was swamped. ³⁸ But Jesus was in the rear of the boat, sleeping on a pillow. They woke him up and said, “Teacher, don’t you care that we’re drowning?”

³⁹ He got up and gave orders to the wind, and he said to the lake, “Silence! Be still!” The wind settled down and there was a great calm. ⁴⁰ Jesus asked them, “Why are you frightened? Don’t you have faith yet?”

⁴¹ Overcome with awe, they said to each other, “Who then is this? Even the wind and the sea obey him!”

Points of Interest

- All four of the gospels, in different ways, include scenes of Jesus crossing over. Jesus deliberately leads his friends away from comfort, familiarity, prosperity, and ease into complex, cross-cultural, disorienting experiences. In this sense, stepping into wild places can be a healthy part of movement toward God and toward growth.
- The boat was swamped, and somehow Jesus was asleep. This is one of my favorite moments in perhaps my favorite sections of the Bible (Mark 4 and 5). In chaos and trouble, perhaps we always wonder if God is with us and if God cares. And perhaps God is always with us, always cares, and is always calm – present, but not overwhelmed.
- What a surreal, magical moment: Jesus giving orders to the wind and speaking to the lake, bending nature toward silence and a great calm! I feel a tension with this scene. It is extraordinarily evocative and beautiful, and I don’t doubt God’s enormous power to do strange and beautiful things. And yet, this is not usually how God operates – with or without our prayers, overwhelming laws of nature, adjusting science for our benefit. I’m sorry to name this tension without a simple resolution to it, but I like being honest in these guides. I’ll only add that I feel about this scene like I do about all things epic. Epically amazing moments really happen, unusual as they are, and hard as they are to believe to those who weren’t there. I find them beautiful and glorious and important to my life and faith, but I don’t let them lead me to despise the ordinary. In other words, in the great majority of ordinary days and ordinary struggles, I hope to experience God with me – adding hope, love, peace, and joy to my experience – without changing my circumstances. When my life or circumstances are altered, and stunningly, well, that’s pretty awesome as well of course, just not the usual course of things.
- This trip ends as so many good things do, with wonder. To be overcome by life is natural for us, but also maybe a sign that our faith has grown thin. To be overcome with awe may be a sign that we’re near to God.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for your friends and family whose wild places of overwhelming problems or chaos are known to you. Ask Jesus to be in the boat with them. Pray that God brings such peace, stillness, and help to them that they are moved to wonder and gratitude.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

God with Me Mediation – We take a few minutes of quiet and welcome Jesus to be God with us. Ask Jesus, how are you with me right now? How do you see and know me? How are you present with me in all my strengths and weaknesses, in all my joys and stresses and sorrows? After a few moments of imaginative prayer, welcoming Jesus' presence with you, close by praying this excerpt from the ancient prayer, *The Breastplate of Saint Patrick*:

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Thursday, April 11

Mark 5:1-20 (CEB)

Jesus and his disciples came to the other side of the lake, to the region of the Gerasenes. ²As soon as Jesus got out of the boat, a man possessed by an evil spirit came out of the tombs. ³This man lived among the tombs, and no one was ever strong enough to restrain him, even with a chain. ⁴He had been secured many times with leg irons and chains, but he broke the chains and smashed the leg irons. No one was tough enough to control him. ⁵Night and day in the tombs and the hills, he would howl and cut himself with stones. ⁶When he saw Jesus from far away, he ran and knelt before him, ⁷shouting, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won't torture me!"

⁸He said this because Jesus had already commanded him, "Unclean spirit, come out of the man!"

⁹Jesus asked him, "What is your name?"

He responded, "Legion is my name, because we are many." ¹⁰They pleaded with Jesus not to send them out of that region.

¹¹A large herd of pigs was feeding on the hillside. ¹²"Send us into the pigs!" they begged. "Let us go into the pigs!" ¹³Jesus gave them permission, so the unclean spirits left the man and went into the pigs. Then the herd of about two thousand pigs rushed down the cliff into the lake and drowned.

¹⁴Those who tended the pigs ran away and told the story in the city and in the countryside. People came to see what had happened. ¹⁵They came to Jesus and saw the man who used to be demon-possessed. They saw the very man who had been filled with many demons sitting there fully dressed and completely sane, and they were filled with awe. ¹⁶Those who had actually seen what had happened to the demon-possessed man told the others about the pigs. ¹⁷Then they pleaded with Jesus to leave their region.

¹⁸While he was climbing into the boat, the one who had been demon-possessed pleaded with Jesus to let him come along as one of his disciples. ¹⁹But Jesus wouldn't allow it. "Go home to your own people," Jesus said, "and tell them what the Lord has done for you and how he has shown you mercy." ²⁰The man went away and began to proclaim in the Ten Cities all that Jesus had done for him, and everyone was amazed.

Points of Interest

- In this section of Mark, Jesus is moving into an escalation of wild places, encountering increasingly fearsome powers – bad weather and forces of nature, then spiritual and mental health trauma, and in tomorrow's passages, long term illness and death.
- I've taught three ways of understanding what's going on with this troubled, self-injurious, alienated man who calls himself Legion. The most traditional understanding is demon possession – that harmful spiritual forces are turning this person's agency against his own welfare. The most modern understanding would be of extreme mental illness – deep depression and schizophrenia, accompanied by suicidal ideation. The most culturally and literarily sensitive reading would be to see this man as carrying and embodying the trauma of his culture and times. He is identified by the very Roman military forces that have ravaged this community with terror and death and will soon do so again.
- Jesus brings clarity to this person's troubled condition and – in allowing the spirits to enter into the pigs – clarity to the devastating forces involved in his pain.

- There's something about corruption, evil, and death that can't help be what it is. It wants to escape the abyss (where first century Palestinians would have thought evil spirits lived) but ends up going there anyway.
- There's also something about humanity that, even trapped in enormous trauma, illness, and pain, we have so much resilience that with the help of God and friends, we can in time be restored and be well.
- Jesus wants better than for him to leave his culture and join his rabbinic school. He wants to restore him to his own community, and invites him to tell his story there.
- Jesus never asks people to argue for him or convince people of anything. He does invite people to tell their stories freely and gladly, practicing gratitude and wonder, and gently inviting others into the same.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for your city, that people in the greatest trauma, greatest mental illness, and even greatest spiritual distress would encounter people through whom Jesus can love them and help them be restored.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

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Friday, April 12

Mark 5:21-43 (CEB)

²¹ Jesus crossed the lake again, and on the other side a large crowd gathered around him on the shore. ²² Jairus, one of the synagogue leaders, came forward. When he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet ²³ and pleaded with him, “My daughter is about to die. Please, come and place your hands on her so that she can be healed and live.” ²⁴ So Jesus went with him.

A swarm of people were following Jesus, crowding in on him. ²⁵ A woman was there who had been bleeding for twelve years. ²⁶ She had suffered a lot under the care of many doctors, and had spent everything she had without getting any better. In fact, she had gotten worse. ²⁷ Because she had heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his clothes. ²⁸ She was thinking, If I can just touch his clothes, I’ll be healed. ²⁹ Her bleeding stopped immediately, and she sensed in her body that her illness had been healed.

³⁰ At that very moment, Jesus recognized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?”

³¹ His disciples said to him, “Don’t you see the crowd pressing against you? Yet you ask, ‘Who touched me?’” ³² But Jesus looked around carefully to see who had done it.

³³ The woman, full of fear and trembling, came forward. Knowing what had happened to her, she fell down in front of Jesus and told him the whole truth. ³⁴ He responded, “Daughter, your faith has healed you; go in peace, healed from your disease.”

³⁵ While Jesus was still speaking with her, messengers came from the synagogue leader’s house, saying to Jairus, “Your daughter has died. Why bother the teacher any longer?”

³⁶ But Jesus overheard their report and said to the synagogue leader, “Don’t be afraid; just keep trusting.” ³⁷ He didn’t allow anyone to follow him except Peter, James, and John, James’ brother. ³⁸ They came to the synagogue leader’s house, and he saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. ³⁹ He went in and said to them, “What’s all this commotion and crying about? The child isn’t dead. She’s only sleeping.” ⁴⁰ They laughed at him, but he threw them all out. Then, taking the child’s parents and his disciples with him, he went to the room where the child was. ⁴¹ Taking her hand, he said to her, “*Talitha koum*,” which means, “Young woman, get up.” ⁴² Suddenly the young woman got up and began to walk around. She was 12 years old. They were shocked! ⁴³ He gave them strict orders that no one should know what had happened. Then he told them to give her something to eat.

Points of Interest

- This mashing together of two related accounts, allowing them to both enrich and comment on one another, is a common storytelling technique in the gospels. Here we have a 12-year old daughter and a woman, called Daughter by Jesus, who has been ill for twelve years. We have a synagogue leader, maybe even a rabbi, in distress, and we have a woman whose illness keeps her away from the synagogue, ashamed to even touch or speak with Rabbi Jesus. One person’s private distress is healed very publicly, while another family’s very public distress is healed in private.
- I have known many people, and frankly many women, who have “suffered a lot under the care of many doctors.” Our hearts go out to this woman. In this woman’s case, she has any number of medical conditions that lead to prolonged, heavy menstrual bleeding. A

source of great shame in ancient – and sometimes modern – times, this could also involve significant pain, as well as infertility.

- Jesus' disciples may share the woman's confidence in his unusual powers, but they don't think there's anyone or anything interesting in the crowd of people. Jesus doesn't see crowds, though, he sees people one by one, offering us peace, stirring faith that makes us well, calling us sons and daughters.
- Which is the greater miracle? Jesus' unusual healing power? Or a grown man who is equally comfortable around 12-year old kids, prominent men, and women's health issues? I love that Jesus as a man never tries to extract anything from women or children, that he is always gentle and safe and respectful with all people.
- The professional mourners in Jairus' home move easily from grief to mocking laughter. They're playing their role well, but aren't emotionally present or open to God's presence. To be present in our own or others' wild places is to be present (sometimes in silence, as are Peter, James, and John) and to touch death without fear, to hope that as we do so, we'll discover that things aren't as bad as they appear to be.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for your family and friends who are suffering from long-term illness, long-term shame, or grief. Ask Jesus to touch them, to cause them to know they are sons and daughters of a good and loving God, and to stir others to come to their support.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

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