

For a voice cries in the wilderness, saying: "prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. For every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill shall be made low. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

If you, like me, are one of those Floridians who wasn't born here but got here as quick as you could, it doesn't take you very long to learn why so many people are on I-95 at a particular time of the year and where they are going. When it gets hot in May and you get stuck in traffic on I-95 north somewhere between Orlando and Jacksonville, you can rightly assume half the reason you are stuck is because non-year-round residential Floridians can't take the heat, so they are getting out of the kitchen. And the other half, the native half, are leaving Florida for weeklong reprieve from the heat. And they aren't going St. Simons Island in Georgia or Charleston, SC. The native Sunshiners are heading straight for bear, tick, rattlesnake and Big Foot territory. They are heading for that beautiful southern wilderness that starts at the Blueridge Parkway and ends up right smack dab in the middle of the Smokey Mountains. You can do a lot of fun things in the Smokey Mountain wilderness too, can't you. You can camp, hunt, fish, hike, handle snakes at church and eat fried catfish. You can even ride rollercoasters that Dolly Parton invented that feature renditions of "Good Ole Rocky Top" in 18 different languages. But there is one thing you better not do in the wilderness of Appalachia. That is this: get lost in the Smokey Mountain Rain. If you do, your Smokey Mountain vacation will turn into a wilderness wandering before you can say Gatlinburg Saltwater Taffy. And the only person around who might point you back in the right direction is Bigfoot himself.

In the Scriptures and in our lives, the wilderness is often a metaphor (a metonymy, actually) for difficult situations the people of God find themselves in. We face trials and tests of our faith in the wilderness. We wander in the wilderness when we get off God's path. And we continue our wilderness wandering when we pray and pray for right way forward and we are greeted with only silence from the Almighty. And God's silence is just as difficult to take in as the Smokey Mountain when we are lost in the wilderness. God's lack of communication with His people was equally as deafening after Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, was written. But it didn't last a week, month, or a year. It last 430 years. They were lost in the wilderness and God was silent. And with God's silence came chaos and desperation for "Word." The Greeks invaded Jerusalem and God's people wanted a "Word." But they didn't get one. After the Greeks came the Romans. When they took control of the Promised Land, God's people wanted a "Word." But they didn't get one. When religion and politics became corrupt in the Land, God's people wanted a "Word." But they got complete and total silence from God Almighty for 430 long years. But church, I want to talk to you today not about the 430 long years of God's silence and the people's wilderness wandering. Instead, I want to talk to you about the "Word" that finally came in their wilderness. It was a time when God decided to speak in the land of his people once again. Here's why I want you to listen intently today: we are in a spiritual wilderness in our land right now and we, the people of God, are wandering in the Smokey Mountain Rain. And the only voice that can break the silence in our wilderness and show is the way forward is the Lord Jesus Christ. That was the message John the Baptist had for God's people over 2000 years ago. And that's the message he has for us today. So today, church, I want to tell you how a "Word" comes in the wilderness. To do that, please turn with me to Mark 1:1-10.

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,² as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"³—³ "a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" ⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." ⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

When A Word Comes in the Wilderness, It Will Come:

1. From Messengers You Don't Expect

- **The Apostle, Doctor, Reverend Such and Such the III** — (1) Have you ever noticed that in ministry, there are some preachers who introduce themselves to you in the church bulletin or on letter heads with as many titles as possible. (2) You go into a church and pick up a bulletin. When you read staff, you see: Secretary: Brenda Smith, Associate Pastor: Jim Roberts, Youth Pastor: Tom Tidwell. (3) But then you get to the Senior Pastor and it's a whole different ballgame: The Very Right Apostolic Doctor Reverend Such and Such the Third, PHD. (4) The assumption is the more titles, diplomas, and achievements a person has to their name, the more we're inclined to trust them. (5) But God doesn't operate like that. He inspires unlikely people with a "Word" quite often.
- **Main Idea of the Point** — God used John the Baptist to break the 430-year silence because his character modeled the message. God could have inspired many others with a "Word." But John the Baptist's "Word" rang different because of who he was.
- **Textual Emphasis (6-7): John's Appearance and Substance Were Two Very Different Things:** (1) In the days of the New Testament, priests wore lavish clothes made of fine linen that were in purple and scarlet. John the Baptist wore camel's hair. (2). Priests wore lavish belts and ephods, often ornamented with gold and gems. John the Baptist wore a regular old leather belt. (3) The priests and people alike had access to

Mediterranean foods like olives, dates, pomegranates, etc. John's idea of fine dining was a couple of locusts and some wild honey. (4) But the reason people flocked to hear him is because his character embodied his message. He didn't just preach the message. He was the message. Just like Jesus, there was nothing in his appearance that might attract us to him.

- **App:** When a "Word" comes in your wilderness, it will come from an unexpected source. One that's able to penetrate with sincerity, not outward appearances.

2. In Places You Don't Want to Go

- **The Most Deserted Drive in America** – (1) If you remember the days before \$5 dollar a gallon gas prices, then you also remember road trips you took. Some of which traversed through miles and miles of absolutely, positively nothing remotely interesting. (2) The most deserted drive in the United States isn't from Tallahassee to Pensacola, nor is it from Mobile to Montgomery. It is from Los Angeles to Las Vegas. (3) Here's why: You must drive straight through the Mojave Desert. (4) And if you don't have a full tank of gas, you are going to be having a bad day.
- **Main Idea of the Point:** The wilderness is the last place on this earth the people of God wanted to go for answers to their own spiritual wilderness wandering for 430 years. But a man from the wilderness, preaching a "Word" from the wilderness, that can only be heard by journeying to the wilderness is exactly how God broke his 430-year silence.
- **Textual Emphasis (3, 4, 5): Wilderness as Central to the First Narrative in Mark as John the Baptist:** (1) On three occasions in ten verses, the wilderness dominates the passage: "a voice calling in the wilderness" (3); John the Baptist appeared "in the wilderness" (4); The people came to the "wilderness." (5) To fully understand the significance of this, go back into your mind the first time you saw the wilderness in the Bible. It was the place Moses told Pharaoh that's where he wanted his people to go to worship him. Let my people go so they can make a sacrifice in the wilderness. (5) But to get there, they had to make an exodus from Egypt and then travel through the waters of the Red Sea. Their exodus from Egypt to the wilderness to hear God required them to step into the waters. (6) John's Baptism was the exact same thing: a second exodus. It was a call to separate from the world (Egypt) and confirm it via a baptism of repentance (Red Sea).
- **App:** The wilderness is dangerous. It's unsafe. It's painful. It's a place where God can be silent for long periods of time. But it is the place where God breaks his silence by speaking right into your soul. But to get there, you must step into the waters.

3. With Completeness You Need to Hear

- **The Emoji Downward Spiral:** (1) The demonstrative proof that our culture is spiraling downwards can be found through one thing we've managed to add to our text messages and emails: emojis. (2) I grew up in a time where you didn't have to add anything to your speech in order to communicate. (3) If you wanted to say, "hi," you just said "hi." (4) Not anymore. You have emojis. So many emojis that you must have a dictionary specifically for emojis to understand what the message really means. (5) It's almost as if, in the present day, conversations are not complete without emojis.
- **Main Idea of the Point:** John the Baptist broke a 430 silence from God with a message that was both convicting and graceful. When God gives you a "Word" in the wilderness of your life, don't expect it to be any different.
- **Textual Emphasis (8): Preaching a Message for Jews No Other Prophet Had Ever Preached:** (1) It was baptism. In this case, two are mentioned: one of repentance (that John does) and one of the Holy Spirit (that Jesus does); (2) A baptism of repentance was unheard of for Jews in that day. They didn't even practice baptism. The only time they stepped into the water in a religious context was to be physically clean before entering temple or synagogue to worship. (3) John's message was completely the opposite. It's not the physical uncleanness that's the problem before God. It's the internal, thus one of repentance (the convicting part of the message). (4) By John saying he baptize with water, it was an external baptism. The one Jesus will bring, will be internal (the graceful part).
- **App:** Think about something: why in the world would people want to journey into the wilderness to hear John the Baptist call them things like "broods of vipers?" Here's why: they were desperate for a "Word" after God's silence for over 4 centuries. And they got one that was convicting and graceful. When we want to hear only part of that, then we really don't want to hear from God because the vital part is missing.

4. With Confirmation You Need to Grow

- **The Lord's Interesting Way of Confirming Things** – (1) Several years ago, I was driving back from a conference in Miami in the late evening and I really felt like the Lord was telling me to pull over for a little bit and rest so I would not fall asleep. (2) I dismissed it and kept going. When I started to get weary, I rolled the window down. As soon as I did, a family of mosquitos came in through the window and settled on my neck. (3) I pulled over like the Lord said right after.
- **Main Idea of the Point:** A "Word" from the Lord in the wilderness will always come with confirmation. Jesus confirmed John the Baptist's message with his baptism.
- **Textual Emphasis (Verse 9): Jesus' Baptism** – (1) Search the other Gospels and you'll find that John didn't want to baptize Jesus. He wanted Jesus to baptize him. But Jesus said he needed to be baptized to fulfill all righteousness. (2) This begs the question: what righteousness does it fulfill? John's baptism was one of repentance and Jesus didn't need to repent. (3) Here's the answer: In his baptism, Jesus associated himself with sinners by placing himself among the guilty. Not for his own salvation, but for ours. Not for his own guilt, but for ours. Not because he feared the wrath to come, but to save us from it.
- **App:** May we have courage to follow into the wilderness and the conviction to leave it as a changed people.

