

Message: “The Journey Begins”

Have you ever been confused by a sign?

I have. I find street signs to be confusing at times. Here are some examples of street signs which seem unclear I’m sure you don’t have to think very long to come up with other signs which can be confusing.

Here’s another sign which may be

confusing. There are signs we see but don’t comprehend. Is a rainbow a sign of God’s covenant as Noah tells us, or is it just a particular arrangement of water droplets and sunshine?



Both can be true.



You may know the old expression by Thomas Fuller, “Seeing is believing, ...” don’t miss the rest, “... but feeling is the truth.”¹

This saying contains a spiritual truth. In the physical world, seeing comes prior to

believing, but in the spiritual world, believing goes before knowing, just as faith goes before the miracle. Believing can give us eyes to see and ears to hear, enabling us to understand and know.

Jesus taught this to his apostles through Thomas. Thomas insisted he see the resurrected Christ before he would believe: “*Unless I see the nail marks in his hands ... I will not believe*” (John 20:25). Jesus allowed Thomas to see while challenging his unbelief. Jesus then pronounced a blessing on those who believe before they see: “*Do you believe because you see me? [Blessed] are those who don’t see and yet believe*” (v29).

Spiritual experiences are outside-the-box experiences. They are outside our comfort zone. They are signs pointing to the acts of grace and mercy of God. Simple, quiet signs carry a depth of meaning we can spend lifetimes exploring.

¹ speeches.byuh.edu/commencements/believing-is-seeing

The problem is we often don't recognize a sign for what it is, give credit to it or trust in it. There are any number of modern-day signs we can cite. For example, my friend John who was trapped upside down in the dark in a cave when Jesus came to him. John recognized who Jesus was but didn't give credit or trust to the sign.

And we've read about Thomas' unbelief and Peter's denial. They were seeing signs but struggled to understand what they meant or how to respond. Using the vernacular of Mark, they were wandering in the wilderness, just like we do. Jesus spent some time there, too.

Let's talk about the wilderness experience. Three of the four gospels tell us Jesus spent time in the wilderness after his baptism. They are pretty clear Jesus needed time to get things in order. I think he needed to be aligned with God. At least that's what it seems like he is doing.

What kind of Messiah is he going to be? Matthew and Luke describe the conversation in the wilderness, the temptations. They give us some background into the decisions facing Jesus. They provide lots of juicy details about what was going on there and lots of debate about the test.

Then we get to Mark, who presents the temptation in the wilderness in two verses. He doesn't list the questions, doesn't tell us how tough it was. We just get bullet points.

- One: Jesus was there forty days.
- Two: Jesus was tempted by Satan. Okay ... How was he tempted by Satan? But Mark has no time for questions. Moving on.
- Three: Jesus was with the wild beasts. What does that mean? Again, no time for questions. Moving on.
- Four: Jesus was waited on by angels. Did they bring him meals and necessities? Did they mop his brow and fan him? Or did they stand on the edge of the wilderness, tapping their toes and checking their cell phones for texts from Jesus?

What was going on there? Mark says we don't know. He says it doesn't matter exactly what happened. The important stuff is there. Back up and take another look. Baptism, heavens torn open, gentle Spirit like a dove descending, and Jesus is blessed. Then the gentle Spirit becomes

an irresistible force driving him out into the wilderness. Driving him. Temptation, wild animals, angels. That's all you need to know.

We have moments like this from time to time, don't we? We find ourselves thrown into a world we aren't ready for, dealing with things for which we are unprepared, wondering if we are going to survive. There are choices to be made, paths to follow. And we are never sure which is right, what will bring us back into the gentle blessing of the Spirit and what will drive us deeper into conflict with the adversary.

Our first thought when we find ourselves in difficult situations is usually, "What did I do wrong? How did I get off track?"

One wonders if Jesus had those thoughts while stumbling around the wilderness. "What did I do wrong?"

"Surely not," we think, "He must have known what he was doing. It must have been his idea to go and spend some quiet time before diving into the busy years of his earthly ministry."

But then, why does it say, "*the Spirit drove him out*"? This sounds like he didn't want to go. It sounds like punishment. God drove Adam and Eve out of the garden. It sounds like getting rid of something you don't want. Jesus himself would later drive out demons and drive out disease. It was a way of getting obstacles out of the way. Jesus drove the mourners out when he wanted to rescue Jairus's daughter from the grip of death.

The Spirit tore open the heavens and drove him into the wilderness.

And in the middle of it, Jesus was blessed with a gentle presence and loving words. He was tempted in the harsh wilderness for forty days. And in the middle of it, he was waited on by emissaries of the God who claimed him at the river. Again, there's an echo of our own lives that seems to vacillate between moments of love and acceptance, and moments of doubt and terror. We feel swallowed up in uncertainty, even as we are comforted by the blessings of those who love us.

Jesus tells us to lean into the Spirit, even when it pushes us into uncharted territory. Even when it seems to be sending us out against our will. Lean into the uncertainty because it won't go away. And along the way, there will be moments of blessing. Remember them. Cling to

them. Let them sustain you in times of temptation and deprivation. Let those words, “*You are my beloved,*” ring in your ears over the weeping and moans of your own feelings of brokenness. And let the gentle Spirit be what drives you to embrace the suffering of the world to bring healing, wholeness and love.

Light and dark, gentleness and suffering, Satan and angels. This is the tension of life, the daily struggle to hold on, the hope in the middle of despair, and the suffering that deepens love. We choose whether to turn away from or to claim the responsibility of coming alongside Jesus.

We choose whether we will realign ourselves with God, shifting our path to follow the one set for us by Jesus. Our journey begins anew each day. This happens all around us, every day. Some attack and some come alongside. Some run from him, and some run toward him. We always have the choice, for we live in the wilderness. We aren’t told what happened there because it is still happening. Every day, we make the choice. Lean into the Spirit, it won’t let you down. And you’ll find resources to face whatever may come in the wilderness.

And out of this wilderness moment, Jesus announces the Kingdom of God has come near. Where? Here in this non-wilderness place found in his presence. Or, back there, on our own filled with confusion and denial? Where is the kingdom nearest to us? Is it when we are safe and happy and everything is easy, or is it when we are wrestling, like Jacob at Jabbok’s ford? That’s the invitation of our Lenten journey. Let us once again realign ourselves with him so we feel the depths of God’s love, the depths of God’s presence, and the depths of God’s forgiveness and grace.

The journey of the rest of your life begins right now. I invite you to take a small step with all who are gathered.

Let us pray ...

Genesis 9:8-17 (CEB)

God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “I am now setting up my covenant with you, with your descendants, and with every living being with you - with the birds, with the large animals, and with all the animals of the earth, leaving the ark with you. I will set up my covenant with you so that never again will all life be cut off by floodwaters. There will never again be a flood to destroy the earth.”

God said, “This is the symbol of the covenant that I am drawing up between me and you and every living thing with you, on behalf of every future generation. I have placed my bow in the clouds; it will be the symbol of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow appears in the clouds, I will remember the covenant between me and you and every living being among all the creatures. Floodwaters will never again destroy all creatures. The bow will be in the clouds, and upon seeing it I will remember the enduring covenant between God and every living being of all the earth’s creatures.” God said to Noah, “This is the symbol of the covenant that I have set up between me and all creatures on earth.”

Mark 1:9-15 (CEB)

About that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. And there was a voice from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness.”

At once the Spirit forced Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among the wild animals, and the angels took care of him.

After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee announcing God’s good news, saying, “Now is the time! Here comes God’s kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!”