

**Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles**  
**First Sunday in Lent – February 18, 2018 – Presidents' Weekend**  
**Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister**  
**Mark 1:9-15**

**FOR REFLECTION**

**"The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness."**

~ John Muir (1838 – 1914) was a Scottish-American naturalist, author,  
and early advocate of preservation of wilderness in the United States

**"To be commanded to love God at all, let alone in the wilderness, is like being commanded to be well when we are sick, to sing for joy when we are dying of thirst, to run when our legs are broken. But this is the first and great commandment nonetheless. Even in the wilderness - especially in the wilderness - you shall love [God]."**

~ Frederick Buechner, Frederick Buechner, A Room Called Remember: Uncollected Pieces

**Untamed Places**

Mark, the earliest of our four canonical gospel writers, was not a poetic man of many words. He wrote in his vernacular – and he summarized a lot. Our text this morning has three brief recaps – which later gospel writers expounded upon in greater length later in the century.

Basically, Mark says, Jesus was baptized, spent some time in the desert alone, and began a proclamation ministry in Galilee. His cousin, John, bookends these experiences: John was the one who baptized him, and John's arrest kicked off his cousin's public persona and movement.

Compared to Luke and our poetic John, Mark is terse and common. I love Mark and the room he gives us to interpret life and Jesus for ourselves. His description of the baptism makes it a very personal experience for Jesus – there is no audience. Jesus alone sees the heavens ripping apart and Ruah descending. He alone hears G-d claiming him. Jesus alone knows what happened really – and takes no selfies or video to prove it. Veracity depends on trust of the author. I trust Mark.

Mark uses some traditional Hebrew storytelling phrases. This "40 days" in the wilderness was meant to describe "a long time" – and evoke other stories well-known to his audience. Noah's flood and journey through the wilderness of the high seas was 40 days. Elijah, fleeing from Jezebel, goes to the wilderness to die and is strengthened by angels for a 40-day journey that saves him for G-d's purposes. (Kings 19) And, of course, the Egyptian slaves spend 40 years in the wilderness – allowing time for the slave mentality to die off and a spirit of freedom to be born.

The wilderness itself – this “untamed place” – is not just endless vistas of sagebrush and long periods of dehydration. The wilderness is a place of unknowns. It holds us and surrounds us through times of major transition and deep spiritual crisis. It swallows us when death overwhelms us – leading us through unmapped territories of grief and fear and anger. It is a place of emptying, opening to G-d, embracing impossible visions, falling into the void of self-understanding, discerning one’s purpose, finding a way through a catastrophe, entering the space between in order to just be.

Mark says none of this – but evokes it in me with a metaphor. Powerful.

The wilderness of my mother’s death was perhaps three days – ten days. Losing her to Alzheimer’s was more like five or six years. The wilderness of being raised by someone who had no mothering role models and had some serious handicaps when it came to mothering her children – that wilderness has been a lifetime. So, this one – this wilderness of grief – is unexpectedly complicated and deep. I thought I had done so much of my “work” over the years. Yet I am faced with so much more.

This is an untamed place and angels are appearing along the way to keep me breathing and safe through these days. One of my angels has been Corinne – who lost her mother, Rosemary Jewell, a week after I lost mine. She has occupied this wilderness with me – shown compassion – affirmed our mutual journey – and continues to be a tether to life even from Oklahoma. I’m grateful. My father took on the tsunami of condolence cards – opened and organized them – absorbed the initial flood of memories – allowing me time to just be. Thank you, Dad.

I recommend a book that I haven’t finished reading. The Wild Edge of Sorrow by Francis Weller is a gift and tool for our times in the wilderness. He writes:

While grief is an intense emotion, it is also a skill we develop through a prolonged walk with loss. Facing grief is hard work... It takes outrageous courage to face outrageous loss. This is precisely what we are being called to do. (xii)

In a world that copes through distraction, denial and anesthesia, we are urged to be intentional and fully conscious in our walk with sorrow. He describes five “gates of grief” which have helped me give voice to some of the ways in which grief has surprised me repeatedly:

1. Everything we love, we will lose. We are mortal.
2. There are places in us that have not known love due to shame and banishment. Neglected pieces of soul live in utter despair – it is difficult to grieve for something we feel is outside the circle of worth. Those places in us need reinstatement.

3. The sorrows of the world – the fact of suffering – this is the kind of grief we have encountered much more deeply this last year – but is a constant companion. I believe that this is the sorrow that drove Jesus into the wilderness and then out into his life’s work. And his cousin’s death was deeply connected to this grief.
4. What we expected and did not receive is a gate I have encountered repeatedly. And it is worthy of grief. This kind of grief in others deserves recognition and a place in our understanding of those who have disappointed us.
5. Ancestral Grief is what “we carry in our bodies from sorrows experienced by our ancestors.” I became very conscious of this when I became a mother. There is an old man in my son that rages at restraint and knows things beyond his chronological age. His sorrow is huge and includes me – I have to hold it.

This week we have all been affected by the expanding wilderness of repeated school shootings – the deaths of children – the coarse disregard of elected officials to the health and lives and well-being of our kids. And in this wilderness, as in most of the social crises of our human history, the children are courageously taking to the streets. And, in this case, they are using social media to bring the full light of truth to their reality.

As always, in the aftermath of catastrophe, there are sick people who claim that the event never happened. The Holocaust was a Jewish disinformation conspiracy. The Newtown shooting was fiction made up by liberal gun control freaks out to deprive citizens of their right to bear AR-15s.

These kids in Parkland weren’t going to let that happen. An article in WIRED describes the social media phenomenon in an unusual way. I’m tempted to read the whole article but will try to just hit the highlights.

**COURAGEOUS GRIEVING AND THE TRAGEDY IN PARKLAND**  
How students are fighting lies, half-truths, and hypocrisy in the wake of the  
Florida school shooting  
By VIRGINIA HEFFERNAN

The article begins with this tweet:

**I don’t want your condolences you fucking piece of shit, my friends and teachers were shot. Multiple of my fellow classmates are dead. Do something instead of sending prayers. Prayers won’t fix this. But gun control will prevent it from happening again.**

**— Sarah Chad, Marjory Stoneman Douglas student,  
on Twitter, February 14, 2018**

**The brave students of Parkland, Florida, who saw seventeen of their classmates and teachers murdered on Valentine’s Day, are doing something astonishing: courageous grieving—and a strategic counteroffensive in the twin fogs of disinformation and gunsmoke. Their uprising provides a new model for all of us who live in two worlds: The real one, where the blood is, and the digital one, where the lies are.**

**The students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas are civilian teenagers, not trained soldiers, but their presence of mind as citizens of these two worlds kicked in during the massacre. They sent texts while under fire—not just expressing fear and love, but creating contemporaneous notes about what was happening to them.** “Sam,” one brother texted another, “My teacher died. And he’s sitting in the doorway.” A student named Kaitlin Carbocci received a text from her sister, also a student at the high school: “kaitlin I am not joking they just shot through the walls someone in my class is injured.”

**Many of these messages have been presented as heartbreaking—and they are—but their specificity also seems keenly designed to thwart future efforts to rewrite history.** A tweet by @Luvanth at 2:42 pm was the first to trigger a newsroom alert. “There’s a real school shooting going on right now i’m not even playing i just heard 10 gunshots there’s police everything i’m shaking.” Later, another student tweeted: “Just to make it known, for those who might not know Douglas or be near Parkland, that the building the shooter chose was well known as the ‘Freshman building’ its wasn’t all 9th graders but had the highest amount of young students. He knew that, everyone who went here knew that.”

**And the students not only noted facts, they made video, which instantly built an evidentiary archive to counter the disinformation that now pounces on every mass shooting.** No Alex Jones was going to claim that the friends, classmates and teachers of these students were not murdered in cold blood by a teenager wielding an AR-15 military-style rifle. Videos by students appeared on social media while the attack was still underway. In one, students, some shaking with fear, raise their hands while police officers storm the room. In another video, a hurt student is carried out of a classroom.

**Their notes, video, and testimony is already, just days after the event, creating a fuller and more direct record of this massacre than any before it.**

**But telling the truth isn’t enough on the broken and infected internet of 2018—and the students, who were barely born when Facebook launched, know this. They had to quickly move to counter lies, half-truths and hypocrisy that might obscure the truth of the day.** (Indeed: Disinformation, much of it pushed by pro-gun Russian groups and botnets, appeared

immediately, some of it connecting the shooter, Nikolas Cruz, to far-left groups and spotlighting his mental illness, which the president promptly picked up and tweeted about.)

The students did not stand for this. In interviews, posts, and tweets, they brought antibodies to the info pathogens. Newtown parents, Las Vegas adults, and other survivors of recent mass murders have not been digitally confident this way: They have been slower to recognize memes as memes.

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**But on day one the Parkland students pulverized weak memes like “thoughts and prayers.” And when Tomi Lahren, the rightwing firebrand, tried the usual palaver about how liberals and lunatics—not guns—are to blame for the deaths, tireless Kyra, as @longlivekcx, tweeted: “A gun has killed 17 of my fellow classmates. A gun has traumatized my friends. My entire school, traumatized from this tragedy. This could have been prevented. Please stfu tomi.”**

It takes uncommon courage and clarity to set celebrities like Lahren straight, not to mention the president of the United States. Maybe the kind of courage and clarity that only an adolescent aware of her power online, her mind sharpened by tragedy, can lay claim to.

**So the students are making their incontrovertible record. They are distributing it in social media and mainstream media, giving interviews, publishing editorials and saturating the airwaves with the truth. In the meantime, they are crowding out lies and dismantling them: calling bullshit on gibberish from the GOP and the president.**

As one student who tweets as @sighnatasha said, “to the republican legislators who will continue to ignore the american people and their cries for gun control and gun laws just to continue to receive money from the NRA: a big fuck you. your own people are being killed daily. the elections in november shall speak.”

And as Cameron Kasky, a 17-year-old junior, put it, “Everything I’ve heard where we can’t do anything and it’s out of our hands and it’s inevitable, I think that’s a facade that the GOP is putting up.”

**In a final step, the Parkland students are refusing to retreat. While excoriating Congress and President Trump for hypocrisy and cowardice,**

**they are also demanding concrete reforms. In many cases, they are asking for the outright dismantling of the NRA.** On Friday, at a neighboring high school in Parkland, dozens of students protested the NRA and Trump's gun policies, warning the president, who has announced a plan to visit, to stay "far away" from their town.

This uprising might be just getting started. Two days after the Parkland shooting, on Friday, special prosecutor Robert Mueller announced a grand jury's indictment of 13 Russian nationals and three Russian entities for waging "information warfare," since 2014. Using fake American personas, social media platforms and other digital media to advance their infiltration and influence, defendants allegedly engaged in a conspiracy to defraud the United States, sow cultural and political divisions and defeat Hillary Clinton. **As the Parkland students seem to grasp intuitively, the war has been on the internet for years. Smear campaigns, propaganda and disinformation have become the internet's stock in trade.**

**But the Parkland students also see the internet as a place to defeat lies with truth. It is testament to their brilliance and their bravery beyond measure that, in their darkest hour, they have taken up the fight for truth. May the rest of us have the sense to join them.**

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<https://www.wired.com/story/courageous-grieving-and-the-tragedy-in-parkland/>

In this untamed place we have named "After Another School Shooting" – in the wilderness of grief and rage – our children have found another untamed place to take on the powers that be with Truth and Unity. THIS is what happened. This is where WE live and die. DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT.

Jesus knew that place. He BECAME the social media outlet of his time – proclaiming the truth about the evils of military occupation and economic oppression – religious hypocrisy and the realities of life and death for the sick and poor. That is where the church is supposed to be – in the reality where the blood is – with our kids.

It is a terrifying, untamed place.  
They shouldn't have to be there alone.  
Where the hell are the angels?

## **Mark 1:9-15**

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

**12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.**

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news."