



Dr. James C. Howell
Mark 1:12-28
August 30, 2009

Jesus steps up out of the water onto the bank of the Jordan. He is dripping wet. Perhaps he is energized or inspired. He has just been baptized. He has just heard the heavens open and a voice saying *This is my beloved son*. The spirit has just descended upon him like a dove. You would think that at such a moment Jesus would think...something marvelous but, instead, the text says that the spirit drove him into the wilderness, and this word drove, *ekballo*, it means "to shove rudely," the spirit shoves Jesus rudely into the wilderness.

I think about for us, testing, what would testing be for us? It would not be going into the wilderness, I think, for us, it's living in the city because in the city we're just bombarded...There's no use to trash our culture, it's such an easy mark. We live in a culture that just makes us sillier and stupider every day. The worst thing, though, is that we live in a culture where it's just not enough. You can get all that it has to offer, but it's just not enough. It can wind up alone.

Jesus is shoved rudely by the spirit into a place of danger, out in the wilderness. This is hard for us to get our minds around because I think we think that if we just get God, everything will be wonderful. The image that we have – you know, sometimes I'll go to a book store and I go to the religion shelf, just kind of browse around, and the religion best-sellers, always have somebody on the cover who's great-looking, their teeth are perfect, their hair is in place. There's Joel Osteen. There he is, and he's just smiling and all perky looking, and he's got this fabulous-looking wife, she's fantastic, and they look great, and they're just smiling, and the impression that you get is "If you just get God, your problems are over, and you can feel like Joel Osteen and his wife at all times." I was thinking about this, and I wonder if he would take a phone call from me, and if I called him, I would say "Joel, have you read the Bible?" It's just a question that I'd want to ask him. Because in the Bible, it's not like you get God and it's all grins and happiness and your problems are over. You get a whole new set of problems, and it's hard, and that's exactly why it's meaningful, because it's hard.

Jesus in the wilderness. Fortunately for us, Jesus went into the wilderness, he engaged in combat against evil personified. I could not have won that battle, and you could not either. We would have succumbed, but, fortunately, Jesus did not. Fortunately, Jesus won that battle, and that's why we can follow him. That's why we can trust him. He went into the wilderness.

Jesus from there went up by the sea of Galilee, he came to the synagogue at Capernaum and there was a man there who was filled with an evil spirit, and Jesus – this is amazing – one of the great virtues of studying Greek in seminary, you get all this cool insider stuff that I get to share with you – Jesus encounters the guy filled with an evil spirit, and he says – the Bible translates it nicely – Jesus says *Be silent*. The Greek word...if you're a little Greek child and you said it, your mom would drop a bar of soap in your mouth. This is foul language, you don't talk this way.

Jesus doesn't seem too interested in being polite when he is dealing with evil, when he's dealing with people who are hurting, when he's dealing with people whose lives have no point, and they're lost. Jesus isn't polite, uses rude, slang, hard language, he's going to do something about it. He's not just messing around.

Jesus does this and he's by the Sea of Galilee – I took a group there back in March, a few of you were with me. I think everybody would agree that the most amazing artifact that we saw on our entire trip was a boat. Archeologists a few years ago found a fishing boat that was amazingly preserved and dates back to the time of Jesus. It's amazing to see this boat because – right? – Jesus' followers were fishermen. Jesus was out on a boat. You wish this boat said SS Peter on the hull. It's a boat from the time of Jesus, and we know that Jesus would have seen this boat. Jesus may have stepped into this boat. This boat could have belonged to one of the followers of Jesus. Jesus comes to men who are fishermen, and we need not think of Andy and Opie going fishing at Mayberry. They're not out having a good time, this is their livelihood, and it was a good livelihood. For years, we thought, "Oh, they were poor" – it was bad – but being a fisherman, that was a pretty good business. Jesus comes to these people with a pretty good business and he says *Put down your nets and follow me*. The fools, they did it. They left their jobs behind, they left their security behind, they left their livelihood. Everything that they were counting on, they just left it behind. Why in the world did they do this? Jesus must have had something compelling about him. Jesus must have had some beauty that when people saw him and he said *Put down your nets and follow me* they just put down what they had and they followed him. They didn't know where they were going, how it was going to work out, they just followed. It's amazing. And to those who followed, Jesus said this other amazing thing that I want us to explore some today. Jesus said *I'm going to make you fishers of men, I'm going to make you fishers of men*. It would be nice if we could say "It's good that he made them fishers of men, we don't have to be." But the implication of the Gospel is that God calls all of us to be fishers of other people.

We don't like to talk about this too much. That seems kind of – you might crowd somebody's space if you tried to introduce somebody to God or something. And there are perils in it, you know, you think about Barbara Kingsolver's novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*. This missionary sets out for the Congo. He's going to convert the natives. He gets there and the first thing he does is he sees the way women in Sub Sahara Africa are dressed and he opens Leviticus and condemns them for their clothing. That's a great way to get started with them. And then he tells them all that his goal is to baptize them in the river. They didn't want to get in that river – there were crocodiles in that river. There were perils to evangelize. We're not talking about beating people over the head, but let's just be clear, you and I have a responsibility to try to get other people connected to God, and as we think about this, we make two huge category mistakes that I've noticed. One is this, I don't know when this happened, I wasn't paying attention, but now it's really prevalent. If you want to say the best possible thing about somebody in our world, you know what you say? You say "He was a great guy, he was a great guy, he is a great guy." I don't know what the female equivalent to that is – there's got to be one – but for us men, "He's a great guy." I'd love that if people thought that about me – "That James is a great guy." Somebody dies and they say "He was a great guy." It's fine to be a great guy, but I've thought about this, did Jesus come down to earth and teach and heal and die on the cross so we could be great guys? I don't think so. I don't think Jesus is that interested in whether we're great guys or not. I think Jesus is looking for the kind of people who would put down their nets and follow him, that they would get really serious about this. The other mistake that we make is this, and forgive me if this offends you, but Jesus is rude today, so I'll be rude too. Is that OK? Will you work with me on this?

I want to talk about church membership, church membership. We make a big mistake about this. When I first moved to Charlotte six-plus years ago, I live on a street, it looks like a normal Charlotte street, but I live on such a holy street. You know how I know this? When I got there six-plus years ago, my neighbor took me out. We were standing by the edge of the road and she went house-by-house-by house and told me where everybody belongs. They belong to First Presbyterian, they belong to Myers Park Presbyterian, they belong to Christ Church, they belong to your church. I don't know these people. Everybody on our street belongs to a church. We just must be – we are a really Christian holy street.

Except I have it on good authority from those who don't work like I do on Sunday morning that they all belong to churches, but quite a few on Sunday morning, no car rolls out of their driveway. It's interesting. You can be a member of the church – how to put this – I think God could care less if you're a member of a church. I just think that to God, that is nothing. Jesus didn't come to those fishermen and say, "I'm looking for members to get your name on the roll – would you sign up? – got your name, thank you, see ya'." I don't think Jesus did this. I think Jesus said *Put down your nets and follow me*. He's not looking for great guys. He's not looking for church members. He's looking for the people who haven't put down their nets and followed him. And you and I know so many of these people.

I want you, in your mind, to think through people that you know – they may be members of a church, they may be great guys. They may look really happy. They may go to parties and just seem to have their whole life together. But there's just this little mystery that I've learned in my line of work and that is, you see people and they seem to just have it all together and then you talk to them and then it's like, "Oh my goodness, they suffer from so much." Or maybe they don't. Maybe you just think, "I'll just buy into this culture and it'll just be happy days for me."

We all know somebody who needs God, we all know somebody who needs God. I bring this up and I know this makes you a little bit nervous because you think "If I said something to them I'd..." It would be rude, wouldn't it? Except Jesus calls us to be fishers of other people. I have a few suggestions about what to do about this condition that you may find yourself in. Think about a person, several people that you may know, and the first one seems like an easy thing to do. You can just pray for them, they'll never know. And it seems kind of safe, but it's not a bad place to start. You pray for somebody, you may invite them to church. This is under-rated, by the way, in our world. I can tell you this by personal testimony. Years ago, I was not a church guy, and when I was in college, a friend invited me to church, and I tell you what my reaction was. I laughed out loud and said "You've got to be kidding." Haha, that was funny. He invited me again and invited me again – that's a little bit rude now, isn't it? Because you're supposed to invite once and if they don't come, you kind of leave it be, right? But he kept inviting me and he did it over and over. He did this for two years, two years. And finally, just to get him off my back, I said "I'll go." Thank God Almighty that he was rude, that he kept inviting me. If he hadn't done that, somebody else would be talking to you today. I wouldn't be in the church. I wouldn't be doing what I do for a living. I thank God that somebody was rude. That was persistence.

We send you off on these mission trips and it sounds like "That's a nice thing to go do for other people." You feel good about yourself. It's a witness to the world that we have something that is wonderful and is precious. We have good news. God calls us to bless other people. God calls us to be missionaries of other people. You may know people, maybe they're cynical about religion. You could try this; you could say "Dr. Howell, tomorrow night, he's a smart guy – See, you could make that up if that helps you to talk them into it – "He's a smart guy and you come tomorrow night and he's going to talk about questions that we have about the Gospel and Jesus." They might come, you never know. It's something that we can do.

I'll tell you something else that's maybe more important. This is not in my sermon notes, but something happened to me last night that just blew my mind, and I wanted to tell you about it because I think it's pertinent. My wife and I were out of town at a wedding. It was a lovely wedding, and it was in a town, a college town that's about two hours from here. I had never really been to this place. In fact, I've avoided this place over time, although many of you probably love this place. And I don't know how to get where I'm going, trying to get to the reception, they gave us a map and all the little signs are light blue, you know. and we're touring around, and I'd just never been there before and I said something to my wife, I can't believe I said this and I can't believe I'm admitting it to you, I said to her, I said, "This

place is really lovely." I said to her, "I get why people dig this." But I take it back now, and I'll tell you why. I had directions to park for the reception, and I'm supposed to park in something called the Rams Head Deck." And so I followed directions and I get to the Rams Head Deck and I pull in. It's crowded – I don't know what all was going on at the Carolina campus last night. There's just cars – it just looks hopeless. I pulled in that deck. There's one parking place in the entire Rams Head Deck, except there's not one parking place because I get to that one parking place and somebody in an SUV has kind of just slung their car in there. And they're kind of over the line, and I can't get in that one parking place. I look at this SUV and it's got a bumper sticker and it says something about God being a Tar Heel. And I am not happy. I tell you this because, you think about it, I'm almost a convert, but "No"... That person wasn't thinking "I'm going to keep James Howell from being a Carolina..." That's not it. That person was just in a hurry, they're just doing whatever they're doing and just stick the car in there and they go. They've got their bumper sticker that says something about God – they didn't think anything about it. And how often do you and I in our lives, we're not doing anything in particular, we're just kind of in a hurry wherever we're going and we just do something and that's what keeps somebody from God? You don't even know it. You're kind of going along to maybe you swing your car, maybe something that you say at work, maybe something in the way you act – something – and then somebody in front of you and you have no idea – they look happy, they look together but somewhere in their hearts they're thinking, "This misery that I'm just acknowledging, maybe God, maybe Myers Park Methodist..." and you just sling your car or you do something, and they just go, "Oh, forget it, oh, just forget it."

What do we do in the course of our week that causes somebody to say "Just forget it," I want us to get serious about this. We have a new bishop. He's got the perfect name for a minister, doesn't he? Larry Goodpaster. It's brilliant, and he's a good pastor and a good bishop and he's laid out a big challenge to us. Some bishops could say "Let's keep the church alive if it's at all possible." He's saying "We've got to grow to the church" because the church is the one organization that does not exist for the benefit of its own members. We exist for the people who are out there who don't know God. And they may be great guys, may even be members of a church somewhere, but they don't know God. They haven't put down their nets and followed Jesus. We are called to reach out to them in some way. You can figure it out. Stop swinging your car somewhere, whatever it is that we do.

I'll close the story about how this can happen in the most surprising way. Years ago, we brought Bishop Kenneth Goodson to Charlotte to speak, and he was so eloquent, had such a big impact on so many young clergy at the time. He came to Charlotte and was at a dinner – I was not there, but I heard about it later – they're sitting around a table, the waitress comes, takes their orders and she brings the food. And they're getting ready to say the blessing, which you can do in a restaurant. Usually when you do a blessing in a restaurant, you kind of wait until the waitress goes on – she's got work to do – but Bishop Goodson was smarter than I am about that. She put the food down and asked if they needed anything else, and he said, "Well, we're about to say a prayer, would you like to join us?" And she said "OK." And they all held hands around the table and he held her hand. He prayed "Thank God for the food," all this kind of stuff, and then he said "Lord, we thank you for this waitress, she's got such a great smile it's really lifted us up, and she served us so humbly and efficiently, I just thank you for her, and Lord, I just ask you if she's got any hurt in her life, if she's struggling with anything, Lord, I ask you just to bless her." They said "Amen" and when they looked up, she had tears streaming down her face. She said to him "How did you know I was hurting?" He said "I didn't know" but he did know, and we know, everybody we brush shoulders with, everybody out there needs God. Everybody out there is hurting. For everybody out there, this culture is just not enough. For everybody out there, there's a sense of being alone. And the question for us is, Are we going to be polite or are we going to risk being a little bit rude and try to be fishers of other people?