

**Epiphany IB**  
**Mark 1:4-11**  
**January 11, 2009**

**No manger. No magi. No magnificat. No shepherds, no angels, no little lord Jesus asleep on the hay.**

**Christmas is over. The decorations put away, the nativity scenes tucked back into their boxes, the carols about babies and mothers and sheep and donkeys and bright stars in the sky are all done for another year.**

**We find ourselves in a different place now, a strange and disorienting place. Here we are in the very first verses of the gospel according to Mark. There is no Christmas here, in the beginning of Mark's version of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. There is no back story, no prologue, no warm up at all for the narrative of the life and death of God's Messiah.**

**Mark has no time for any of that. The story starts here, in the wilderness. Not in Rome, or Alexandria, or Jerusalem, or even Bethlehem. It does not begin on the Appian Way or in the Temple courts or even in the city of David. The story doesn't even begin INSIDE Israel, but on the far side of the Jordan River, beyond the border. It's the other side of the tracks, Biblically speaking. A place on the fringes, the outskirts, the edge.**

**It starts with this strange and almost prehistoric figure. John the Baptizer appears – as if out of nowhere – in the wilderness, dressed like Elijah, that quintessential Old Testament prophet. Crunching on grasshoppers and slurping down honey, wrapped in an old camel's skin, preaching repentance. *Come back Israel. Come out here, to the banks of the Jordan where your story began. Come back and be God's people. Something's coming. Something big. Gotta get ready and ready fast.***

**And lo and behold, the something arrives, and it's nothing big at all. It's just this guy from the north, Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee. It's like saying Jesus from Ovid, of Clinton County. A nobody sort of person from a no-account little town in the backwater of the Middle East.**

**Is this any way to start a gospel? Is this any way to introduce Israel's Messiah? Out here on the fringes, away from Jerusalem, the center of the universe, away from the Temple, the very heart of the Jewish faith, the home of God himself? Surely the Messiah should appear in the center of things, in the holiest spot in the holiest city on earth.**

**But he doesn't. Jesus comes from the outskirts of Israel to the border country of the Jordan. He turns up in the wilderness, and submits to John's baptism. He appears – not in the center – but on the margins.**

**A margin is an interesting thing. When I type it into my computer's thesaurus, I get two concepts in return. In the first sense of the word, margin means edge, border, fringe, periphery, outskirts. It's a little threatening – think about terms like “edgy” or “borderline” or “fringe element”. Or it's just not important – think about things that are peripheral or marginal.**

**But margin also means scope, leeway, space, room. You get to have a “margin of error,” or a “breathing space,” or “room to roam.”**

**So the Messiah appears in a place that is peripheral, but it is a place that offers him space. Out there in the edges, on the periphery, there is room for God to move and to begin the action that inaugurates Jesus' ministry.**

**God tears open the heavens. *Schizo* in Greek, like schism or schizophrenia. It's a sudden, violent action that rends the barrier between humanity and God asunder. And through that ragged opening, God's own Spirit pours out upon Jesus, so that he can fully experience that moment of intimacy, that moment of call, that moment of commissioning.**

**“You are my Son, my beloved.” Jesus hears the voice of his Father speaking directly to him, clearly, openly. “With you I am well pleased.”**

**Had Jesus appeared in the center of things, in Jerusalem, in the Temple, the well-ordered rituals of offering and sacrifice would not have yielded to him or to his Father. They would have ensured that heaven remained a smooth, impermeable, and predictable barrier -- strong enough to hold a demanding God at bay. Only in the wilderness could heaven acquire its own rough edges. Only on the margins could God find room to move.**

**And I wonder if this is not the case today, as well. We try so hard to keep our lives in order. Sane. Predictable. Balanced. Centered. We value neutrality and reason. We have Blackberries and Day Timers and pocket calendars and wrist watches to keep our days and hours and minutes under control. We are middle-class people, leading middle-class lives in the middle of the United States, in the middle of the mitten. Even our denomination – Anglicanism – is called the *via media*, the Middle Way.**

**It feels good to be in the middle, doesn't it? Not too hot and not too cold, not too right and not too left. Not too stodgy but not too radical either. It feels safe ... saf-ER anyway, when the winds of change start howling, and the forces of chaos begin to bear in upon us. We are well-insulated here in the middle, in the center. It takes a lot to get through to us.**

**But this strange beginning of the gospel of Mark suggests that the middle is not really where we will discover God at all. Jesus appears in the wilderness, in the margins, on the edge, where the divine action is about to take place. And Mark tells us to forget being centered and balanced and safe. Mark says it's OK to be disoriented and off-balance and on edge. Mark says that's a good thing.**

**But it is also a scary thing, to go out into those strange borderline places, to stand on the very edge of security and comfort and watch for what appears in the wilderness. We don't like to go there, we don't want to go there. And yet, the voices of John, of Jesus, of God the Father himself, call us into the peripheries and outskirts of our world. I**

**Are we seeking God? Then we must go to the margins – to the jail, the soup kitchen, the nursing home, the unemployment office, those peripheral places filled with peripheral people. That’s where Jesus is making his appearance.**

**Are we seeking God? Then we must go to the margins – to openly greet those people who think differently from us, or who speak a different language, or who value different principles. Jesus is speaking to us in the words and voices of the stranger and the alien.**

**Are we seeking God? Then we must go to the margins – and that includes the margins inside ourselves. Because each one of us has something that separates and walls us off from the warm, safe, comforting center. Each one of us has attributes that keep us apart.**

**Maybe we are marginalized by ethnicity, or by gender. Maybe by sexual orientation. But we are also marginalized by more subtle forces as well ... perhaps by an illness we don’t want to discuss. Or by a grown child gone off the straight and narrow. By an addiction. By a failure. Maybe we are marginalized by simple human loneliness. We all have our outskirts, our edges, our borders that wall us off from one another.**

**And to go there, to our own border country, might be the scariest journey of all. Because it is there, in our wilderness, in our rough edges and our ragged places -- that is where God wants to come to us. That is where an insistent God will descend, tearing through complacency and comfort, ripping through our well-ordered lives, shredding our illusions and pretensions -- to descend, to inspire, to commission and command us.**

**But we must go there. Because it is only there -- in our wilderness, in our rough edges and ragged places, where we can hear at last the message God has for each of us. For only there – in those places where we are on edge, where things are wild and unpredictable – only there will God have enough space to get through to us, to speak to us. To say those words that will claim us, name us, heal us and seal us:**

**“You are my child. My beloved. With you I am well pleased.”**