Ok, let’s remember our context and message of the Gospel of Mark as a whole. Last week I said that the major theme of the Gospel is that our connection to God, our relationship to God is found when we are taken outside of what we know. We called that the wilderness. I brought up how when Israel was freed from the promised land, where did they go? Into the wilderness. I forgot the most obvious example of all, which is Jesus. What’s the first thing that happens to Jesus after he is baptized? Boom, out into the wilderness. The wilderness I’m using as metaphor for the way we are taken outside of what we know as seek to follow God. And here in the wilderness we discover what Mark called repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Remember what repentance is, I talked about this last week. It’s not primarily about behavior, repentance is for the most part about how we think. The word repentance means, “think about how you are thinking”. And so the Good News is that there is a power coming that is going to get us out of what we know and start us rethinking. Reforming, renewing, re-evaluating, mulling things over. You’re always on the way learning and growing about God and his creation. This is Good News to which we are called.

This rethinking is very closely related to respecting. If I respect you I’m not just going to come to some conclusion about you that is permanent. Won’t put you in a little box. And if you know your wife or husband, or your kids, if you know anyone very well, you will know that they are always a little bit of a wilderness aren’t they? Sure, this is reality. So you always are called and given the gift of engagement, rethinking, repenting. Most people who own a home know what it means to live the Good News in a certain way. You have to redo things, remodel, update. Same with your computer. It’s always being updated. The spiritual reality is for your mind and your heart, what you believe, and the way you see the world. It always needs to be refreshed and renewed, updated. Life goes forward and not backwards.

Along with this then, you will realize where you were blind before, or didn’t understand, or didn’t see. So forgiveness is a constant as well. Oh, I didn’t see that quite right before. When you’re learning you’re seeing where you were wrong. Oh, I was mistaken about that. Imagine a world where people could discover the joy of being wrong and you are pointed in a big way toward the Good News. Have to rethink that. This is dying to the old and rising to the new, the life of a disciple of Jesus. Being born again, that popular phrase. The baby is forced out of the womb into what to the child certainly experiences as a total wilderness. This is life. This is living. Take up your cross. Get out of what you know and learn to rethink, reflect, rediscover. It’s a wilderness out there isn’t it? Sure is. God waits for you there. We meet each other and grow in love as we learn to listen and engage.

So welcome to our Gospel lesson today. Because we are certainly taking into a wilderness here. This is another example of that intercolation thing I talked about a couple of weeks ago. That Mark uses a kind of sandwhich approach with a lot of these stories. That is what is happening here again. Right before our lesson today, Jesus sends out the disciples. Where does he send them? Outside of what they know. To people they don’t know. Then, they return to report on what how it’s gone. Mull it over. Jesus even tries to set up a kind of retreat for them to rest and debrief. But sandwiched in between being sent out and coming back, we have our Gospel lesson today. As if to say, as the disciples are sent out into the wilderness, so we will be sent into the wilderness as we read this story of John the Baptist today. And what will we be given to think about as a result?

Just the gruesome nature of John the Baptists death gets us started. But what causes his death? That’s the wilderness I want to look at today. And in order to get into what this is, I’m going to flip to another biblical story that is recounted by the Apostle Paul. It’s easier to see the issue there, and then I’ll come back to Herod and our Gospel lesson. Again, I will put it up on the screen so that you can read along with the text. This is from Galatians Chapter 2. St. Paul is confronting Peter about how he is thinking. And it’s a real wilderness, that we all deal with.

Here is what Paul writes, Later, when Peter came to Antioch, I had a face to face confrontation with him because he was self condemned for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, (the people from James), he (Peter) drew back and kept himself separate out of fear of the circumcision faction. So what’s the issue at hand here just in these two sentences? Well, a Jew would never eat with a Gentile. But Peter ignored that and ate with them, until his Jewish friends showed up. In other words, His Gentile friends were fine, until his Jewish ones showed up. Then he sort of switched allegiances.

Get the wilderness? How is Peter thinking? Well, It’s sort of like I would be if I was watching the Nebraska CornHuskers play the Washington Huskies in football. At home in the living room, no problem Washington Huskies all the way. Whoo Hoo, the Huskers fumbled! But you know, watching the game with a bunch of Big Red fans, I might not be so bold. So what’s going on in my mind. Yeah, I’m sort of one way in this group and another way with that group of people. In the church this comes up once in a while as one way on Sunday and another way on Monday. Sunday it’s love your neighbor as yourself on Monday it’s business is business. I remember in my last call I heard a lot about how criminals should be harshly punished. Until a member that everyone liked had a kid that stole some cattle and landed in prison. Then people were a little different around that family. Completely changed their tone and manner. One way in this situation, another way in that. I talk real big with my friends but when I’m around people of a different point of view, sort of by myself I don’t talk so big anymore. I sort of withdraw. Now that’s finding yourself in the wilderness isn’t it? I think we find ourselves there more than we might let on.

Now lets consider our Gospel lesson. Because this is what gets John the Baptist killed isn’t it? It’s very interesting how Mark spends so much time on this, this is a short Gospel without a lot details often. But here Mark takes great pains to show how Herod finds himself in the wilderness. in private Herod was sort of with John. He put him in prison to save him from harm. He was actually intrigued by the message. What did John do to Herod that was so important? Yeah, when he listened to John he was greatly perplexed. That’s another term for finding yourself in the wilderness isn’t it? Perplexing means complete baffling. But he was intrigued, he like John. He really got Herod thinking things over. Herod it seems was doing a bit of repentance.

See but what takes him out? Yeah, one way on Sunday, another way on Monday. One way in his private thoughts, another way with his friends and family. Mark makes sure that we understand the dilemma Herod was caught in. See, in order to find God you have to deal with this wilderness don’t you? You are sent into this wilderness every day. There is a real pressure to conform, to just go along with the crowd that you’re in. How do you wrestle with this back and forth that sometimes happen in your own soul? Can you mull it over? I’m one way in this group, and another way in that group. Hmmm. Interesting. Reflect, review, rethink. John the Baptist isn’t killed by an atheist, or some enemy of God, some unbeliever. John the Baptist was killed by a man who liked him. A guy who was really interested, but just couldn’t stand up to his friends. Pretty tough. How many terrible things happen to people because of this way of thinking?

I’ve been thinking about Afghanistan this week. I remember when we went to war 20 years agp. Boy, for the most part America was gung ho. All in against Iraq, against the Taliban. Let ‘em have it. Toby Keith wave the flag. It’s sure easy to go to war isn’t it? Not a lot of doubt back then. We were so certain about what was right and what was wrong. We’ll stand with the Afghanistan people against the Taliban. Well, now it’s not so popular, so we think differently. We’re tired of this, it’s time to go. So it looks like a lot of people will get killed. One way at the beginning another way at the end. No easy answers, I’m not trying to be overly simplistic. People will get killed either way I’m sure. Does it mean that the American people are bad or evil? No. I think most of us would like the people of Afghanistan given a chance. I’m sure they would baffle us a bit. Just like Herod and John. But we thought this way at the beginning and now we think differently. Next time we go to war I hope we’ve mulled that over a little bit. Reflected. Learned something. Grown a little bit. And that’s what happens when we get taken out of our nice comfortable certainties and find ourselves in the wilderness. Where you have to think about how you are thinking. And think about where you need forgivness.

I wonder what would happen if this is how we taught the Christian life. That the main activity of being a disciple of Jesus was this kind of reflection? This kind of repentance? So often we simply reject the world around us. What if we saw ourselves as embracing this baffling world? What would happen in our families if we could talk about the way we’re one way in this group and another way in that? But more than that, simply wrestling with the hard questions that life brings us, instead offering easy answers. My guess is that we would be growing in a sense of compassion and love for one another. Understanding how we always in the end have to rest on His unchanging Grace. That the solid rock that we have learned to live is the love of God. I think we would bring hope to a lot of people. And we would be learning. Amen.