

## Sermon for February 21, 2021—“A Dangerous Place”

First Sunday of Lent, Year B—Texts: Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15

As I considered what I would talk about on the first Sunday of Lent, where the reading talks about the Spirit sending Jesus “out into the wilderness,” I remembered a phrase from a curriculum that was used at a church where I’d once served. The phrase was this:

“The wilderness is a dangerous place. You only go there if you have to.”

It’s part of the popular Sunday School curriculum for young children called *Godly Play*. I wonder if Mark, or for that matter Matthew and Luke, had known about Godly Play, would the passage about Jesus have opened with the same lines:

“The wilderness is a dangerous place. You only go there if you have to.”

Unlike his counterparts, Matthew and Luke, Mark offers his readers no colorful details about Jesus’s experience in the wilderness. We don’t learn what the specific temptations were or how Jesus responded to them. Mark doesn’t even assure us that Jesus “passed” his desert test. All he gives us are two abrupt sentences:

**“At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness and he was in the wilderness forty days being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals and angels attended him.”**

I don’t know about you, but this terse version of events leaves me buzzing with questions. You see, part of my “problem” with Scripture is that I start thinking about the minutiae. Like—how exactly did Jesus spend his time? Was he tempted 24/7? Did he walk for miles each day or camp out in one spot? Where did he sleep? What was the silence like hour after hour after hour?

He was very likely praying a good bit of the time, but might he have also passed the time in other ways? Say, by humming? Singing? Reciting some of the psalms? Did he star gaze at night? Did he throw rocks? Chase lizards? As the days stretched on and on, did he fear for his life? Did he question his sanity? Did he wish to die?

Mark—ever the bastion of brevity—leaves all of these questions unanswered. But the few details that he does include in his account are telling and they give us much to cling to, as we face the wilderness’ in our own lives. I’d like to focus on three:

First—Jesus didn’t choose the wilderness.

Second—the struggle is long.

Third—there are angels in the desert.

First, Jesus didn’t just meander into the wilderness. He didn’t schedule a safari, or plan an expedition, or book a wilderness trek to rack up Fitbit steps. Mark tells us that the Spirit “drove” Jesus into the wilderness.

As I’ve said, “The wilderness is a dangerous place. You only go there if you have to.”

Oddly enough, however, this is one detail I find comforting. Why? Because it's true. It certainly is for me—how about you? I mean, we don't choose to enter the wilderness. We don't volunteer (generally) for pain or grief, danger or terror, but the wilderness happens anyway. Whether we're driven to it by circumstances, or whether it comes to us in the guise of a hospital waiting room, a thorny relationship or a troubled loved one, a serious illness or a sudden death, the wilderness appears—unbidden and unwelcome at our doorsteps. It insists on itself. And sometimes, if we can bear to ponder this, it's God's own Spirit, who drives us into the parched landscape amidst the wild beasts.

Now, does this mean that God wills bad things to happen to us? That he wants us to suffer? I really don't think so. Does it mean that God can redeem even the most barren periods of our lives? That our deserts can become holy even as they remain dangerous? Yes. I believe so—absolutely!

I say this knowing how much Christians have suffered under the false teaching that God authors human pain and suffering for some greater good of his own devising. He does not—it's not God's nature. But we walk a fine line nevertheless. Sometimes parts of our journeys with God include dark and desolate places.

Not because God takes pleasure in our pain, but because we live in a fragile, broken world that includes deserts and because God's modus operandi is to take the things of death and wring from them resurrection. As I've said on numerous occasions, pain teaches and that God's more concerned with our character than our comfort.

Second, our wilderness journeys sometimes last a long, long time. Despite the fact that I'm an introvert (hard to believe I know), I've never spent forty days in solitude and silence, much less in a state of physical deprivation and danger. Still, I can't imagine that Jesus's time in the wilderness passed by quickly.

The sense I get from Mark's gospel is that Jesus strove and wrestled for much of his time there, if not constantly; that he experienced each day as a battle of mind, spirit, and body. Maybe the hours seemed to stretch into years and the nights felt endless. Maybe the landscape itself mocked his weary senses, his hunger and thirst, the unwavering bleakness breaking his heart, as if it would dry up, crumble into dust and blow away to nothingness in the hot, dry desert wind.

For those of us who live in a quick-fix culture, this aspect of the wilderness can be especially trying, because we can tire and despair easily—can't we? Why—we ask—is this pain not ending? Why are our prayers going unanswered? Where is God? Is God up there? Is he even listening? But maybe we need to ask a harder question: Why did Jesus need the wilderness? Why—for that matter—do we?

I mentioned Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz Weber a few weeks ago, and offered a quote from a great sermon which just so happened to be about this gospel story and in this context, it's seems appropriate to give you the full quote. She suggests that temptation—Jesus' and ours—is always about identity about who we are and whose we are.

She wrote: “Identity—it’s always God’s first move. Before we do anything wrong and before we do anything right, God has named and claimed us as God’s own. But almost immediately, other things try to tell us who we are and to whom we belong. They all have a go at telling us who we are. But only God can do that. Everything else is temptation.”

It’s very telling, I think, that this week’s reading, as it appears in the lectionary (the three year cycle of chosen Scripture readings), begins with Jesus’s baptism. According to Mark, the heavens were torn open and God announced Jesus’s identity loud and clear, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” And once more it begs a number of questions. For one, what happened to that certain sense of identity and belonging as Jesus’s wilderness wanderings stretched into week two? Three? Four? Did it begin to waver? Did the Son of God have to keep reminding himself who he was? Did his Father have to nudge him each time he forgot? “Can you hear me now? Do you remember that you are precious and beloved now?”

I imagine that there are some who might disagree, saying that Jesus is the Son of God, how could he not hear God? How could he possibly waver or have doubts? In my experience, it’s because lots of folks have a difficult time with Jesus’ humanity. They struggle with it and for lots of reasons, reasons that the Church has grappled with over the last two millennia in various creeds and theological treatises.

Though we affirmed these things, dutifully studying and reciting them, we resist examining the implications too closely. We hesitate to linger too long—if at all—over what Jesus’s incarnated life might’ve looked, smelled, tasted and felt like? The divine part—Jesus’ divinity? No problem. But it makes some uncomfortable to consider the possibility that the Son of God might have wrestled with his identity; his vocation; his calling; his relationship to his Father. It’s hard for some to accept that the greatest danger Jesus faced in the wilderness wasn’t starvation—but **amnesia**.

Some might think that would be too much to accept. Some might even call it heretical. Maybe—but I think it’s true. At the very least, we have to admit that it’s possible.

Think about it.

At his baptism, Jesus heard the absolute truth about who he was. That was the easy part. The much harder part came in the wilderness, when he had to face down every vicious assault on that truth; when the dove disappeared and the last faint echoes of his Father’s voice from heaven faded and he had to learn **how** to be God’s beloved in a lonely wasteland, without food or water, with vultures circling overhead waiting for an easy meal. And I hate to have to be the one to point this out, but maybe we—like Jesus—need long stints in the wilderness .to learn what it really means to be God’s beloved.

Because the unnerving fact is this: We can be beloved and uncomfortable at the same time. We can be beloved and unsafe at the same time. In the wilderness. the love that survives is hard like stone—not soft. It’s salvific—not sentimental. Learning to trust it takes time.

Third—there were angels in the wilderness. This, too, is a startling and comforting truth, one that we can recognize if we open our eyes and take a good look around. Somehow. Somewhere. Help comes. Rest comes. Solace comes. Granted, our angels don't always appear in the forms we might prefer—but they come.

I wonder what Jesus' angels looked like. Did they manifest as winged creatures from heaven, complete with halos and harps? As cool, comforting breezes across the sun-scorched hills? As a trickle of water for his parched throat? As a wild animal that surprised him with a tame and tender gaze? As a rock to lay his head upon? As the swirl of constellations on a clear, cloudless night?

What do your angels look like? What have they looked like in the past when they ministered to you? Held you? Embraced you? Did they speak? Did you hear a voice, like God's voice, calling you his beloved? If yes, then what would it be like to enter into someone else's barren desert now and become an angel for **their** journey?

“The wilderness is a dangerous place. You only go there if you have to.”

This week, we began the wilderness journey of Lent. Today, as I mentioned, is the first Sunday of Lent—a season that began this past week on Ash Wednesday. The ashes that we normally would've received, would have stood as acknowledgment that we are dust and to dust we shall return.

The uncomfortable truth that we—all of us—will surely die one day; that our bodies will fail us, no matter how cleverly we attempt to preserve them with medicine, diet and exercise, cosmetics or mindfulness. From that austere beginning, with that understanding, we venture into the wilderness, as so many have before us. People like Abraham, Moses, Elijah, John the Baptist, and—of course—like Jesus.

And here, brothers and sisters, is the thing:

Even without ashes on our foreheads, we began a hazardous journey inward, a journey to learn our true names, our true identities. I pray that we'll walk with courage into the deserts we don't choose and cannot avoid. I pray that our long stints in the wilderness, like the one we've been in for nearly a year now, will teach us more about who we really are and that we will heed its lessons. And I pray that when angels, in all their sweet and secret guises, whisper “beloved” into our ears—we will listen and believe them.

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.