

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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Mark 1:9-15 (NRSV)

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."

INVITED TO THE WILDERNESS

Several years ago I received a pamphlet on a continuing education opportunity that was purported to be perfect for Lent. It was a course entitled "A Week in the Winter Woods."

The idea behind this course according to the brochure was to use the beauty and the struggles presented by the harsh winter environment as a kind of crucible in which one could develop spiritually and personally. I passed on the opportunity.

The idea of paying good money in order to sleep on the ground in freezing temperatures seemed crazy to me. In fact, this is one continuing education event that I would never pay to experience. With my allergies it would be sheer torture. I'll leave the wilderness experiences to someone else!

Of course there is a whole industry devoted to giving people a "wilderness experience." Some are demanding trips, but most of them conjure up images of snug mountain resorts that are fully equipped with all the modern amenities despite their rustic look.

BIBLICAL WILDERNESS

But, in the Bible, this is not true. In the Bible, the wilderness is still the wilderness. In the Bible, the wilderness is not a place to take a benign backpacking trip or spend a few quiet moments to reflect.

The wilderness is a place to avoid. The wilderness is that empty frightening place where there is nothing but evil and danger. The wilderness is filled with brigands who are looking to take advantage of the unsuspecting pilgrim.

The wilderness of Jesus' day looked a lot like Death Valley in California, devoid of all plant and animal life, a place where the only animals around slither in the dead of night or bay at the moon.

And so the wilderness also became a symbol, a symbol of those times when we are tempted to abandon hope. The wilderness became a symbol of the lonely place of despair.

The wilderness became a symbol of that gut wrenching place that we inhabit when a job is lost, when a friendship is betrayed or when we lose a loved one.

DRIVEN INTO THE WILDERNESS

None of us want to go into this wilderness, not the real wilderness.

We are driven into the wilderness by circumstances that are beyond our control. The "wilderness experience" is something that most of us would rather avoid all together. And when we are forced to enter that dark and frightful place, we want to leave it as soon as possible.

No one wants to be driven into the wilderness.

And yet, in our lesson for today, that's exactly what happens to Jesus. Jesus was driven into the wilderness. The Scripture tells us that he was driven into the wilderness by the Spirit, God's Spirit.

In the case of Jesus, it was not circumstances or fate that led Jesus into the wilderness. It was part of the plan, God's plan. God Himself drove Jesus into the wilderness.

And the question I have to ask is why? As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, this Spirit is no sweet dove. This "Spirit thing has claws, talons." William Willimon describes this passage from Mark as a "dark, fierce, enigmatic tale with which to open a gospel."

The language of this passage is quite forceful. The word that the NRS translates "drove out" is the same word used to describe the casting out of demons, and Mark's favorite phrase "immediately" adds even more punch to the phrase. "Immediately Jesus was tossed out into the wilderness."

Try to visualize the picture this gospel is painting. Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan, and there is a heavenly affirmation of Jesus.

The Bible tells us that the heavens are ripped wide open, the Spirit of God descends like a dove and a voice from heaven proclaims,

"This is my beloved son whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

It seems to me that things are going well for Jesus. He has the affirmation of heaven and a mandate to do God's will. And what happens next?

Immediately Jesus is cast out into the wilderness. The scene abruptly changes from one of affirmation and confirmation to one of doubt and temptation.

So often it seems to happen to us in the same way. Just as we seem to be turning the corner in our life, just as we begin to perceive God's providential care, we are once again cast out into the wilderness.

It seems that evil is in charge wherever we go, and we are tempted to lose faith.

OUR NECESSARY WILDERNESS

The wilderness was necessary for Jesus. It was part of God's plan. Is the wilderness necessary for us? Must we be tempted as Jesus was tempted? Must we in some sense walk the path that Jesus walked?

The church in its celebration of the season of Lent has said "yes."

This is the first Sunday of Lent. In preparation for Easter each year, the church has decreed that just as Jesus was tempted in the wilderness for forty days, so we in the church should spend 40 days in the "wilderness" of self-denial. We should spend forty days repenting of our sins and considering where God might want us to go in the coming year.

We take a hard journey with Jesus these next forty days, and the journey begins in the place we would rather avoid; it is called the wilderness. It is in that place where everything we love best has been taken away.

And in that lonely and difficult place we are challenged to ask ourselves, "Is there hope even when the thing we fear the most happens? Is there a purpose to my life even in the middle of the despair?"

The story of Jesus tells us that there is hope in the wilderness. More than that, hope is actually born in the wilderness. In that place of depravation and despair, God's salvation comes.

This is a theme that runs throughout Scripture. For example, God's people spent forty years in the wilderness after their Exodus from Egypt. Their sojourn in the desert was a punishment for their lack of faith.

But, it was also a time when they learned to trust in God alone. In a place that did not contain the essentials needed for life, they learned that God could provide what they needed.

In the same way, Jesus was cast into the wilderness to help us learn about the power and promise of God's kingdom. His kingdom cannot be stopped by the evil that lives in our world.

God's kingdom will not be overcome by the cruelty of human beings, the perversion of true religion or the crass calculations of those who grab for political power. God's kingdom will not be overcome by personal tragedy and betrayal. God's kingdom will still stand even in the face of death.

BASIC TRAINING

This is a lesson that we must learn personally, over and over again. The wilderness experience forms the backbone, the basis for who we are as God's people. The forty days of Lent are not an optional experience. We too are driven to the wilderness by God's Spirit because we need the wilderness.

Spring training and the baseball exhibition season have begun. These are the greatest baseball players in the world. But, every year they go over and over the fundamentals of the game, just as some of us did when we were in the little leagues.

Why do they do that? Why do they go over and over what they surely know? Why don't we just start new baseball season without all this spring training stuff? Even the most accomplished baseball players need to be refreshed in the basics of the game. They know what needs to be done, but knowing isn't enough. The basics must be a part of their lives.

In the same way, even experienced Christians need the discipline of Lent. You could think of it as our spring training, our way of remembering the important facts about how God was in Christ, about how he suffered many things, about how he was crucified dead and buried and how on the third day he rose again from the dead.

I am teaching these basic facts to our middle school students. They will learn them easily if they don't know them already.

But, these statements are more than just facts to be learned. They are facts to be lived. We must learn anew each year what Jesus means for us to do when he commands us to take up our cross and follow him.

A FLOWER BLOOMS IN GETHSEMANE

Ian McClaren wrote, “The highest joy to the Christian almost always comes through suffering. No flower can bloom in paradise which is not transplanted from Gethsemane.”

We spend much of our life on automatic pilot. We take the simple blessings of life for granted. In the wilderness this is no longer possible.

As someone once put it, “God is not found in the soul by adding anything, but by a process of subtraction.” The wilderness strips away the nonessentials of life so that we can be attuned to the voice of God.

We hear advertisements every day about the things we don’t have that we really need. The wilderness teaches us what we already have.

We often hear people talking about giving up something for Lent, but the lesson of the wilderness teaches us that this is too mild a discipline. We must give up everything for Lent, that is, we must consider during this sober time of reflection that everything we have in life is temporary except our relationship with God.

I was reading this week about a man who was well known for his books and lectures on human relationships. He was asked what effect aging had had on his perspectives. He thought for a while and said, “I view everything from the point of view of my death.”

At first this struck the interviewer as morbid, but as he went on to explain, the questioner realized that his response was not full of dread but wisdom. He now possessed the maturity to acknowledge what younger people often deny and avoid; he was mortal.

He was willing to face the fact that his days were numbered and out of that wilderness experience his remaining days took on a greater sense of urgency and importance.

IN LIFE AND IN DEATH

As Jesus bravely strides into the darkness, we are invited to go with him. We are invited to know personally what A Brief Statement of Faith boldly proclaims in its introduction, “In life and in death we belong to God ...”

Today’s lesson suggests that God is never absent, even in the wilderness. God is not absent, especially in the wilderness.

This does not mean that the wilderness is easy. The temptation to despair is real and the possibility of making a tragically wrong turn is always there.

But, God in Christ is always there too, and God can and does use the deprivation of the wilderness for a greater purpose. Notice that in Mark’s gospel the angels of God minister to Jesus the whole time he is being tempted by Satan and threatened by the wild beasts. In Mark’s gospel, Jesus is never portrayed as being completely alone in the wilderness. God’s angels are always there.

In the same way, we are not left alone either. God is with us in the time of struggle. His ministering angels are never more obvious than those times when we are cast into the wilderness.

It is said that trials can either leave us bitter or better. That’s true. Our time in the wilderness can be a time of preparation for greater service as it was for our Lord, or the wilderness can become our undoing.

The difference comes in what we believe.

If we believe deep down inside that we are indeed all alone in the wilderness, then I’m afraid that despair and temptation will finally gain the upper hand.

But, if we believe that God is with us, no matter how great the pain or tragedy and that God can use this difficult experience for a greater purpose, then we'll come through the wilderness experience a better person instead of a bitter person.

LIFE GIVING STRUGGLE

A man confined to a bed because of a lingering illness had on his sunlit windowsill a cocoon of a beautiful species of butterfly. As nature took its course, the butterfly began to struggle to emerge from the cocoon.

But, it was a long, hard battle. As the hours went by, the struggling insect seemed to make almost no progress. Finally, the bed ridden man, thinking that the powers that be had erred, took a pair of scissors and snipped the opening larger.

The butterfly crawled out, but that's all it ever did ... crawl. You see, the pressure of the struggle was intended to push colorful, life-giving juices back into the wings, but the man in his misguided mercy prevented this. Instead of flying on rainbow wings above the beautiful gardens, it was condemned to spend its brief life crawling in the dust.

There is much that we don't know and can't understand. Maybe there is a reason for our struggle in the wilderness. Maybe it is through our struggle that we are given eternal life.

God knows what He is doing.

BODY BROKEN FOR US

In Jesus we learn that He is not above us as we struggle. He is with us in the struggle. He gives everything He has ... even His own Son, his very lifeblood for our sake.

It is hard to understand, this salvation that comes through the wilderness, but it is at the heart of what we believe.

The wilderness is not a pleasant place, and without a doubt we will be scarred by the wilderness experience. But, then so was our Lord, and it is by his wounds that we are healed. It was through the hard experience of body broken and blood shed that salvation came into the world.

Today our Lord reminds us once again. He provides a supper in our wilderness. It is the Lord's Supper.

Once again he ministers to us with a gracious meal in our time of need. Once again he tells us,

“This bread is my body broken for *you*.
The cup is my blood shed for *you*.”

In our wilderness let us eat and drink to the promise of God's salvation in Christ Jesus.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN