

Mark 1:9-15

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."

## LENT

Every year I get the same question. What is Lent and why do we celebrate it?

Lent is a time of prayer, fasting and self-examination in preparation for the celebration of the resurrection of the Lord at Easter. (Lent began this past Wednesday on Ash Wednesday and will last 40 days not counting Sundays. The Sundays aren't counted because every Sunday is a celebration of the resurrection. Welcome to the symbolism of the liturgical world.)

Now you might ask why 40 days? The number 40 plays a role in a number of biblical stories. For example, the flood in Genesis, Moses' sojourn on Mt. Sinai, and Elijah's journey to Mount Horeb all took ... you guessed it ... forty days. Israel stayed in the wilderness for 40 years before entering the Promised Land, and in our lesson for today Jesus' time of testing in the wilderness lasts 40 days.

That number 40 rings a biblical bell so to speak. And the first readers of Mark would have picked up on this right away. The 40 days in the wilderness is a prelude to a larger story, a divine story.

But, why should we spend any time in the wilderness? Why should we engage in 40 days of prayer, fasting and self-examination? Many churches of course don't celebrate Lent. They see it as an unnecessary vestige of the medieval church, something that is not taught or required by Scripture.

In the Presbyterian Church there is certainly no requirement to celebrate the season of Lent. If you want to keep on celebrating Mardi Gras as they do at Universal Studios be my guest.

But, I would suggest that celebrating Lent while not required is a helpful practice. The power of Lent is not found in naval gazing or giving up chocolate. The power of Lent is found in the opportunity to reevaluate my life, my story in light of God's story. Lent provides the opportunity for me to once again walk with Jesus and his disciples on the road to the cross. And that walk changes everything.

## CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST

The Apostle Paul often made this connection in his teaching. For example, Paul said that he had been "crucified with Christ", that he died every day to the old way of life in order to receive the new life that Christ offered. (Galatians 2:19-20; 1 Corinthians 15:31)

New life requires us to surrender the old life. Before there can be a resurrection, before there can be a new creation the old must die.

That's what Lent teaches us. Lent drives home the peculiar claim that in dying we live. We who are baptized into Christ are baptized into his death. To be raised with Christ means that we must also die with Christ.

In order to embrace the resurrection we must experience the passion of Jesus. We must become a part of the story. We must learn, a Jesus put it, to take up our cross and follow.

That's why at the beginning of Lent we are reminded that all that we have and all that we love do not last forever. We are mortal. We are temporary. We are dust. In Genesis we read, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19). And it is this sobering realization that enables us to find what is really important in life.

Each year the Scripture lessons and the liturgies of Lent pry loose our fingers from those temporary things that we hang on to so tightly for security. And then we are plunged into the uncertain waters of baptism. We die to everything except the call of Christ. We are baptized into the death of Christ.

But, the cross and the tomb do not have the last word. We learn once again that baptism is not our death tomb but the very womb of life.

So let us join Jesus in the wilderness these 40 days. Let us face our shortcomings and our temptations. Let us face the evil in our own life. Let us face our fears.

We can do that because we believe the wilderness does not have the last word. On the contrary, the wilderness is the place where the kingdom of God begins, for Jesus and for us. The wilderness is that place where we learn what we really believe. The wilderness is that lonely road that all of us must walk on the way to faith.

## BAPTISM AND THE WILDERNESS

Mark doesn't give us a detailed description of Jesus' wilderness experience. He just lets us know that it happened and that it happened as a result of baptism.

You'll remember that when Jesus was baptized, the heavens were ripped open, the Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove, and a voice from heaven says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

But, notice what happens next. The same Spirit that lights on Jesus like a heavenly dove when he is baptized "immediately" casts Jesus out into the wilderness of temptation.

Affirmation immediately gives way to temptation. Being God's Son does not protect Jesus from danger and temptation. Being God's Son immediately puts Jesus in harm's way.

And those of us who are also born of the Spirit cannot expect anything different. We are born again not to a life of luxury and good fortune. We are born to a life of temptation. The Spirit carries us into that fearful place where the cross looms and we struggle to maintain our faith.

In our lesson for today Jesus proclaims the good news, the coming of the kingdom of God. But, that good news comes to the fore only after he struggles in the wilderness, that dark place of loneliness and despair.

And I would contend that the wilderness never really leaves Jesus. This is especially true in the gospel of Mark. Everything Jesus says and does is set under the shadow of the cross.

In today's lesson the ministry of Jesus begins when John is taken by force and arrested. We know of course that this is the prelude to John's murder.

Jesus declares that the time is fulfilled, that now is the right time to begin his ministry. And the next time Jesus uses that word, is when the authorities arrest Jesus. He too is taken by force. He too will be murdered by the very people he came to save.

## ANXIOUS TIMES

Mark's story is dark. But, it is dark because it is realistic. The first readers of Mark lived in an anxious and uncertain time. Due to an uprising by nationalistic Jews, Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed by the Romans. Jewish Christians were persecuted and scattered all over the ancient world. No doubt they were tempted to give up hope.

But, Mark reminds his readers that the story of salvation began in a place of temptation and anxiety. When Jesus received his call the first place the Spirit led him was to the wilderness. And yet, out of the wilderness, good news was proclaimed. The kingdom of God came near.

And this passage reminds us that Jesus still comes to our wilderness, that place where we are tempted to give up hope, that place where we are broken by life, that place where fear overwhelms faith. Mark's gospel, Mark's good news is indeed told under the shadow of the cross. It is in many ways a dark and foreboding story.

Yet in the darkest part of the story the grace of God is revealed most clearly. Toward the end of Mark's gospel as the Jesus is crucified, Jesus graciously asks God to forgive those who do this; they don't know what they are doing.

And one of those responsible for his death, a Roman centurion, looks upon that dark scene and proclaims as Jesus dies, "Surely, this man was God's Son." (Mark 15:39)

I know that some of you live in the wilderness. Some of you are in a place filled with fear and doubt. Some of you are tempted to give up hope or maybe do the wrong thing. But, I'm here to tell you that the light of God's salvation shines in the darkest corner of any life.

A minister told of preaching a sermon about God's grace and God's unconditional love. After the service a young woman said on her way out, "Those were beautiful words, pastor. But, I don't think you'd say them if you really knew me."

The pastor said that the ache in those words stays with him still.

I wonder if some of you have the same problem. You can talk about God's grace and forgiveness, but you're just not so sure that grace can reach into the wilderness that you find yourself in this day.

Can God really come into my wilderness of despair and doubt? Can God really love me?

Kevin Costner spoke at Whitney Houston's funeral and shared that Whitney was forever plagued by a fear that she wasn't good enough. She thought that she wasn't pretty enough or talented enough.

That's very sad. I thought she was one of the most talented and beautiful women I have ever seen. But, she couldn't see it. The demons of her wilderness proved to be too strong.

And the demons of our wilderness will prove to be too strong, if we try and face the wilderness alone.

But, it doesn't all depend on us. We are not alone in the wilderness, and that makes all the difference.

## TEMPTATION DEFEATED

There is one big difference between the temptation of Jesus and our temptation. Jesus was tempted in every way as we are ... but he did not sin. He did not succumb to temptation. (Hebrews 4:15)

We often sin, and that can be very discouraging.

But, according to the Bible our failure is not the end of the story. Jesus died for our sins. His body was broken for us. His blood was shed for us.

And that means we are forgiven and freed to live without fear. We can honestly face temptation because we know that Jesus stands with us in our time of need.

He is our comforter, our friend and our guide. He ministers to us in our wilderness of temptation just as angels ministered to Jesus in his wilderness of temptation.

The wilderness is a desert, a dry place. But, the desert is also filled with the power of God's Spirit.

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 of temptation 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 fear 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.

## LENT AND SPRING TRAINING

Spring training and the baseball exhibition season will soon begin. 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.

Most of you know those facts. We say them each week.

But, these statements are more than just facts to be learned. They are facts to be lived. We must learn anew each year the power of the gospel, the good news that is born in the wilderness.

## ANGELS IN THE WILDERNESS

Christopher Henry the pastor at Shallowford Presbyterian Church in Atlanta tells of attending a small ecumenical study group in North Carolina. Pastors and lay leaders from many different denominations told how they came to faith.

They talked about loving and faithful parents who told them the stories of Jesus. They talked about ministers and Sunday school teachers who led them to faith. You've been to meetings like that. The stories are meaningful, but after a while they all sound the same.

Finally, there was only one person left to speak. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she said, "I am a Christian because the Christian church saved my life." Suddenly the chatty crowd fell silent.

She told how her parents had abandoned her as an infant. In a foster home she was neglected and abused for the first six years of her life.

Finally, at age seven she was adopted. Not knowing what to expect, she spent her first night wide-awake in her new bed, afraid and anxious.

The next morning, a Sunday, the family got up early, had breakfast and got into the car. She said, "It was my first time in church and I had no idea what to expect. We walked into the Sunday school class, and the teacher's face lit up.

She said, 'Welcome, Janet, we've been waiting for you.' Then she read the Bible story for today. I will never forget the feeling. Jesus said to his disciples, 'Let the little children come to me. Do not stop them.'

I became a Christian at that moment. I knew with all my heart, that he was talking to me. I knew that I was home."

There are still angels in the wilderness, messengers of God's love and grace. There are still angels who minister to us and lift us up in our darkness and despair. There are still angels who remind us that God is with us and for us.

Some people say that Christianity is unrealistic, that all we talk about is pie in the sky by and by. Those people haven't read Mark, and they haven't celebrated the season of Lent. The Spirit leaves us no choice.

If we are to stay with Jesus these forty days we will stay with him in the wilderness. We will stay with him in that place of rejection and fear and temptation. That's as real as it gets.

It would be nice if could skip the wilderness. It would be nice if we never had to be afraid. It would be nice if we were never tempted to lose faith. But, in the wilderness we learn that though there are wild beasts there are also angels, messengers from God who give us the strength to face our fears and come out on the other side.

So, I ask you to spend a little time in the wilderness these forty days staring down the wild beasts of fear and temptation. I ask you to follow the lead of the Spirit who casts us out into the wilderness and brings us home again.

Amen.