

**“Into the Wilderness”**

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**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.”

Mark’s gospel begins in the wilderness.

The prophet Isaiah predicted it.  
A voice crying in the wilderness  
will prepare the way of the Lord.

And right on cue John shows up.  
He proclaims a baptism of repentance.

And where does he proclaim this message?  
You guessed it...in the wilderness.

John dresses and speaks like the prophets of old.

His message is an urgent one.  
The Messiah is on the way.

So, city people come from all over  
...to the wilderness.

They confess their sins.

They are baptized in the Jordon River.

## BAPTISM

Jesus also comes to be baptized in the wilderness.

And as he's coming out of the water  
three things happen.

First, the heavens are ripped open.

In Jesus, the gap between heaven and earth has been bridged.

Second, the Holy Spirit descends upon him like a dove.

Actually the word means that the Spirit went into him.

This is a way of affirming that Jesus is fully divine.

The Spirit of God lives in him.

And third, a voice from heaven proclaims,

“You are my beloved Son  
in who I am well pleased.”

## FORTY DAYS IN THE WILDERNESS

The Holy Spirit came to Jesus like a dove.  
When I think of a dove I think of a sweet little birds that coos.

But, in some ways, this dove is an angry bird.

This dove drives the newly appointed Messiah farther into the wilderness.

Mark uses his favorite word again.  
“Immediately”

Immediately, the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness.

No time for reflection.  
No time to rejoice in the call that he had received from heaven.

Immediately...to the wilderness..  
For forty days.

There’s a reason that the Holy Spirit is such an angry bird.  
Evil must be confronted.  
Inaction is not allowed.

So, in the wilderness Jesus is tempted.  
He lives among the wild beasts.

But, he is not alone in this confrontation.  
Every step of the way he is with the angels.  
They serve him.

## THE TEMPTATION OF THE WILDERNESS

What is the temptation that Jesus faces?  
What is the spiritual dilemma that requires a forty day stay in the wilderness?

Mark doesn’t say.  
But, I think we can guess.  
Jesus must decide where he will put his emphasis.

Will he focus on the provision of God  
or the fearful beasts that surround him?

Will he focus on the assurance from heaven’s voice  
or the specter of what an uncertain future might bring?

Did he think that the good news  
was too good to be true?  
Or would he trust in the provision of his heavenly Father?

The temptation of the wilderness  
was not an easy one to resolve

...even for the Son of God.

Jesus was fully human  
and subject to the same struggles that we all face.

According to the book of Hebrews,  
He is a high priest who understands our weaknesses.

Tempted in every way  
just as we are

...yet without sin.

That's the difference.

For Jesus the time in the wilderness  
was a time when faith was confirmed

...not destroyed.

## FAITH AND THE WILDERNESS

For us, that's not always the case.  
In fact, sometimes our lack of faith  
keeps us in the wilderness for a long time.

That was true for God's people.

They were rescued from slavery in Egypt.  
But, their lack of faith  
kept them in the wilderness,  
not for forty days,  
but for forty years,

They were never quite able to trust in the ministry of God's angels.  
They focused on their fears instead of God' salvation.

In the uncertainty of the wilderness,  
they longed for the security of slavery.

Even manna from heaven  
could not bolster their trust in the goodness of God.

So, wandering in the wilderness became a way of life for God's people.  
A whole generation lived out their lives in the wilderness.

I wonder.  
Can wandering in the wilderness become a way of life for us?

It can be, if we succumb to temptation.  
If we put all our attention on the wild beasts  
instead of the ministering angels.

## A MODERN PICTURE OF THE WILDERNESS

This past Wednesday was notable for three things.

First, it was Valentines Day,  
a day we celebrate romantic love.

Second, it was Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent.  
Many people marked the occasion by going to church.

Ashes were imposed on their heads to remind them  
of their need for repentance and their mortality.

And third, it was a day when yet another school  
faced the terror of a mass shooting.

One picture from that horrific scene tied all together.

A woman in tears is holding a fellow mother trying to comfort her.  
They're waiting to see if their children are okay.

And on her head...  
you can clearly see ashes in the shape of a cross.

Love, sin and mortality  
all captured in one trenchant photo.

For me the scene is summarized by Mark's favorite word... "Immediately"

"Immediately" a warm sunny day  
turned into a day filled  
with wild beasts and temptation.

Into the wilderness.  
Again.

These trips into the wilderness have become routine. They've become so  
common  
...that we are getting used to them.

We are tempted  
to just make our home in the wilderness.  
...just accept the unacceptable.

We have the uncanny ability to make the abnormal seem normal.

This is the great temptation of our time.

MEANT FOR THE PROMISED LAND

But, God's people were not meant  
to make their home in the wilderness.  
God's people were meant to live in the Promised Land.

That was true then.  
And it's true now.

God does not want us to live in the wilderness.

Now it is true that all of us visit the wilderness from time to time.

But, we must avoid at all costs staying in the wilderness too long.

We must move on to that place God will show us.  
You see, we are meant for more.  
We are meant for the kingdom of God.

## THE WILDERNESS AND GALILEE

Unlike the other gospels,  
Mark doesn't give us much information  
about the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness.

All we know is that he was  
driven into the wilderness by the Spirit,  
tempted by Satan,  
lived with the wild beasts

...and was ministered to by the angels.  
This took forty days.

And then the scene abruptly changes.

John is arrested.  
Jesus leaves the wilderness and comes to Galilee.

And Jesus preaches a message that sounds a lot like John's message.

"The time is fulfilled.  
The kingdom of God has come near.  
Repent, and believe in the good news."

There's a connection between the wilderness and Galilee.

In both cases Jesus refuses to allow himself to be influenced by the power of evil.

The message that Jesus preaches in Galilee shows that he has successfully defeated the temptation of the evil one in the wilderness.

The power of evil and the powers that be hold no sway over Jesus.

This portion of our lesson begins with the arrest of John. We know that John was arrested by Herod because he criticized the king's loose morals.

So Herod had him arrested,  
Herod was making a point.

Don't mess with the powers that be.  
Don't preach this message.

Now the temptation for Jesus would be to modify the message.

Let's not talk about a new kingdom.  
The old king might not take it so well.

But, that's not what Jesus does.  
The Spirit of God is upon him.

The same Spirit that helped Jesus confront Satan in the wilderness is the same Spirit that helps him to confront King Herod in Galilee.

#### THE SPIRIT IS AN ANGRY BIRD

The Spirit of God in Christ is an angry bird.  
This dove has talons!

And that's a good thing.  
Some things need to be confronted.  
Some things need the ministry of an angry bird!

King Herod (and those like him)  
want us to stay in the wilderness.

They want us to get comfortable in a world  
where men in power  
abuse women and threaten those who dare to challenge them.

They want us to get comfortable in a world  
where might makes right.

They want us to get comfortable in a world  
where religious leaders kowtow to those in power.

They want us to accept a world  
where terrible acts of violence are seen as normal.

All of this comes up in Mark's story.  
(And yet it sounds a lot like things we hear about today.)

But, Jesus, like John before him,  
will confront violence and abuse... again and again.

And all along the way,  
Jesus will remind us that the kingdom of God  
is not about getting comfortable in the wilderness.

The kingdom of God  
is about finding a way out of the wilderness.  
The kingdom of God is about salvation.

Salvation will not come from more rules and regulations.  
Salvation will not come from trying to control those that we fear.

Salvation will come from things that seem counter-intuitive.

Things like:

Loving our enemies.  
Doing good to those who persecute us.  
Pursuing peace and justice.

These are the values of the kingdom of God.  
These are the things that allow us to overcome temptation.

These are the things that will help us find a way out of the wilderness when  
the sorrows of this world become too much to bear.

WALKING THE LONESOME VALLEY TODAY

The Spirit may not drive us into the wilderness.

But, we are certainly no strangers to that place.

All of us will know the wilderness.

All of us have faced times of profound fear and doubt.

The season of Lent reminds us  
that we are not alone.

It may seem like we have to walk the lonesome valley alone.

But, it's not true.

Jesus walked that lonesome valley for us.

It was for us that he walked into the wilderness in the power of the Spirit.

This is what the temptation of Jesus means to us.

There is no wild beast, no demon,  
no temptation that will leave us God-forsaken.

When the heavens opened  
and the Holy Spirit came down on Jesus,  
that was just the beginning.

The Spirit of God did not retreat back into the heavens.

The Spirit of God in Christ is still with us.

One commentator wrote,

“...wilderness seasons marked by  
...deprivation  
...loneliness  
...beasts within and without”

They “strip us of all our illusions of power and control...”

But, she adds that those seasons can “also reveal angels.”

We learn the power of the one who sustains us.

...the power of the one who leads us home.

...the power of the one who keeps the forces that would destroy us at bay.

...the power of the one who sends us angels, messengers of hope and grace.

“...the Holy Spirit,  
that angry bird  
... will stop at nothing to protect us  
and will tear apart heaven to reach us.”

This is the good news.  
This is the promise.

The Spirit of God in Christ  
is with us wherever we go,  
whether it be in the wilderness  
or the mountaintop  
or somewhere in between.

This Spirit still sends angels to protect and help us.

In the Old Testament,  
the prophet Isaiah foresaw a time  
when the wilderness would bloom,  
and the wild animals that resided in that desert would become tame.

In that peaceable kingdom,  
the lion would lay down with the lamb,  
and the child would make mud pies  
right near the hole of the cobra snake.

To say it another way,  
one day the world will be recreated by the power of God's grace.

And thanks to the work of the Spirit of God in Christ,  
that process has already begun.

The question for us during this season of Lent is this:

Do we believe that?

Do we trust in the power of the Spirit to save us?

Or do we succumb to the temptation of fear?

Let us walk that lonesome valley with confidence.  
The Spirit of God in Christ goes with us.

And we believe that one day the wilderness,  
our wilderness will bloom.

Amen.