

Genesis 9:8-17
Mark 1:12 –15

First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ
1st Sun. in Lent, Sunday, March 1, 2009

Finding Faith in the Wilderness

Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist and seems almost ready to begin His ministry. But one more relationship, maybe the most difficult of all, is to be tested before Jesus can enter into His public service. Immediately following Christ's baptism, the Spirit pushes Him into the wilderness. There is no time for Him to bask in the glorious presence of the Spirit of God. As soon as Christ steps out of the water, He finds Himself compelled to leave the glory and the glamour of the cool and crowded banks of the Jordan River for the white heat and loneliness of the God-forsaken desert.

Loneliness is said to be created by drastic changes from emotional highs to emotional lows of life. Actors and actresses have been heard to say that the loneliest moment of their celebrity existence comes just after the last encore when they sit all alone in their dressing rooms. Jesus rides that roller coaster from high to low because He experiences the instant plunge from the shining glory of the presence of God at His baptism into the dark night of the soul when He suddenly finds Himself all alone in the desert. The seemingly hostile surroundings add to the fear of loneliness.

This temptation of Jesus, which could also be called Christ's wilderness journey, plays an important role in Mark's Gospel. Because it is associated with testing, it is especially appropriate for Lent. Verses 12 and 13 seem to begin with four statements connected to each other with "ands." Each of the four statements involves wilderness themes, and as the Spirit immediately drove Him out into the wilderness; and He is in the wilderness forty days,

tempted by Satan; and He is with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on Him. It seems the wilderness setting interests Mark more than the temptation of Christ.

The first statement comes as a bit of a surprise. It dramatically depicts the Spirit, who just descended on Jesus as a dove and is now driving Jesus out into the wilderness. Mark's concern is for the necessity of Jesus' going into the wilderness. Already the wilderness serves as an important location for John the Baptist. Jesus Himself also goes there to relax.

The second statement combines the reference to forty days with Jesus' temptation by Satan. The number forty calls to mind several important Biblical stories, such as the length of days of the flood, the wilderness years of Israel, and the flight of Elijah. In each of these stories, the preservation of life in the midst of danger is an important issue. Satan's presence emphasizes the threat to life implied in being in the wilderness for forty days. Mark seems content with simply suggesting these temptations rather than listing and describing them.

The wild beasts of the third statement remind us of various Biblical passages which promise God's protection from wild beasts. That Jesus is with these wild beasts and emerges unharmed indicates the divine protection made available to Him.

Another reference to that divine protection comes in the fourth statement where the Greek verb used is also used in other places to mean serving or ministering.

There is another reason Mark seems to go out of his way to mention these wild beasts. We want to remember Mark is writing mainly for Roman Christians whose faith is marching them right into the mouths of lions. We can almost hear the first hushed reading of the Gospel of Mark among a fear-filled band of Christians huddling together around a candle in either a small room in a house or in a catacomb. The phrase which seems so little to us flickers in their imagination and then becomes the bright flame of recognition as they bring together their situation with the hazards of Jesus in the wilderness. Yet they know Jesus is with them.

This scene shows both the danger of the wilderness and the protection of Jesus as God's Son. The period of forty days, with its obvious danger to physical life and the temptation of Satan, threaten Christ. The fact that He dwells safely with wild animals and is waited on by angels lets us know Christ will emerge safely from danger. The wilderness becomes the location of danger. Later in Mark, the wilderness, now tamed, becomes the place where Jesus goes to retreat from the crowds and from the misunderstandings which press in upon Him.

Mark seems to have more to say about the circumstances of Jesus' temptation. A person's physical condition combines with emotional swings and a hostile environment to make the fear of loneliness seem worse. Jesus fasts in this wilderness forty days and forty nights, from now until Palm Sunday. That is a long time to fast or go without food and water. Psychologists who have studied hunger and starvation find a pattern which can affect the mind. At first, the mind clears, and food is not important. But

as the body slows down, fantasies of wonderful feasts flash into the consciousness. If the person still does not eat, the fantasies disappear and food becomes unimportant again. But depression can set in. Later on, the individual enters a stage when mental processes become numb and suggestibility increases until the person becomes vulnerable to brain washing and mind control. It is a loneliness where no one and nothing really matters. As a human being fasting for forty days and forty nights, Jesus subjects Himself to all these dangers, particularly to the emotional and spiritual vulnerability which comes from prolonged hunger.

Many of us only know a loneliness which is partial and passing. Jesus knows the ultimate loneliness – total and prolonged. Emotionally, He falls from high to low. Environmentally, He is pushed away from the cheers of His baptism to the fear of the desert. Physically, He is weakened by hunger until He is dangerously open to any temptation.

The time is right for Satan to make his move. Finally revealed for what he is, the epitome of evil, Satan approaches a lonely, fearful, and vulnerable Jesus with three well-known temptations – physical pleasure, personal success, and political power. Mark does not record the details of what happens between Jesus and Satan. According to David McKenna, Mark simply gives us the setting, which in itself presents three tests for a person who is alone in the desert. One is the test of character; the second is the test of creativity; and the third is the test of communion.

Character can be tested when a person is all alone. Each of us wears public masks. Maybe we have a serious mask for our daily work, a smiling mask

for when we are with friends, and a pious mask for when we are in God's house. When we are alone, these masks are not on and our true character is in the face we see in our mirror. When we are removed from everything except our basic desires and our raw motives, we are vulnerable to a devil who prowls in the wilderness and associates with our being alone.

Creativity is also tested when we are all alone. Take away all the intellectual, social, and spiritual supports that prop us up and we wonder what resources we have to be on our own.

One of the aboriginal tribes in the South Seas has a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood called a "walkabout." A boy coming to puberty is sent into the jungle for six weeks without food, shelter, or weapons. During this time, he must test all of the survival skills he has learned during childhood. He must also be creative when he meets the unexpected. Talk about a final examination! One mistake and he could be dead. If, however, he survives to walk out of the jungle, he returns to a celebration which honors him as a man, a hunter, and a warrior.

Jesus' experience qualifies as a spiritual walkabout. His inner resources for survival and creativity are tested when Christ is all alone and tempted by the devil. What resources does He have? Christ has the physical conditioning to survive a forty-day fast under the desert conditions of a blast furnace by day and deep freeze by night. For His spiritual test of survival, Jesus has one resource – the word of God. It is not a coincidence that Jesus answers Satan's tempting offers with only word-for-word quotations from the Word of God. This fits the circumstances in which He finds Himself. Vulnerable

to suggestions because of His weakened condition, Jesus Christ knows He cannot debate with the devil. A similar scene may be a prisoner of war whose mind is dulled by starvations and beatings. Constant questioning is used to get him or her to confess. Instead, all the captors can get is a name, rank, and serial number. So it is with Jesus. Physically weakened and psychologically beaten, Christ answers, “It is written . . . It is written . . . It has been said.” Jesus has a creative reservoir in the Word of God from which He can draw when all alone and tempted.

Communion is the third test of being alone in the wilderness. Words are a weapon which we use to control people and situations. Most of us overtalk, interrupt, gossip, joke, and shout as evidence of our insecurity. But all alone in the desert, you can shout to the winds and no one answers. That may be why we fear to be alone. In silence, it is God who speaks and God who controls. But we do not seem to want to hear what God has to say to us.

Jesus Christ does not have a need to be talking all the time nor does He have a fear of being alone with God. For Him, the desert is a place where Christ enjoys unbroken communion with His Father. For Jesus, silence becomes the setting for centering or focusing on the will of God and getting ready for His public words and actions.

Jesus passes the tests of being alone – the tests of character, creativity, and communion – but not without a price. Mark tells us angels minister to Christ. There is only one other time in Jesus’ life when He needs angels. That is in the Garden of Gethsemane when He sweats drops of blood. Angels come to strengthen Him. Jesus Christ’s experience of being all

alone, hungry, threatened, vulnerable, and tempted by Satan in the desert is not an easy one. Jesus is not only the Son of God but is also the Son of Man, capable of suffering under all the fears we also suffer. Yet, through his suffering and His triumph in the desert, Jesus redeems our loneliness. No longer is it loneliness, the fear of the unbeliever. It is solitude, the desire of the Christian. Satan is forced to retreat as the loser of this first round in his cosmic struggle with Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Beverly Gaventa says the wilderness journey prevents readers from assuming that Jesus' ministry is one of only joy and glory. The careful reader recognizes all is not just heavenly voices and powerful proclamations. Danger lurks at every turn. At the same time, we as readers may understand the dangers which wait for Christ will not ultimately defeat Him. The One who journeys safely with wild beasts and whom angels feed and care for will finally triumph.

Mark does not encourage us to an easy identification with Jesus. For Jesus, being both the Son of God and the Son of Man is far removed from our lives as ordinary folk. Mark readily invites us to identify with Jesus' disciples, with the women around Him, and/or with the religious leaders of that day. Jesus' journey in the wilderness gives us a glimpse into Christ's experience with danger in a vivid way, hoping we will not have to experience it ourselves.

Announced by man, affirmed by God, and acknowledged by Satan, the credentials of Christ Jesus are in order for the beginning of His ministry. No

one can dispute Christ's qualifications. No one can question His references as Christ, the Son of God.

As disciples of Christ, we are asked to follow His example. We may be tested from time to time. If we remember to answer by using the words of God, we will be able to pass the tests. Through prayer and supplication, Christ will help us with these tests. God will help us to defeat Satan. May we always call upon Him in any time of need and respond with His words when we are tempted. Amen!