

Our first Sunday in the season of Lent begins with a lesson from the Gospel of Mark that is just 6 verses long. Since Mark as an author is a master of brevity, we have 3 distinct scenes in just these 6 verses. We have Jesus being baptized by John in the Jordan. We have Jesus in the wilderness. And we have Jesus leaving the wilderness and beginning his ministry. Our lectionary is turning us into time travelers this morning, because this experience in the life of Christ actually precedes most of the Scripture lessons we've had throughout the season of Epiphany in January and February. We've witnessed Jesus preaching in the synagogue, working healings and performing exorcisms throughout the last two months. Last week's lesson of the Transfiguration was found in Mark 9. But for the purposes of beginning the Lenten season, we've traveled back in time to the 1st chapter of Mark, before all of that happened. We are seeing what it was that *compelled* Jesus into His ministry; the formative events that shaped Him, tested Him, and brought Him clarity of purpose and intention.

The first event was His baptism by John. As Jesus comes out of the water, He has an intense, spiritual encounter with God. First, He sees the heavens torn apart. Next, He sees the Spirit of God descending upon Him as a dove. Finally, He hears God's voice declare, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with You I am well pleased." Obviously this is a powerful moment for Jesus; He is likely coming to understand His full identity and purpose, as God speaks a word directly to Him. And that direct Word of God is a word of love and affirmation. In our baptisms, though likely far less dramatic than this, God speaks words of affirmation and love directly to us as well. And it never hurts for us to remember that although we often fear that if God were to

address us directly, it would be in anger or judgment or disappointment, that is *not* how God operates. God changes us *not* through judgement but through *love*. Jesus is given through this baptismal experience a profound sense of His identity as God's beloved child. One would think that He couldn't possibly *be* better prepared to launch his ministry after such a powerful connection with the Almighty. But one would be wrong. Because there's a middle scene between this first Baptismal moment and that third and final scene of His ministry underway, and it's that *middle scene* that had to happen *to truly* prepare Jesus for His ministry. Apparently with robes still damp from his time in the Jordan River, the Spirit immediately drove Jesus into the wilderness. Although He was without human company, He wasn't alone there, but had three types of companions. I don't know with whom *you* would choose to spend 40 days in the wilderness? It would probably not be this unusual crew that Jesus encountered though: Satan, the wild beasts, and the angels. Sounds like one of these strange reality shows where someone is stranded on an island with few resources and numerous perils. Just what kind of a set-up is this?

Let's think a bit about what wilderness and desert meant within the Scriptural context *and* for Jesus in our lesson today. All we are told in this Gospel is that Jesus was there for 40 days, 40 being a Scriptural number that connotes a long and complete period of time. We are told that during these 40 days he was tempted by Satan *and* was with wild beasts and angels. That's it. No details are provided beyond that in the Gospel of Mark. So how was it for Jesus to be in the wilderness? It's not necessarily all bad to spend time in the wilderness, is it? Don't some of us do so rather intentionally and fairly often? Could it be that along with having his mettle tested and his faith proved by the temptations of Satan, this wilderness time might *also* have served in a positive way for Jesus? Could it have been a time that Jesus found serene and refreshing, a

chance to experience a solitude and closeness to nature that blessed? Or was it simply lonely, difficult, long, and maybe scary?

Both aspects of the wilderness experience are found throughout the Scriptures. That same number 40 is associated with other Biblical wilderness experiences. Noah and his family were afloat in a watery wilderness for 40 days and nights. Moses spent 40 days on the top of wild Mount Sinai, waiting to receive the 10 commandments. Israel wandered in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land for 40 years. Elijah spent 40 days in the desert wilderness before receiving new instructions. And now Jesus is 40 days and nights in the wilds. 40 days *is* a long time to spend in the desert, and 40 years *is* a long time for a people to wander the wilderness. And yet in each of these Biblical examples, that time spent was *valuable* time; time of preparation, time of learning to trust God, time of waiting for God to make the next move leading forward. In keeping with this long Biblical tradition, the wilderness was apparently just the right place for Jesus to prepare for the transition that was coming.

And what about the company Jesus kept during this wilderness time? Satan was there. Satan, which means “adversary”, was testing Him, tempting Him. It would seem that Jesus needed this time to wrestle with all the revelations His baptism implied. What did it *mean* for Him to be God incarnate, human and divine, with a unique and painful role to play in the salvation of humanity? Would He seek power, glory, ease? Or would He walk the difficult road to the cross? Throughout Mark’s Gospel Jesus will face off with Satan and come out the victor, and He does so here also. He may certainly have wished for more congenial company in the

wilderness, but this testing of His mettle against Satan did serve to clarify His purpose and His allegiance to God's will.

Besides Satan, Jesus had the company of the wild beasts. Of course the desert wilderness held fearsome predators, from lions to poisonous snakes. And yet not all wild beasts are fearsome, are they? And even those that are, we may still admire, from a safe distance, for their beauty or majesty or strength. This time Jesus spent in the midst of the created order, with the wild beasts in this desert, may actually have been time of communing with nature, at least in part---just as we do all the time as we walk along the Shore or ski into the woods, sharing our space with whatever wild beasts may be present.

Best of all, in terms of company, we learn that angels waited on Him. Their companionship proves that the wilderness is not some desolate, God-forsaken place, as angels are always a sign of God's presence. Jesus may have been without human company, He may have been struggling with Satan and wrestling with temptations; but Jesus was also in the stark beauty of God's desert among the wild beasts, and He was waited upon by angels, signs of God's presence with Him even there. "You are my beloved", God had said in His baptism. Whether at the River Jordan's edge or out in the desert wilderness, that claim and promise held true for Jesus. As it does for us.

Here's what matters: what parallels might we draw between our current circumstances and this ancient, profound story of truth that will bring this Scripture alive for us? Here are some suggestions. Haven't we been in a time of testing and temptation, in a kind of wilderness, for the last 11 months or so? Hasn't our mettle been tested by temptations to give in

to doubt and anxiety? Haven't we felt at times beset by fear, overwhelmed by unknowns, frustrated and angry? Haven't we experienced moments of feeling alone, forsaken, perplexed? Perhaps even stalked by natural forces or forces of darkness that seem set against us? We can identify with this time of testing in the wilderness.

But haven't we also had companions? Not only Satan in whatever form of testing or temptation we've encountered, but also the wild beasts and the angels? So many of us, myself included, have found solace in the beauty of nature during this time. Maybe because we had fewer options to go to the Mall or get on a plane or spend time in restaurants, many of us have spent more time outside. In Creation. In the wilderness. Shared with the wild beasts that coexist with us along the North Shore of Lake Superior. And while the wilderness includes perils like extreme cold and possible predators, it also encompasses beauty that is balm to our souls. And the angels with us, messengers of God's presence, have *also* been balm to our souls. Those angels may have looked celestial. *Or* they may have looked like the strong bonds of love with friends, family, church and community members that have sustained us. This story of wilderness and unusual companions could well be our story, and here's the interesting part: Jesus leaves the wilderness to begin His ministry with a razor-sharp sense of clarity, purpose and determination. What about us? I believe we could all benefit from pondering this crucial question for the 40 days of our Lenten journey: with what will *we* leave *our* time in the wilderness? What have we learned this last year? What will our takeaways be? What perspective have we gained? How has God been present for us, how has our faith been strengthened by the testing of our mettle? Because make no mistake, this 40 day period in the wilderness wasn't just lost time for Jesus; it was *invaluable* time for Jesus, preparing Him for His

future. Don't we, likewise, want this unique time apart for us to have been more than just lost time, more than just a meaningless ticking off of the days, weeks, and months before we finally walk back out of the desert? We need to put some spiritual muscle into discovering what this time has meant for us. Sustained throughout by the assurance of God's words to us: "You are my beloved child", with what gifts of clarity and purpose will we leave our time in the wilderness?

Amen.