

Lent 1, February 21, 2021

Mark 1:9-15

LFLC

***“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.”***

Sounds fairly dry and matter-of-fact, doesn't it? But there's a lot going on between these lines. Jesus's home and family are in Nazareth of Galilee, and Jesus isn't.

I mean, this isn't 21<sup>st</sup> century, white, and middle-class North America, when adults are expected to leave home to go to college, travel if they can afford it, and eventually find their way in the world alone.

This is first-century Palestine, and the decent thing for Jesus to do would be for him to stay in Nazareth and look after his mother (and his father, if he's alive)—to look after them until they died, and to make sure they got an honorable burial. That would be the decent thing for a son to do.

In the same way, the normal thing for a man to do in Jesus' culture, even for a spiritual leader, would be to stay in his hometown, marry, and have children – preferably at least one son to carry on the family name. “Be fruitful and multiply” was seen as a binding command from God, and not just a vague hope expressed by parents who want to become grandparents.

But Jesus didn't do either of those things.

Instead, he left Nazareth of Galilee in the north to go to Judea in the south where he was baptized by John in the Jordan.

In short, as they would probably say in his village, Jesus abandoned his family to go on a spiritual quest.

We have now entered the desert of Lent on a spiritual quest of our own.

Now, it is true that Lent often gets turned into a domesticated kind of pious self-improvement exercise: I give up something that many respectable people think is a good thing to give up, at least for a time—like chocolate or beer, or some such thing-- with the result that, other than the purple on the altar Sunday mornings, hardly anyone even notices it is Lent.

But if we want to experience this quest fully,

we need to take note of the ways in which Mark's story tells us that the quest we're on for these forty days is NOT tame or respectable or safe. Jesus left his home and family and entered a desert with wild beasts and angels—both of whom can be frightening.

So, if we are striving to follow Jesus in our spiritual quest the whole thing sounds lonely as well as dangerous.

How on earth could we do it? Why on earth would we want to do it?

However, before we can answer that for ourselves,  
 we need to ask “Why did he do it? Why did he go into the wilderness?  
 Well, unlike his counterparts, Matthew and Luke, Mark offers his readers  
 no colourful details about Jesus’s experience in the wilderness.  
 He doesn’t tell us what the specific temptations were  
 nor how Jesus responded to them. Mark doesn’t even assure us  
 that Jesus “passed” his desert test with flying colours.

All Mark gives us are two abrupt sentences:

“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.  
 He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan;  
 and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”  
 In other words, Jesus didn’t choose to go into the wilderness.  
 He had to. . . which tells us that the wilderness is a place you only go if you have to.

Now, I don’t know about you, but this terse version of events  
 leaves me with a bunch of questions like:

How exactly did Jesus spend his time? Was he tempted 24/7?  
 Did he walk for miles each day or camp out in the same spot?  
 Where did he sleep? And what was the silence like. . .  
 hour after hour, day after day and week after week?  
 Did he break that silence up by humming, laughing, or shouting?

Did he star gaze? Watch the vultures circling round  
 or the lizards skittering across the ground?

And as the days stretched on and on, did he ever fear for his life?

Question his sanity? Even think about wanting to die?

Always brief, even brusque, Mark leaves all these questions unanswered.  
 But the few details he does include in his account are telling,  
 and they give us much to cling to as we face our own deserts.

Debie Thomas, an Episcopal priest in Palo Alto, California, highlights three points Mark makes:

1. Jesus didn’t choose the wilderness.
2. The struggle in it is always long.
3. There are angels in the desert.

Let’s look at the first one first—that, as Thomas puts it,

Jesus didn’t just happen to wander into the desert by accident  
 nor did he schedule a National Geographic expedition,  
 or plan a wilderness marathon to rack up Fitbit steps.

No, she says, according to Mark, the Spirit “drove” Jesus into the wilderness—  
 and, oddly enough, she finds this detail comforting. Why? Because it *rings* true. .  
 because we don’t generally choose or volunteer to experience pain or loss, danger or terror.  
 But the wilderness happens anyway.

And whether it comes to us in the guise of a hospital waiting room,  
 a thorny and difficult relationship, a troubled child, a sudden death,  
 or a crippling panic attack, the wilderness just appears,  
 unbidden, unwelcome and unwanted. . .  
 and it stays. . .stays at our doorsteps.  
 And sometimes it is God's own Spirit who drives us  
 into that parched landscape amidst the wild beasts.

Now, does that mean that God *wills* bad things to happen to us?  
 That God wants us to suffer? I don't think so.  
 Does it mean that God can redeem even the most barren periods of our lives?  
 That our deserts can become holy even as they remain dangerous?  
 That God can and does bring good out of evil  
 and light out of darkness. . .or bring light into darkness? Yes. I believe that.

But I'm hesitant in saying that because I am well aware of how Christians have suffered  
 and still do suffer under the false teaching that God causes, brings or sends humans  
 pain and suffering for some greater good in God's own mind.  
 And I don't believe that.  
 And yet, I must admit that we walk a fine line, nevertheless,  
 when it comes to suffering. . .to our times in the wilderness.

So, while I don't believe that God wants us to suffer, let alone causes us to do so,  
 I do wonder if we can imagine that God just might be "working" on us  
 during our desert times. Is it possible for us to look at the struggles we face  
 around us and within us in light of this story and ask,  
 "Even though I did not wish for or want this,  
 how might God be at work in me through this difficult period?  
 What can I get out of this? What might I become through this?  
 How might God use me to help someone else in their troubles?"

These kinds of questions aren't meant so much to justify our struggles  
 and our trust in God's care of us, but rather are meant to remind us  
 of God's presence with us during those times of hardship in the wilderness  
 that leave us feeling stretched beyond our abilities.

So, yes, sometimes our journeys with God include dark and desolate places  
 because we live in a fragile, broken world that includes deserts. . .  
 and because God's apparent *modus operandi*—method of operation—  
 is to take the things of death and squeeze resurrection out of them.  
 And that statement of fact. . .and confession of faith. . .  
 is one of the paradoxes we live with as believers.

Second, Thomas points out that our wilderness journeys sometimes last a long, long time.  
 Now, I confess that I've never spent forty days in solitude and silence,  
     much less in a state of physical deprivation and danger. . .  
     but I can't imagine that Jesus's time in the wilderness passed by quickly.  
 In fact, the sense I get from Mark's gospel is that Jesus experienced each day  
 as a battle of mind, body, and spirit.  
     Maybe the hours and days felt like years, and the nights felt endless.  
     Maybe the landscape itself mocked his weary senses,  
     its unvarying bleakness breaking his heart.

For those of us who live in quick-fix cultures, this aspect of the wilderness—  
 such as our time living in the midst of a pandemic--can be especially trying,  
 because we get tired and despair easily.  
 Why is this loneliness and heartache not ending?  
 Why are our prayers for relief going unanswered? Where is God in all of this?  
 But maybe we need to ask a harder question. . .like this one:  
     Why does Jesus *need* the wilderness? And why do we?

In a sermon on this gospel story, the Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz Weber  
 suggests that temptation--for Jesus and for us-- is always about identity—  
 about *who* we are and *whose* we are.

“Identity,” Bolz Weber says, “is always God’s first move.  
 Before we do anything wrong and before we do anything right,  
 God has already named and claimed us as God’s own.  
     But almost immediately, other things try to tell us  
     who we are and to whom we belong:  
     capitalism, advertising, the weight-loss industrial complex,  
     our parents, kids at school — all have a go at telling us who we are.  
 But only God can do that. Everything else is temptation.”

To explore this idea more intently, let's look again at how today's text starts:  
 It begins with Jesus's baptism, where, according to Mark, the heavens are torn open,  
 and God announces Jesus's identity loud and clear:  
     "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

But what happens to that certain sense of identity and belonging  
 as his time in the wilderness stretches from days into weeks:  
     Does it begin to waver? Does the Son of God  
     have to keep reminding himself of who he is?  
     Does his Father have to nudge him each time he forgets?  
     Does God say to him again and again, “Can you hear me *now*?”  
 Can you hear that you are precious and beloved *now*?  
 Can you hold on to your identity as my own in this oppressive silence *now*?"

I grew up in a Christian tradition that treated Jesus's humanity  
with a great deal of discomfort, even squeamishness.

Although we affirmed the Incarnation—that is,  
the teaching that Jesus, the Son of God, was fully human—  
and although we confessed that in our creeds and our worship,  
we resisted examining its implications too closely.

To linger too long over what Jesus's human life might have looked like  
or felt like or how he behaved a child or a teenager

or a young man in his 20's and growing up--  
that was something we didn't think or talk about much.

I mean, even now, in our time, we sing at Christmas:

“The little Lord Jesus no crying he makes.” Really? Really? A baby that doesn't cry?

And so to consider the idea that the Son of God might actually have to wrestle  
with his identity, his vocation, his relationship to his Father. . .

or to argue that the greatest danger Jesus faced in the wilderness  
wasn't necessarily starvation but amnesia--

well, that would have been too much. . .almost heretical.

And yet it is true. At his baptism, Jesus hears the absolute truth about who he is.

But that's the easy part. The much harder part comes in the wilderness  
when he has to face down every assault on that truth—

when the memory of the voice from heaven fades,  
and Jesus has to learn how to be God's beloved in a lonely wasteland.

Could that mean that, like Jesus, we need long stints in the wilderness  
to learn what it really means to be God's beloved?

Because the unnerving truth is that we can be beloved and uncomfortable at the same time. . .  
beloved and unsafe at the same time. For you see, in the wilderness,

the love that survives is hard like flint, not soft like down;  
it is serious, not sentimental--and learning how to trust love like that takes time.

Debie Thomas's third point reminds us that there were angels in the wilderness.

This, too, is a startling and comforting truth — one we can recognize if we open our eyes  
and take a good, long look around and see that somehow, somewhere,  
help comes. . .rest comes. . .assurance comes.

To be sure, our angels don't always appear in the forms we might prefer,  
but they show up nevertheless. As Thomas writes:

“I wonder what Jesus's angels looked like?

Did they manifest as winged creatures from heaven?

As comforting breezes across the sun-scorched hills?

As a trickle of water for his parched throat?

As a wild animal that surprised him with a tame and tender gaze?

As a rock to lay his head upon?

As the swirl of constellations on a clear, cloudless night?”

Let me ask you: What do your angels look like? What have they looked like in the past—  
when they ministered to you, held you, embraced and strengthened you—  
did you hear a new version of God’s voice, calling you the beloved?

If yes, then, what would it be like for you to enter into someone else’s barren desert now,  
and become an angel for them and for their journey?

“The wilderness is a dangerous place. You only go there if you have to.”

As we heard in the opening words of this sermon, this week we begin  
the wilderness journey of Lent which starts on Ash Wednesday where and when,  
by means of the the imposition of ashes, we acknowledge and remember  
the hard truth that we will surely die—that our bodies  
will eventually fail us no matter how cleverly we attempt to preserve them  
with exercise or cosmetics, medication or meditation.

As Debie Thomas describes it so beautifully and evocatively:

From that austere and hard beginning, we venture into the wilderness  
like Abraham, like Moses, like Elijah, and like Jesus.  
With ashes on our foreheads and mortality on our minds,  
we begin a hazardous journey inward--  
a journey to learn our true names, our true identities.

May we walk with courage into the deserts we can’t choose or avoid.

May our long stints in the wilderness teach us who we really are.

And when angels in all their sweet and secret disguises whisper into our ears:

“You are God’s beloved”-- may we listen to them, believe them,  
and take heart from them. Amen.                   SDG