

## **“The Wilderness Experience”**

This Sunday is the first Sunday of Lent. Fresh from his baptism, we reflect today on Mark’s story in Chapter 1, vv. 9-15, about Jesus being thrust into the wilderness for a time of preparation and testing. Mark does not give us as many details as do Matthew and Luke about the interchange between Jesus and Satan, but he gives us enough to make it vivid.

As discussed by MaryAnn McKibben Dana in her reflection in *Christian Century*, what we read today is a disorienting narrative, going between two distinctly contrasting moods. On the one hand, we have previously been introduced to John the Baptist and his bracing manner. His demeanor and words are meant to challenge, not coddle. During the baptism, John’s camel hair robe hangs heavily on his shoulders, and the ritual is punctuated by the heavens ripping apart.

But then, the Spirit descends like a dove. Through that curtain of sky, an unassuming bird of the air flutters down. The dove is normally used as a symbol of peace and harmony. The juxtaposition could not be clearer between the camel’s hair and downy feather, between the rent heavens and a gentle cooing. Then, comes the voice, uttering words of comfort, “With you I am well pleased.”

Then comes Mark's signature word, *immediately*, and the tone shifts again. The same Spirit who just alighted on Jesus now beats its wings and nips at Jesus' head, driving him into the wilderness as if Alfred Hitchcock had choreographed the scene in the movie *Birds*, with those seagulls beating on Tippy Hedren's head. What's going on here? Why did this Spirit of peace from the baptism thrust Jesus into this time of temptation in the wilderness for testing?

This is a lesson for those who choose to follow Christ who might believe that the Christian life is supposed to be easy. Yes, when we commit to follow Christ, we have the certainty of being put back in right relationship with God. We have the certainty of being forgiven of our sins. We are given a peace we did not have before. Some believe that we will not have any more problems.

But the reality is that our problems do not go away. In fact, we may have more challenges. As theologian Brian Blount expresses the dynamic well in *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*: "Want to know what happens when you get too close to God, when you get touched by the power of God's Spirit? You don't sit still and enjoy the view, you don't lay down and take a nap, you don't bask in the glory of what great things has just happened to you. You go immediately to wild work. To work for God is to be thrown directly into the path of those who would oppose God."

A few things to learn from this passage. First, we will have temptations. Becoming a Christian does not change this reality. This is one reason why this story of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness is so instructive. We will be tempted to go back to the sins which have haunted us before. We will be tempted to abandon our faith in God and Jesus. We will be tempted to not do Jesus' work on earth. It will be tempting not to challenge the status quo and bring justice on earth. It will be tempting to just do nothing and sit back and let others do the work.

The second thing we learn is that the temptations are sent to us to strengthen our nerves and the sinew of our hearts and minds and soul. They are not sent to us to make us fail. They are meant to be tests from which we will emerge as better warriors and athletes of God.

The test makes me think of my time playing football. When I was in the sixth grade, I played in a city football league which consisted of youth who were in the sixth grade to the eighth grade. I was not as big as most of the eighth graders, but I was big enough to compete fairly well against the older players. I played on the second string as defensive end and made some pretty big plays, including a sack of the quarterback in one game.

The season consisted of nine games. By the seventh game I was comfortable playing on the second team and being in a back-up position. My coach came to me

and said he wanted me to play first string for the rest of the season. I asked him why, not sure if I wanted to do that against the bigger players. He said I showed promise as a player, but he would really not know how good I was for that season and the next until I was tested as I was never was tested before. So, I played first string for the last three games of the season. It was hard but it helped me for the future. This is what temptation is meant to do. It is the test which is given to prove our faith and to emerge the stronger for the fight.

Third, we must appreciate the force of evil we face. It was Satan who tempted and tested Jesus. The development of the conception of Satan is very interesting. The word *Satan* in Hebrew simply means an *adversary* and in the Old Testament is so used of ordinary human adversaries and opponents again and again; the Philistines felt that David may turn out to be their *satan* (1 Samuel 29:4); Solomon declares that God has given him such so much peace and prosperity that he has no *satan* left to oppose him (1 Kings 5:4). Satan is the adversary of man.

But as Satan develops in the New Testament, he becomes the essence of everything that is against God. The Devil or Satan is behind human disease and suffering (Luke 13:16); it is Satan who induces Judas to betray Christ (Luke 22:3); it is the devil whom we must fight (1 Peter 5:8, 9). It is the devil who is destined for final destruction (Matthew 25:41). Satan is the power which is against God.

In our scripture today, Jesus has to decide how to do his work. He was conscious of a tremendous work and he was conscious of tremendous powers. In the wilderness he had to make one of his first major decisions. God was saying to Him, “Take my love for people,” love them till you die for them; conquer them by this unquenchable love even if you finish up upon a cross.

Satan was saying to Jesus: “Use your power to blast people; obliterate your enemies; win the world by might, power and bloodshed.” God said to Jesus, “Set up a reign of love.” Satan said, “Set us a dictatorship of force.” Jesus had to choose between the way of God and the way of the adversary of God. Jesus provides a model for us.

Finally, we must remember that in the wilderness we are not truly alone. To get the full benefit of the wilderness experience, we do need to experience how we face temptation without the help of other people or food or other ways to satisfy our needs. We will feel vulnerable or often scared, but God provides us with help when we are in the wilderness. In the scripture today, we read that Jesus was among the wild animals and the angels took care of him. Angels have a soft, comforting image in our culture, but not always in scripture. Sometimes a gentle, well-coifed angel doesn't cut it. There are occasions when we need the heavy artillery, spiritually speaking, when we face Satan and evil. When we are the fight of our

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lives, we need courage and strength. We need a sidewinder, sent from God, on our side.

What does it mean that the wild animals were with Jesus? Perhaps their sheer wildness was an inspiration to him. Their lack of tameness gave him the strength he needed to go mano a mano with the Adversary, who was relentless in his struggle to divert, distract or seduce Jesus away from his mission.

Jesus was not left to fight his battle alone and neither are we. Once Jesus returns to begin his public ministry, he proclaims the time fulfilled. “The kingdom of God has come near.” In what tone do we hear these words? Is this the comforting voice of the baptismal Spirit or the harsh edginess of John and the wilderness beasts? Perhaps, like the complexity of the life of faith, it is both at once.