

DS 2-21-2021

Our text this morning— like the desert itself— is sparse and lovely. In Mark's fashion, he tells only the basics and bare bones of the story. Luke and Matthew give the details of the ups and downs of this story and Satan's temptations. But not Mark.

Read Mark 1:9-15

“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 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. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” 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. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.

The story is simple and straightforward enough. Right?

The story begins with John the Baptist, this wild-looking zealot wearing camel's hair and eating locusts with wild honey. It makes sense that John has come forth from the wilderness because religious zealots and abstainers often lived in the desert. John preached a compelling message of repentance and baptism, and people from all over journeyed out to this deserted place to be baptized. John made it clear that the One was coming; another One was coming who he himself was not worthy to stoop down and tie his sandals.

From Nazareth to the Jordan was about a four-day journey by foot. Jesus appears on the scene to be baptized by John. Just as he was coming out of

the water, Jesus saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

The heavens were torn apart! It’s as if the word of Truth about his belovedness, his specialness, that would shape and carry Jesus until his death.

What a wonderful experience and at this point we may begin to hear the soft, calming music begin to play as we remember this part of Jesus’ life and the beginning of his ministry and what a great ending to the movie.

Verse 12 is where the intensity of the story lies.
And the **Spirit immediately drove Jesus** into the wilderness.

And just like that the musical score changes and we have that “eerie” kind of music that we associate with something bad is about to happen.

Mark uses the word immediately a lot. The word itself is used 51 times in the entire New Testament and 41 of those times can be found just in the Gospel of Mark.¹

We are used to hearing the Spirit of God called by its many names: Comforter, Advocate, Nurturer. We’re not used to hearing about the Spirit being one who has authority, who **drives** Jesus out to a pain-filled 40 days. The gentle spirit-dove is the one with authority who commands Jesus, who nudges Jesus, who drove Jesus into the wilderness.

The word for driven out in Greek is ‘ekballo’. It means to expel or cast out. One who is ekballo-ed is forcibly compelled to depart. It’s the word used when Jesus drives out demons and unclean spirits. He ekballos them. This word is not a gentle word. It is not a peaceful word. This is not the Spirit of God tenderly dropping Jesus off at school. This is the Spirit ejecting him into the wilderness right after anointing him: go on and GET, get out, scram. This

is Jesus cast out into the wild. Right after being told that he is God's Beloved son. How do you like them apples?

Immediately following the voice from heaven came this necessary time of testing.

Why testing?

Mark makes no mention of the contents of the temptations themselves, which for Mark are not as important as the fact that Jesus is retracing the steps of Israel's history in order to rewrite her story. Whereas Israel in the wilderness stumbled and wandered for forty years in sin, rebellion, and distrust, longing again for the chains of slavery, Jesus withstands Satan's tests in the wilderness for forty days.²

The Spirit's driving Jesus into the wilderness was somehow essential to the Spirit's work in purifying him in readying him for his mission and ministry to bring forth God's kingdom. His identity and his understanding of God became clear in those 40 days.

The late spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen, called the desert or wilderness experiences in our lives "Furnaces of transformation." He said it is in the fiery furnace of suffering that we are shaped into the child God created us to be. In the book of 1 Peter it says that we, being more precious than gold, are tested by fire. Our hearts and our souls and our faith go through a purifying and transforming process.

Being a child of God **does not shield us** from being driven into the wilderness.

It is precisely because we are **held in love** that we can face down and endure those trials. Think about it. When you look over your life and what has shaped you – I would bet what will come to mind are not the easy times, but the difficult ones. The fiery furnaces.

Just like Jesus was ministered to by the angels – so each of us have felt angels come to us, they have come in all forms: notes and cards, meals and casseroles, a friend's call at the right moment, a passage from a book, a poem, a sermon or scripture lesson. We are not left alone.

We journey into Lent to face a difficult wilderness of our own choosing. The 36 days left in Lent give us an opportunity to look at ourselves more honestly, to evaluate the quality of authenticity of our lives, to strip off masks we habitually wear – perhaps it's a mask we've grown so accustomed to that we've confused the mask with our real self.

This story and the season of Lent I believe offer us two truths – or at least two. Each truth is a truth we must understand for ourselves. They are truths that fit together like the yin and the yang of the Chinese circle. They seem like opposing forces, but maybe, they are deeply connected and mutually dependent.

First: Each of us is a beloved child of God. Turn to the person next to you and say it out loud "You are a beloved child of God." [pause]

And Second: The God who loves you will drive you toward the fiery furnace of transformation.

The mystery and the pain of transformation – even for the son of God himself – is that it comes in the wilderness of our lives. And God allows the suffering, and God does not leave us alone in it. Others have gone before us, who have suffered themselves, and they become for us the agents or angels of God's compassion. Just as we become for others an angel of God's compassion too.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent, the season of the church year when we focus upon the new life God offers us in Christ, and how we can respond to God's offer by a new commitment of our lives to God and to Christ. We focus on the new life God offers us in Christ by focusing on the death of

Christ, for it is the death of Christ that gives us new life. Of course, we also know that Christ rose again but unless we focus on how He gave His life for us we will never truly understand the victory He gives us. And as we focus on how Christ gave His life for us, we reflect upon how we can give our lives to Him.

1. William Placher, Mark in the series Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) 27.
2. Stanley P. Saunders: Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.