

St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
Albuquerque, New Mexico  
Sunday, February 18, 2018 Lent 1B  
Text: Mark 1: 9-15 Jesus in Wilderness  
Preacher: Christopher McLaren, Priest  
Theme: Wilderness is for Everyone

Jesus is still dripping wet from the Jordan, the beautiful words from heaven ringing in his ears, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased," when he is driven into the wilderness. It is a whiplash kind of scene, first, words of deep affirmation and then his exile into the wild environs around the Jordan River. It seems an odd way to follow such a wonderful message of belonging and love.

This is the story we are given at the beginning of Lent each year. Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days struggling with faith and doubt after his amazing baptismal experience with John the Baptizer. The reward of baptism seems to be testing. Mark says that Jesus is "tempted by Satan," which is evil personified, the great accusing spirit, intent on disrupting our relationship with God and one another, the dehumanizing force in the universe that sows division, hatred, pride and violence.

When we ponder this story, we realize that the 40 days of Lent is purposeful. It is meant to connect our lives to the life of Jesus in the wilderness. The wilderness that Jesus is driven into is a literal wilderness in this Gospel story. He actually goes into the wild, where few people go, especially alone. The story tells us something surprising, that even when you are alone, you are not entirely alone. You have Satan there to tempt you, I realize that's not exactly comforting. You also are apt to find help from strange quarters, from unexpected messengers, the angels sent into your wilderness if you are able to see them.

However, Jesus is in the wilderness in another way too. He is spiritually in the wilderness and that may be even more scary than the actual physical wilderness. Seeking out a spiritual wilderness is a rather challenging proposition, I'm not sure any of us would choose it if given a chance of avoiding it. However, spiritual wilderness has a way of finding us whether we are looking for it or not.

After all, who really wants to go into the wilderness? I'm not really talking about hiking or camping with freeze-dried food and headlamps. I'm talking about real wilderness, the kind where we wrestle with ourselves, search the depths of our spirit, struggle with our own unhealthy ways of thinking and living, and take stock of our relationship with God and others. This is a kind of wilderness that is a rather hard sell, really. You can't put it on your resume. It won't make you rich. It doesn't make your life easier at first; in fact it might make it harder for a while. So really, the question about going into the wilderness with Jesus as our guide is a rather troublesome one. Why would anyone want to do that?

But this is exactly what Lent asks of us. Every year it offers us a kind of wilderness exam. It says something like this, I know that the culture thinks doing the difficult thing is for losers, why not just entertain yourself to death and avoid anything really serious or self-reflective, but I'm offering you a chance to go deep. God loves you and wants you to learn how to live deep within yourself, deep within God's loving embrace, deep within the compassion of Christ, deep enough to see where you are in need of a savior, deep enough so that you can grow and be changed into the likeness of Christ. The world is starving for deep people. You are starving to become a deep person and the wilderness experience is the only tried and proven way to get there.

Yes, that is right, the church, in this robust season of Lent, is asking something of you, it asks us to take the risk and go into the wilderness and prepare ourselves for the journey of discipleship, of becoming a companion of Christ, of drawing close to this beautiful and challenging person in whom "the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." Lent asks us to do something challenging, to pray, to sit in silence, to fast, to actually read the bible that you may be terrified of, to make time for self-examination, to actually become attentive to your life. It asks you to admit to your temptations and ask for help in resisting them, from Christ or a friend. Lent is not for wimps. Lent is for those who want to know God, are hungry for a spiritual life and honestly not satisfied with the shallowness of everyday life in this world.

I realize that what I am saying is not a terribly popular message. There will be a lot of people showing up for Easter morning who will not have spent the last 40 days preparing for that joyous Feast. Everyone likes a party but not everyone likes setting up for it or cleaning up afterwards. But those of us who decide to make this Lenten journey of 40 days in the wilderness may find something surprising in the midst of it; that Christ is there with us. The truth is that we've often been in the wilderness, haven't we? Wilderness comes in all shapes and sizes. It might be in the phone call from a friend telling you of their diagnosis. It might be the sudden ending of a job, the cardboard box on your desk meant to collect your personal belongings. It might be the ending of a relationship that you knew was going nowhere but you didn't want to lose. It might be the loss of control you feeling in an area of your life that used to give you such satisfaction and now is place of pain and anxiety. Wilderness has a way of finding each of us whether we are seeking it or not. But what this God-breathed story of Jesus tells us is that we don't need to be alone in the wilderness, Jesus is willing to companion with us no matter what our point of pain, no matter how bleak the landscape of our lives has become.

This is the Good News of the Gospel because the reality of our lives is that we do spend a lot of time lost. Each of us struggle with temptations and wrestle with God. We each have our demons that wait until we are feeling alone to attack. Jesus knew what it was like. So, Lent offers us the opportunity to spend 40 days not alone but with someone who has been through the wilderness and emerged as still God's beloved.

Have you ever had a hard time with faith? Jesus know what that was like, remember his prayer in the Garden. Do you struggle to make hard choices? Jesus has been there too. Are you grieving a loss that is your wilderness? Jesus is no stranger to grief. Are you trying to prepare yourself for something new, something you are not sure how you are going to survive? Jesus knew what that was like too when he set his face toward Jerusalem and all the conflict that awaited him.

Wilderness is a place where God can get to us in a particularly intimate and sensitive way. I'm convinced that when we go through times of wilderness in our lives, God looks upon on us with compassion and love. After all, God watched his very own Son go through the stretching time of wilderness over and over again.

There is one more possibility in the wilderness for each of us that we don't want to overlook. Wilderness can be a place that does more than challenge us, it can be the agent of change in our lives. The life of faith is not meant to affirm all of our natural ways of being, but rather to transform them into Christ-likeness through struggle and awareness. Wilderness gives God more access to our lives more opportunity to touch us into new life.

I have a friend that likes to fly fish in remote places. He likes to hike and fish where few people go. He's been a lost a lot on these outings. One of the things he told me was that it is often when he is lost that he sees some of the most amazing country, becomes aware of the incredible beauty that very few ever have the opportunity to see. Being lost is not always a bad thing, it can open us up to something wonderful if only we have the eyes to see it.

Sometimes we have to get lost before we are able to see the beauty that surrounds us. Sometimes we need to go through the valley of the shadow of death to rediscover the scent of new life and its intoxicating fragrance. Sometimes we have to hit rock bottom before we can find the ground of our being and begin to rebuild a life with God.

I think Lent is meant to be a time of discovery. I think the church is a good place to do this work. What other places in our culture encourages us to embrace the wilderness that life brings our way. The community of faith, the communion of saints is a place where we can be encouraged to face into wilderness, to look at the source of our temptations, to admit to the demons that plaque us. The church is one of the few places where we can say to each other, "I'm in the wilderness," and hear a friend in Christ say, "that it is ok, the wilderness is where you find and are found by Christ and we can travel the ways of wilderness together." This Lent let us follow the one who has been through the wilderness and beyond. Jesus may not lead us down easy paths, but he will never lead us astray.

I love searching for bumper sticker theology, messages of encouragement from strange quarters.

The other day I saw a bumper sticker that read simply: "Embrace Wilderness." I'm pretty sure it wasn't intended as a Lenten admonition, but then again perhaps it was. Embrace Wilderness, for there you will find Christ waiting for you.