

Lent 1B. February 18, 2018. Mark 1:9-15.

Our attention is naturally drawn this morning to the wilderness. In fact, we read some version of this story on the first Sunday of Lent every year, I think with the intention of setting up Jesus' sojourn in the wilderness as a model for our Lenten practice. He's there for forty days, he's fasting, and he's undergoing a spiritual workout. All of that does indeed sound like Lent. But the danger we face in modeling our Lenten practice on just the wilderness is that Lent might become a time of individualized, private, rehearsed trials of the spirit. There is a danger that our work this season might never leave the comfortable home of our hearts, to have any effect on our hands and feet. And with rare exceptions, a Christian practice that does not involve other people has somehow gone wrong.

Mark's Hemingway prose gives us ways to avoid this threat. First, unlike Matthew and Luke, he doesn't give us a long narrative of the temptations. You may remember these from the other gospels, where the devil suggests that Jesus turn rocks into bread, throw himself off a roof to see if God will catch him, and worship the devil in exchange for control of the kingdoms of the world. Mark leaves the bare bones of the story unwrapped with fat and so we know that every detail he gives is crucial to his intent. Those details are that Jesus almost flees to the wilderness, with the Holy Spirit hounding him along; that in forty days out there he was tempted by Satan; that he was with wild beasts; and that angels served him.

The detail here that is most likely to disturb my pious comfort is the proximity of the wild beasts. Because I might feel driven by the Spirit to spiritual exertions, and I have ready more prosaic parallels for Satan and the ministering angels, but I don't remember the last time my Lenten disciplines were dangerous. I read an old Victorian era commentary on this passage this week that emphasized that Jesus was with the wild beasts as Adam was—that Jesus was so innocent that the panthers and wolves came over to have him rub their tummies. I'm pretty sure that's wrong. The point is not that Jesus was so holy that he was safe; it is that holiness and safety are basically unconcerned with each other. And if our preparation for the Easter feast is to be modeled on Jesus' time in the wilderness, then we ought not to imagine ourselves in a cozy prayer closet, only missing chocolate and red meat.

So okay, Lent calls us to break into the big cat pens at the zoo. But besides reminding us that danger is not the exception for the Christian life, Mark's fleet-footed prose also makes it easier for us to see the context of Jesus' time in the wilderness. What might for another writer be three separate stories is here fused into one: Jesus is baptized, Jesus is tempted, Jesus begins his ministry of proclaiming the nearness of the reign of God. In today's reading, this is one story with three movements: baptism, wilderness, ministry.

I'm pretending that we knew in advance that this Sunday's reading would link baptism and ministry so closely when we decided to make baptismal ministry our formation theme for this Lent. In this communion, we say that baptism is full initiation into Christ's body the Church, or echoing this story, that it is the sacrament in which God adopts us as God's children. But current theology goes a step further, to claim that in baptism we are also commissioned to ministry. We may all be adopted as God's children, but God doesn't have any trust fund babies. God's family works, joining in the divine effort to reconcile the world in love to God. Baptism and ministry are indissolubly linked. The life of the baptized, the life of the church, is discovering and living into the ministries to which we are called. Part of embracing Lent as a season is being alert to the ways the Spirit is driving us far from our comfort zones and into dangerous, world-changing work.

But as convenient as this text is for our formation plans—and please come at noon to our first Lenten formation session—there is always the wilderness. This week the wilderness isn't just a place of discomfort and dislocation. This week, it is the state where the Enemy comes and goes as he pleases. The place where our lives are under threat. The place where our children are not safe and our rulers render us powerless. And it's not a place that we can just leave when we feel like it—Jesus comes back into town because that is where the wilderness has gone, when the government arrests his cousin and colleague John. The kingdom of God is coming into the world, it has drawn near, *and* the wilderness is still here.

In Mark, Christians aren't surprised that evil is empowered, that life is dangerous, that people suffer. The wilderness is firmly entrenched from the halls of power to the sleepy villages in the countryside. But this is no deterrent to ministry. The kingdom of God, where justice and mercy and love hold sway, is an invading alien force. Love disrupts the wicked way of the world.

We may or may not share Mark's pessimistic view of the state of the world. It resonates for me as I preach my fifth mass shooting sermon in three years here—and obviously I don't preach on anything like every mass shooting we allow. Regardless of how foreign we feel in our world, the wilderness is here. We withstand it with the assurances and the calling we received at baptism: that we are the beloved family of God, called to reconcile the beloved benighted world to God's love. This means that in these weeks of rage, grief, and terror, we do not stop with righteous outrage and we do not resort to hate. We steadfastly proclaim the nearness of God's disruptive reign, even as we defend our children and all people, who bear the image of God.