

Lent 1 – 18 February 2024

Fr David's Sermon

What do we understand by a wilderness today? A quick search on the internet (of course) came up with these descriptions and facts:

- Natural, not modified by human activity.
- Non urbanized.
- Uncultivated.
- Still covers a quarter of the earth's surface, but rapidly decreasing because of human activity.
- Marine wilderness down to 13% of the oceans.
- Wildernesses are important for certain species of animal and wild flora and fauna, biodiversity, solitude (my emphasis) and recreation.

Wilderness is an important place and symbol in the Scriptures. Especially, the forty years the people of Israel spent there were a formative experience. The prophets often used it as a symbol of their restoration after their exile. One of many examples:

‘Let the wilderness and the parched land be glad,
Let the desert rejoice and burst into flower.’ *Isaiah 35.1*

And, of course, during Lent we think of the forty days which Christ spent being tempted in the wilderness before starting his ministry. Mark's account is characteristically terse, curt even. Unlike Matthew and Luke, he does not describe what the temptations were, or even say that Jesus fasted. In fact, in just the seven verses comprising today's Gospel reading, he has three highly significant and connected events.

First, Jesus' Baptism, the foundation of his ministry. As we were reminded in last week's story of the Transfiguration, God the Father's voice affirms him as his beloved Son, in whom he is well pleased. That is the identity that will sustain him through all his trials.

But then, immediately, the Spirit drove him into the wilderness. Only Mark uses this word 'drove'. It is the same word as in the mythical story of the Fall, when God drove Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden. There is surely a comparison being drawn here. That just as Adam and Eve, representing all humans, were driven away from the best God intended by their sin, so Christ, the new Adam, is driven into the wilderness to begin his work of struggling against and overcoming sin.

A work which would be completed in his death and resurrection.

Only Mark says that Jesus was 'with the wild beasts'. This word describes brutal, ravenous beasts, threatening to devour him. Thus, it enhances the difficulty of this time for Jesus, the strength of the temptations that confronted him.

Yet this wilderness experience flowed from his Baptism and empowered him for the third setting: his ministry. Jesus began to proclaim the nearness of God's Kingdom and the coming of the good news. Jesus had resisted the powers of evil and began to move out among God's people, loving them as God loves, teaching them about God, and finally proving that we are loved by God without condition, by showing us all to be worth dying for.

What then of us? For us, as for Jesus, the temptations and testing of our faith follow our Baptism. In Baptism we, like him, were assured that we are God's beloved daughters and sons, in whom God delights. This is where our ultimate identity, safety and security lie. The rest of our Christian lives in this world consist of growing into what our Baptism assured us of. A good reason to attend this year's parish Lent Course!

In various kinds of wilderness experiences, we too struggle against the wild beasts of our times, the wild beasts within us. For in every human being lies the best of God and the worst of evil. We can resist the evil by listening to the Scriptures, prayer and receiving the Sacraments, repentance, forgiveness and renewed lives. In short, by staying connected to God, sustained by the Holy Spirit and our fellow Christians.

And, as we do those things, despite our failings, we are called to share in Christ's work of recognizing the nearness of God's Kingdom, of living out the Good News.

Lent invites us into our own interior deserts, which, away from the many noises and distractions of contemporary life, have much to teach us in silence.

The desert has many teachings

In the desert,
Turn toward emptiness,
Fleeing the self.
Stand alone,
Ask no one's help,
And your being will quiet,
Free from the bondage of things.

Those who cling to the world,
Endeavor to free them;
Those who are free, praise.
Care for the sick,
But live alone,
Happy to drink from the waters of sorrow,
To kindle Love's fire
With the twigs of a simple life.
Thus you will live in the desert. Amen.

– Mechthild of Magdeburg

Translated by: [Jane Hirshfield](#):
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