

Jesus' Wilderness; Our Lent

"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." (Mark 1:12-13)



You may recall that we began the Sundays of Epiphany with Mark's story of Christ's baptism. As he came up out of the water, Jesus sees the Spirit descending on him. He hears a voice *"You are my Son, the Beloved."* Now, as we enter Lent, the next verses take a stark turn. The plot thickens.

If Epiphany is about the revelation of who Jesus Christ is, Lent is about deciding how we will respond to that revelation. And Mark gives us the perfect place to start by telling us how Jesus himself responded.

Immediately after his revelation from above, the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness. Though we can only imagine what was going on inside him, we get an impression that what Jesus saw and heard compelled him to run.

Jesus was in the wilderness forty days. Moses was on Sinai with God forty days when he received the ten commandments (*Exodus 34:28*). Elijah journeyed forty days in the wilderness to Horeb, the mountain of God, where he received God's instruction (*1 Kings 19:8*). Jesus, it seems, is in good company.

And by our forty days of Lenten wilderness, so are we.

In the wilderness, Jesus is tempted by Satan. Mark doesn't say what specific temptations were laid before Christ. But elsewhere in Mark's Gospel, Jesus talks about his tempter. When Jesus foretells his death and resurrection, Satan is behind Peter's attempt to rebuke him (*Mark 8:32-33*). In the parable of the sower, it is Satan who takes away the word sown in those on the path (*Mark 4:15*). Satan tempts Jesus to deny his identity as the Beloved Son of God. To abandon the path to the cross and resurrection.

We too know this tempter. As Flip Wilson put it, *"The devil made me do it."*

Finally, Mark tells us that though Jesus was tempted, he was not alone. *"He was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."* This is an allusion to Psalm 91, a psalm about God's protection:

*For he shall give his angels charge over you, *
to keep you in all your ways.
They shall bear you in their hands, *
lest you dash your foot against a stone.
You shall tread upon the lion and the adder; *
you shall trample the young lion and the serpent under your feet."* (Psalm 91:11-13)

The truth of God's protection is woven deeply into our faith. You may have heard our new president bear witness to the comfort he finds in the popular hymn *"On Eagle's Wings"* with its line: *"For to His angels He's given a command to guard you in all of your ways."* (Michael Joncas).

Baptised. Forty days in the wilderness. Tempted by Satan, yet under God's protection. How might our parallels with Jesus' experience guide our Lenten reflections?

In Baptism, we, like Jesus, were claimed as God's beloved children. We too received the Holy Spirit. Oh, we may not recall what we felt that day, but that doesn't change the fact that as

the water ran over us, the heavens opened, the Spirit descended and God announced *"With you, I am well pleased."*

By the grace we received at Baptism, I believe that the revelation of Epiphany season is not lost on us. Deep in our bones, we know who Jesus Christ is. We know that by his cross and resurrection all creation is being made new. Saved in Baptism, we have been called to love God above all, to love our neighbors as ourselves. By our word and deed, to save them in Christ's name. It's right there in our Baptismal Covenant.

But we may hesitate to put God's mission front and center. We may even doubt that we could possibly be loved by God with the same love he has for Jesus. So we find ourselves in a wilderness of temptation, of testing.

Temptation doesn't mean we don't have faith. Temptation is part of the landscape of faith. The wilderness is the place where our religion gets real. It's the place where we ask the hard questions of ourselves and God. The frontier where we work out our part in The Lord's prayer *"your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."*

Satan is creative. What keeps me from going all in on love of neighbor may be different from what tempts you. When Mark does not tell us specifically how Satan tempted Jesus, perhaps he is leaving room for us to insert our own struggles. Lent is an opportunity to accept the grace to meet our particular temptations head on. To open ever more fully to the salvation bought by the Jesus Christ.

As we wrestle with our resolve to more completely follow Jesus, remember that we are not alone. God gives us the angels to keep us in all our ways. God gives us the strength to keep our minds and hearts set on the one who faced the ultimate temptation and who took the path to the cross and the crown.

During Lent, we often seek to strengthen our resolve with the blessed disciplines of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. This season, I invite you into one more resolve-building practice: Imagining.

Imagine the ways you and those around you already join in God's mission to heal a broken world. It's certainly in the time, talent and treasure you give to St. Mark's. And it's so much more. The neighbor on the other side of the political spectrum who showed up to blow my leaves and plow my driveway when I was not able to. That phone call made to someone struggling with Covid isolation. I learned recently how folks in the Garden Club are engaged in God's work of creation care with pollinator pathways. How the Grange and our local farmers feed those in need. All without fanfare or "churchy" labels.

The church doesn't make our efforts holy. Our holy activity builds up the church.

When we imagine, when we are open to seeing and naming how so much of what we and our neighbors do is already guided by love, the wilderness becomes less foreboding, more fertile. Temptation gives way to grace, to possibility. Seeing the sacred in daily life, we draw closer to Christ and each other. And we are energized to do more. By the power of God working in us, the kingdom of God is already drawing near.

After forty days, the Messiah emerged from the wilderness setting out on the path to the cross and the crown. At the end of our forty days, we too will emerge from our penitential Lent into the springtime of his resurrection. Our faith renewed. Committed ever more deeply to joining God's mission to reconcile all things under Christ.

Walk in faith, repent, and believe in the good news.