

**“Into the Wilderness”  
Mark 1:9-15**

**Dranesville UMC  
Sunday, February 21, 2021**

Have you ever spent time in a desert? It can be a very forbidding place. There is very little visible plant or animal life. Other than an occasional oasis, water can be very scarce. While on active duty, I spent about six weeks in the Mojave Desert. During each of my trips to Israel, we would spend part of at least one day in the Judean Wilderness, where Jesus spent forty days as Mark tells us. Although not very large in area, it is pretty desolate.

One very clear memory I have of my time in the Mojave Desert is the extremes in temperature. In September, the daytime high was around 120 degrees. The nighttime low was around 50 degrees. I would imagine Jesus experienced similar extremes during his time in the Judean Wilderness.

Today is the first Sunday in the Season of Lent; the time in which we prepare to celebrate Easter and the Resurrection. This is a time of self-examination. We may practice some new or additional spiritual disciplines. All of this is intended to help us strengthen our relationship with God.

This process may not be a smooth one. We may be more intentional in our prayer life, reading of Scripture, worship attendance, and service to others and still feel like nothing has changed. We may even feel a spiritual dryness - a sense that we're actually further from God than we were before we started. We find ourselves in a spiritual desert.

On other occasions, you may experience a spiritual high. This may come during a mission trip, a retreat, a special worship service, or some other event or activity. It may even occur when you are simply being still before God. However it occurs, you have a feeling of closeness to God. You are filled with hope and motivation to do great things for God. Persons who complete education or training for various forms of ministry are often highly motivated and filled with a sense of God's presence as they are about to begin the work for which they have been prepared. This was certainly true for me when I graduated from Divinity School and when I

was ordained as an Elder two years later. Those intense feelings have been rekindled many times since then when I went on retreats, mission trips, and did other things which charged my spiritual battery. I have also had periods where I felt I was in a spiritual wilderness.

Jesus may have gone from a high to a low as described in our Gospel Lesson for today. Some of the passage should have sounded familiar to you. It was part of our Gospel Lesson on the Sunday last month when we both remembered Jesus' baptism and our own. Because we covered some of the passage then, I want to focus on only two new verses this morning.

As Jesus is still dripping wet with the baptismal waters of the Jordan River, we read in verse 12 that the Holy Spirit sent him out into the wilderness. The word we read as "sent" is actually the same word used to describe Jesus' actions when he cast or drove evil spirits out of people who were demon possessed.

Jesus was forced to go into the wilderness. This is the first of four action statements that appear in verses 12 and 13. Mark tells us that this Spirit, which had descended on Jesus like a dove is now driving Jesus out to the desert. Only a short time before, the voice of God had proclaimed, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Why is this drastic action necessary?

Jesus' time in the wilderness was to be preparation for ministry and for the many challenges he would face. This idea of preparation in the wilderness would resonate with the Jews. They would look back in their history to the forty years that their ancestors spent wandering in the wilderness after they had been led out of slavery in Egypt. It was during those forty years that the people were formed into a nation. Even with all their complaining against God and Moses, the time in the wilderness was also the time when the people were closest to God.

It's also important to remember that the Israelites, as they were being formed by God into a nation while in the wilderness, failed their big test. They rebelled against God and Moses one time too many when they expressed fear and reluctance to enter the Promised Land when they had the first opportunity. For that, they would wander for forty years. With the exception of Joshua and Caleb, all those alive when they left Egypt would die without entering the Promised Land. Where Israel failed the test, Jesus would succeed.

The number forty may also conjure up memories of Noah in the Ark while it rained for forty days. Elijah was in the wilderness for forty days when he fled from King Ahab and Queen Jezebel and encountered God on Mount Sinai.

Some of us may have that sense of closeness to God as we pass through our spiritual wilderness. While it may be a trying time, we may sense that we are closer to God than we ever were.

Jesus' time in the wilderness was not an end in itself. It was preparation for his ministry. It was a foretaste of things to come - of the opposition he would encounter. He was affirmed by his heavenly Father then sent to face his testing and temptation. We can expect much the same. With commissioning comes conflict.

Like Jesus, we don't create our wilderness. We simply find ourselves in it.

Once Jesus had his identity affirmed and is tested, he is thrust back out into the society to preach, teach and heal. We are expected to do likewise. After our time of trial, we aren't supposed to keep to ourselves. That trial or testing serves to refine us, to build us up.

I came across this image that might help explain how we prepare for and engage in ministry. In the nation of Israel, the two largest bodies of water are the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. Located in the Galilee region in the northern part of the country, the Sea of Galilee gets water from that part of the Jordan River that starts on the slopes of Mount Hermon in the far north and flows southward. The Sea of Galilee is very much alive. It is teeming with fish and is surrounded by many villages and small cities. The waters of the Sea of Galilee flow south, as the Jordan River continues toward the Dead Sea.

The Dead Sea is in Judea at the southern end of the Jordan River. Unlike the Sea of Galilee, it has no outlet. Waters flow in, but never leave. Several streams bring in deposits of salt and other minerals which become so concentrated they kill all water animals. The water is unsafe for humans or animals to drink.

If our lives, our ministries, are like the Sea of Galilee, we can thrive and be truly alive. We take in information and are otherwise prepared for life and ministry. We then pour that out on our world, making it more lively as well.

If we are like the Dead Sea, all we do is take. The information and experiences we have are of no value to anyone else. If our lives consist of give and take, we live. If all we do is take, we die.

Mark tells us that, while Jesus was in the wilderness, he was tempted by Satan. Unlike Matthew and Luke, we aren't told how Jesus was tempted. Matthew and Luke describe specific types of temptations and imply these came at the end of the forty days. Mark reads as if Jesus was constantly tempted. The common thread is that Jesus was tempted but did not yield.

As an aside, unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark makes no mention of Jesus fasting while in the wilderness. Food supplies may have been scarce; so perhaps Mark assumed that Jesus would have to exist on very little food.

Some of us feel a sense of guilt when we are tempted. Please hear this: Everyone is tempted. Jesus was. You are. I am. Temptation is a part of life which we cannot completely escape. We might seek to minimize the situations in which we may be tempted; but we can't avoid them completely.

Here is another point to remember: Temptation is not necessarily sin. Writing many centuries ago, Pope Gregory declared that there are three stages of temptation. They are: 1.) suggestion, 2.) delight, and 3.) consent.

What might these stages look like? Consider this: You see a wallet filled with cash lying on the sidewalk. It appears to be lost or abandoned. You realize that you could probably take the wallet and its contents and no one would be the wiser. That is suggestion.

Delight comes in when you think further about all the things you could do with the money in that wallet. Why not? If the person who lost it was so careless, he or she must not need the money or be able to use it as well as you. Why shouldn't you take it?

Up until now, according to both Pope Gregory and Saint Augustine, you have not committed a sin. You may have had some inappropriate thoughts and mentally gone where you shouldn't, but you haven't committed an overt act.

You cross the line and sin when you give your consent to your thoughts and act upon them. If you keep the wallet and the cash instead of trying to find the owner or turning it in to proper authorities, then you sin.

We cannot control the tempting thoughts that enter our brains. We may be on thin ice when we entertain them and daydream about the sinful things we think we might like to do. Some of these thoughts are beyond our control. We become responsible once we knowingly and willfully act on those thoughts.

This is the issue with the sin of coveting. There is nothing wrong with observing something that our neighbor has and wanting it for ourselves. Coveting comes into play when we begin to obsess over this thing and start conniving to make it our own, by whatever means necessary. Coveting usually results in attempts to secure this object as we act out the thoughts we nursed to fruition. From what I can tell, as soon as we recognize we are having improper thoughts about someone or something, we need to recognize those thoughts for what they are and try to divert our attention to something else. It certainly wouldn't hurt to confess our dilemma to God.

Temptation does not stop when we become believers. In fact (and this is the bad news), it only starts at that point. Temptation will be ongoing. The other thing to keep in mind is that we become tempted in proportion to our abilities and our positions. Satan would like nothing better than to take down prominent Jesus followers. No matter how strong the temptation, it's important to remember that temptation itself is not bad. Sin occurs when we yield to it. Temptation need not end in failure.

Let's move on. While Jesus was in the wilderness, Mark tells us he was with the wild animals. This statement may tell us two things. The first is that the wilderness is a dangerous place. My experience in the Mojave Desert bears that out. I vividly remember one night when a rattlesnake crawled under the poncho on which I was sitting and decided to curl up next to me - probably for warmth. As calmly as I could, I told my radio operator what had happened and we made a plan. I would move suddenly to one side and pull the poncho with me. The radio operator was standing by to whack the snake with an entrenching tool if it made a hostile move. As soon as I moved and pulled the poncho off of it, the rattlesnake skedaddled in the opposite direction. It wanted nothing to do with us, nor us with it.

Mention of the wild animals and the presence of and temptation by Satan may be a way of letting us know that Jesus began his ministry in peril. He would always be in danger; but it would not ultimately defeat him. This can serve as a warning to us that following Jesus will not be an easy journey. Faithful discipleship is more about doing God's will than about feeling good. We will confront bad news every day; but this does not in any way indicate that God has abandoned Creation.

There is another way to consider this statement about Jesus being with wild animals. Mark says nothing about Jesus fearing the animals or that he was in any danger. Several Old Testament prophets declared that, in the kingdom of God, humans and wild animals will coexist in peace. It may be that Jesus' experience with the animals in the wilderness was a foretaste of that aspect of the kingdom. We can't say one way or the other.

The fourth and final action statement in today's lesson is that angels attended Jesus. Some translations state that they ministered to or served him. Only Mark tells us this. In his struggle with Satan, in a hostile environment, Jesus had heavenly resources at his disposal. We do too.

Jesus, before his ministry even got started, had to face a time of trial and temptation. We will have trials and temptations aplenty throughout our lives.

He had an extended time in the wilderness. We can expect similar wilderness experiences which will test us; but which may also serve to mold and shape us.

In the midst of danger, Jesus had divine resources at his disposal. We have access to heavenly assistance which will help to see us through any situation.

After Jesus was tested, he set out to do God's will with his preaching, teaching and healing. He didn't keep to himself. We're expected to let our lights shine; not hide them.

Lent is a time for reflection. We may be in a spiritual wilderness right now. Using Jesus' time in the wilderness as our guide, we can take confidence that God will see us through and provide the resources along the way. Amen.