

Sermon for Lent I (B)
March 5, 2006
Christ Church, Andover
Jeffrey Gill

Gospel: Mark 1:9-13

When you walked into church this morning it was just a little different. You looked around and saw the purple. You heard the music in a little different key. You sang forty days and forty nights. It must be Lent!

The first thing people usually think about, of course, is “giving something up for Lent.” That’s all well and good. Some take on a new spiritual discipline during Lent – like praying more often or reading and studying the Bible or some other devotional practice. That’s great too – maybe even better. But I hope that in none of this do we allow ourselves to trivialize what this season is really all about. It’s serious stuff. It’s about wildernesses and wild beasts and being tempted by Satan. In other words, it’s about real life.

The journey of Lent begins this year as always with Jesus in the wilderness. From that big emotional high of his baptism, when the spirit descended on him like a dove, and then he heard those wonderfully affirming words from God saying “You are my Son, my Beloved one, with you I am well pleased.” From this, we are told, the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness, where he was tempted by Satan for forty days, and where he was with the wild beasts.

Highs and lows – just like life, huh? Anybody recognize that?

The Gospel of Mark, unlike Matthew and Luke, gives us no details whatsoever about what happened during these forty days. We don’t know anything about the nature of Jesus’ temptations from Mark. We can only guess at what it would have been like to be out there with wild beasts. Or, finally, to be waited on by angels, as he was in the end.

And so, we are left to fill in the blanks for ourselves. The story invites us to impose our own stories, our own wilderness experiences, onto it. What do *we* imagine that it feels like to be in a wilderness? We all have our own wildernesses, don’t we?

- Depression, addictions – talk about battling with demons!
- Family problems, unemployment, illness or death of a loved one, perhaps for some even the *birth* of a new baby that leaves you feeling overwhelmed and lost in a surreal new landscape
- Mid-life crises, Financial disasters or debt
- Maybe it’s just worrying about kids, or a free-floating anxiety about the state of the world that takes you into your wilderness place.
- You fill in the blanks. These are all modern day wilderness experiences.

Even though spare in its details, Mark’s account of Jesus’ wilderness experience is bracketed in consolations – the mountaintop experience that preceded it, and the tenderness at the end

of his ordeal as we see angels ministering to him. The forty days in between? All we know is that he was tempted by Satan, and that there were wild beasts. And we know that Jesus came through his ordeal prepared for all that he would face in his life and his ministry.

Jesus' wilderness experience has been the inspiration, and the pattern, for the quests of spiritual seekers throughout time. In the fourth and fifth centuries there was a unique movement of people fleeing the pressures and chaos of their then modern lives and going into the desert of Egypt and Syria to find a deeper and richer experience of God. They were Christians who were fleeing persecution under the emperor Decius, but they stayed and many more kept joining them even after the persecutions subsided. Something was going on out there in the desert.

They were a unique breed of individuals. Something about the solitude and hostility of the desert environment called them. But ironically, what happened was the formation of a unique kind of community – a network of people who learned at a very deep level, and are still teaching us today, what it means to be in relationship and to live in community. People from the nearby populated areas began to go out to be taught by them and to hear their sage advice. The desert fathers and mothers learned through their very focused experience of isolation and austerity what it truly meant to be in relationship and how important right relationships were to their salvation. They learned that pursuing the spiritual life could never be done in the abstract – simply by closing oneself off from “the real world.” The spiritual life was not something ethereal and separated from the physical realities of life, but intimately entwined and connected to and mediated by the most human of relationships, with all their challenges.

Rowan Williams has written a new book about the desert fathers and mothers called *Where God Happens* in which he makes this point so clearly. The subtitle for it is *Discovering Christ in one another*. The desert experience of these ancient folk, he says, shows us that “relation with eternal truth and love doesn't happen without mending our relations with Tom, Dick and Harriet.” Tom, Dick, and Harriet might, in fact, be the means of our knowing Christ.

I often hear people talk about their hunger for “a more spiritual life” as though they can achieve that by “cultivating a sensitive and rewarding relationship with eternal truth and love,” somehow apart from the realities of daily life – as though the spiritual life is something separate from where we live every day. Sometimes we even approach Lent as a time when maybe, for once, we can rise above it all, take in a big deep breath of the Spirit and be lifted to another plane where none of this daily stuff will affect us any longer, or where relationships will somehow suddenly right themselves because we have achieved this detached spiritual state. Well, even if the desert fathers and mothers began as escapist trying to flee the realities of life, they learned over time that Christ was to be found not in the absence of the other, but *in the presence of the other*, and that right relationships with the other were precisely the means of their salvation.

The desert monastics cultivated above all an ethic of what it was to be neighbors in community with one another. One of the most famous of them, Anthony, said: “Our life and our death is with our neighbor. If we win our brother, we win God. If we cause our brother to stumble, we have sinned against Christ.” Rowan Williams writes that “gaining the brother or sister and winning God are linked. It is not getting [the brother or sister] signed

up to something or getting them on your side. It is opening doors for them to healing and to wholeness. Insofar as you open such doors for another, you gain God, in the sense that you become a place where God happens for someone else.” (Trinity News, p. 10).

Yes, even our wildernesses – desolate as they may be – are finally about relationships. The key to understanding and living life is in how we are with the other, our neighbor – be it our spouse or child or parent, fellow church member or co-worker or unbelieving neighbor – who we are for them in making it possible for them also to know Christ through us.

I’ve been thinking a lot this past week about the victims of Hurricane Katrina, especially after being at a conference a week ago with two clergy from New Orleans and hearing their stories. Talk about a wilderness experience! The thing they emphasized more than anything else was the importance of relationships – with those who had gradually come back together to be church together, with other churches who had come to provide help, with all of us from different parts of the country who had reached out to them. They begged us to come and see, and to be with them, to bring people with us. It’s the way we begin to make sense of tragedy and loss, because it is in one another that we finally meet Christ.

Mark’s picture of Jesus in the wilderness didn’t need a lot of details to get across its real point – and that is that we never go through our wildernesses alone. Jesus is there with us, facing temptation, facing the wild beasts.

There’s an old spiritual that comes to my mind when I think about walking through life’s difficult journeys. Born out of the four hundred year wilderness of slavery in America, some of the music sung out in the fields, or just under the breath of a discouraged and downtrodden soul, still carries with it the power to touch something deep inside and remind us that we are not alone:

I want Jesus to walk with me.
I want Jesus to walk with me.
All along my pilgrim journey,
Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me.

Whether it’s the forty days of Lent – or that larger life experience for which it stands – let Jesus walk it with you. There are angels just waiting to minister to you.