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The First Sunday in Lent, Year B, Mark 1: 9-15
21 February 2021
Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA

We were invited this past Wednesday to the observance of a holy Lent, and with that invitation we learned what “holy” means in this context: self-examination and repentance; prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and, reading and meditating on scripture. With the exception of fasting—I definitely have *not* been fasting—with that exception, it feels like I’ve already spent the entire *year* in Lent! Indeed, it was a year ago this coming Wednesday when we met for our first Lenten soup supper, and at that time we debated whether to go forward with the supper or to cancel it. We did go forward with it using special precautions, but then we cancelled the rest. We get our 40 days of Lent from the 40 days Jesus himself spent in the wilderness, but the pandemic has already driven us into a kind of wilderness—a dry and barren physical, psychological, and spiritual wilderness. This morning, I want to reflect with you on Jesus’ experience there, and ask what we might learn from it.

Our gospel reading for today is from the first chapter of Mark and, as is typical of Mark’s prose, he gets right to it, without embellishment: Jesus is baptized by John, he is driven into the wilderness, and he then returns to begin his public ministry, preaching the “good news.” The consequences of these three, inter-related events changed the world, but they are recounted by Mark in tantalizingly brief terms.

First, Mark signals that John the Baptist was pivotal to the story he wants to tell us about Jesus. John himself came out of the wilderness, and we know from the Old Testament that for Jews it is a highly important and symbolic place, a

place where the covenant between Israel and God was established and then renewed. John's baptism in the Jordan was the forerunner of a "new exodus" and, as such, it was intended to mark the end of exile for the Jews who repented and returned to their God. John also pointed to "one who was coming," one who, as prophesied, would lead to God's spirit being poured out on all the people who joined him in the renewed covenant. Jesus' own baptism by John was both an "act of solidarity" with the people of Israel and a sign of his royal anointing as the "servant" of God (Wright and Bird, *The New Testament in Its World*, p. 563).

Second, in another key signal, Mark tells us that "immediately" after his baptism, Jesus is driven into the wilderness. I'll come back to this part of the story in a moment, but here I want to note what is obvious but nonetheless puzzling. Mark simply does not elaborate on what happened to Jesus or what he did in the wilderness except in the sketchiest of terms—he was in the wilderness for 40 days among the wild beasts, he was tempted by Satan, and angels ministered to him.

But third, *whatever* happened to Jesus in his baptism by John and during his sojourn in the wilderness, it was significant enough that, when he returned and learned that John had been removed from the scene, he was ready to begin his own ministry. Something very important happened to Jesus while he was in the wilderness, something connected to John's proclamations and to his own baptism. Jesus evidently got clear about his own vocation, his own mission, his own purpose. He returned believing he was the one John had proclaimed, the one for whom John was waiting and preparing the way. So again, *something* happened during those 40 days that was very significant, that may be why Matthew and Luke elaborate on the event considerably.

But again, we are in Mark's gospel this morning, and I want to do justice to Mark's brevity, for what little he has told us might be important in its own right. Here, I want to focus on an aspect of Mark's story that is easy to gloss over. Evidently, Jesus didn't simply *choose* to go into the desert wilderness after his baptism, perhaps like we might choose to go on retreat. Instead, he was *driven* there and, more to the point, he was driven there "by the Spirit." In other words, Jesus was compelled by the Spirit of God to go immediately after his baptism into the desert wasteland east of the Jordan. I've been there, as have some of you, and it's bleak.

I confess that it is tempting, just as Matthew and Luke did, to fill in the blanks in Mark's story, and as I've said I'm trying to resist this. But still, we can ask of Mark if there might be any special significance to his claim that Jesus was *driven* into the wilderness and driven there *by the Spirit*.

In what little Mark tells us, it seems clear that Jesus suffered after he was driven into the wilderness. Physically, he was hungry and weakened by hunger. Psychologically, he was alone. Granted, we're told he had Satan (really, a title meaning "the accuser") and the angels visiting him, but he had no human companionship. And spiritually, he was tempted. Again, Matthew and Luke elaborate on this, but in Mark there is only a hint that the temptation was constant, confronting Jesus day and night for the entire time he was in the wilderness. If you have ever faced serious and unrelenting temptation, then you know it can be spiritually exhausting. Add to this his physical and psychological deprivation, and we can conclude that Jesus truly suffered in the wilderness—perhaps approaching the suffering he would later experience in Gethsemane before he faced the cross.

But there's yet another observation to ponder about Mark's brief reference to Jesus being driven into the wilderness: he was driven to all this suffering in the wilderness by the *Spirit*. Think about that in terms of your own wilderness experiences of suffering. Think about this last year of suffering for so many of us. Do we think of ourselves as being *driven* to our suffering by *God*? We may look back on it and be grateful to God for what we learned from our suffering, but do we really believe God *drove* us to suffer so that, like Jesus, we in the end might be better servants? These are hard questions, but if we are intended to imitate our Lord, then Mark suggests the answer might indeed be, "Yes." It was certainly the case for Jesus and it may well be for us as well as his followers and disciples. In any case, we know from Mark that Jesus returned from this experience in the wilderness and began his public ministry with a certain sureness and a certain boldness he had not exhibited before this. Again, this suggests that his suffering in the wilderness helped him clarify his vocation. He clarified what his mission was to be and, perhaps paradoxically, he found the strength through his suffering to return and begin his work.

I want to end with two quotes. First, this past week I was reading a book on the history of the US National Parks, and in that book is an interview with a Mandan Indian who is also a National Park superintendent. In the interview, he says this:

When the white man came in and discovered a wilderness, to us that was fascinating. Because it didn't need to be discovered—it was never lost. We have no word for "wilderness." It wasn't a wilderness to us, *it was the place where we lived* (Duncan and Burns, *The National Parks*, p. 56, emphasis added).

I thought of Jesus in the wilderness when I read this. Yes, it may have been dry and barren, but it may also have been beautiful. And, yes, it may have led to him to experience hunger, loneliness, and exhausting temptation, but he may also have found a home there—if not a place to live, then perhaps a place to return to. We are told that, during his public ministry, he often went off to a lonely place to pray. Perhaps he carried the wilderness back with him.

And second, regarding what Jesus may have learned from his suffering during those 40 days in the wilderness, I want to end with a poem from St. John of the Cross, called “Soul-Candle” (emphasis added).

My soul is a candle that burns away the veil;
so that now I have only the glorious duties of light.
The sufferings I knew have initiated me into God
and I have become a holy confessor to all.
When I see their tears running down their cheeks
I see they are falling into God’s hands,
and I can say nothing to their great sorrows
except what I too have known,
and that the soul is a candle that burns away the veil
so that now we each have only the glorious duties of love.
For the sufferings we have known have initiated us into God,
and so now all we have are God’s *own* glorious cares.

Just like Jesus, so for us: “...the sufferings we have known have initiated us into God.” Amen.