

Genesis 9:8-17
Psalm 25:1-9
1 Peter 3:18-22
Mark 1:9-15

Lent 1B
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
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Wilderness Season

When I walk out the door of my office these days, I smell the sweetest, most luscious fragrance imaginable. It's startling because it seems out of place and out of time. Tropical islands come to mind when that fragrance wafts by, and even on our recent snow day, it smelled of full-blown spring. It's called Sarcococca if you need to pick one up from the nursery. They are scrappy plants that don't like too much sun, but they will reward you with a breath of spring when you think winter will never end. In my front garden at home, there is a large patch of hellebores in full bloom. A hellebore is often called Lenten Rose because hellebores bloom early, in Lent. Did you know the word Lent comes from an old English word that means spring?

It's interesting that we begin Lent with Ash Wednesday when we are reminded of our mortality, of death. It's tempting to want to skip straight to Easter when secular people celebrate spring rather than resurrection! But just like it's a bad idea to go directly from the Palm Sunday parade to the Easter parade without going with Jesus through the days in between, thinking of Lent as springtime rather than wilderness time is a bad idea too. We have a long journey in the desert wilderness ahead and today, it is time to begin it.

No matter which liturgical year we're in, on the first Sunday in Lent we hear the temptation story. We're in year B, which means we read primarily from Mark's gospel, but Mark's gospel gives us precious little temptation to work with. In Mark the temptation isn't about quoting scripture or debating theological principles. In Mark's gospel, the temptation is only about the struggle between the forces of good and evil. For Mark, there is no need to know that Jesus was hungry and tempted with bread, or powerless and tempted with all the power and esteem in the world, or in danger and tempted with safety and security. We only need to know that the Spirit drove him to the wilderness, he was there 40 days, he was tempted by Satan, he was with wild beasts and angels who waited on him. That's it. Not a lot of material for a preacher who is most likely going to preach on the temptation because that's what we always preach on in the first Sunday of Lent.

So what is there for us in these sparse and spare verses? The wilderness.

I don't think there is a person in this room who hasn't spent some time in the wilderness. Maybe your wilderness was in a doctor's office when you heard unbearable news. Maybe your wilderness was an empty table in the school cafeteria. Maybe it was a moment of humiliation that seems to have lasted a lifetime, or an abusive relationship or an unhappy home. Maybe it's living with secrets you can hardly bear to tell yourself. We know we're in the wilderness when we're in pain, when we cannot abide the situation in which we find ourselves, and yet we can't

seem to find a way out. In the wilderness, you have to go inside yourself, rather than outside yourself, to make it through.

People in our culture spend a lot of time, effort, and money, trying to escape most anything that seems even marginally unpleasant. Mostly, we don't choose to go into the wilderness, to the stark and barren places where nothing is comfortable or easy. I'm not sure Jesus would have chosen to go into the wilderness either. Mark tells us the Spirit drove him there, and I think that's because the work he needed to do couldn't have been done anywhere else. Sometimes we need the stark and barren landscape in order to see past the ends of our noses. Sometimes we need a harsh reality to shake us out of our complacency. Sometimes we need a good long stretch in the empty desert to see our futile attempts at filling ourselves with all manner of things that do not satisfy. So I am pretty certain that if we are going to faithfully make this Lenten journey, if we are going to walk alongside Jesus during holy week, if we are going to come to the joy of Easter resurrection filled with joy and God's Holy Spirit, we are going to need all the lessons the wilderness has to offer us.

Jesus came to the wilderness having just been baptized with a whole line-up of outcasts and sinners. At his baptism, Jesus heard the voice of his Father calling him beloved, so he went into those forty days in the wilderness with the assurance of God's love and in solidarity with God's people. Forty days of fasting and praying. Was he wondering about the work he was meant to do? Was he garnering strength through spiritual sustenance? Was he getting ready for his earthly ministry?

Although the temptations are not spelled out for us in Mark's gospel, we've heard them a hundred times and we know that at their center, they had the need for safety and security, or power and control, or affection and esteem- things we humans grapple with all the time. For us it's often the temptation to believe that by controlling everything, we can save ourselves. These are not things God grapples with, which is why, it seems to me, this wilderness time for Jesus was a time of becoming fully human. As it turns out, in both his baptism and his sojourn in the wilderness, Jesus moved more deeply into communion with God. But he also moved more deeply into communion with us.

Jesus didn't succumb to the promise of his every desire being met, even though the tempter would have had him believe that all desires can, and should, be immediately fulfilled. We believe that to some degree too, don't we? Our culture certainly does. We're impatient and exasperated when it takes more than a nano-second for the web page to load. We're frustrated when someone in front of us drives too slowly. We're irritated when the package doesn't arrive on time. We have no patience with our bodies when they won't heal according to our schedule. When everything doesn't happen immediately, we think something is wrong. But nothing is wrong. We just aren't experiencing immediate gratification, and that is a good thing. That's part of what the giving up and taking on of Lent are about- not having our every desire met just because it can be.

What would it feel like not to pick your phone up every time you had an empty 20 second interval? What would it feel like to turn off the tv or the music or the news, and listen to the quiet? What would happen if we gave up our chosen escape mechanisms – our chocolate, our shows, our designer catalogs, our five-o'clock martini? None of those things are inherently bad, it's just that when we use them to escape the realities of the lives we've created for ourselves, we would be well served to set them down. It is so tempting to use all manner of things to keep us from feeling what it feels like to live our very own lives. But in the wilderness, we turn inward, where God is, to find what we need.

We need these forty days in the wilderness just as Jesus did. We need to sit with ourselves. We need to set our distractions aside, maybe get a little frustrated and unsettled, settle in with that frustration and see what it has to teach us. Spending time in the wilderness teaches us things that go far beyond ourselves and our difficulty with our own unmet desires. We humans experience unmet desires all the time... that's part of what it is to be human. Jesus was famished and there was nothing to eat. That happens to regular humans too. None of them can turn stones into bread, and I think that's why Jesus didn't do it either. Yes, he could have invoked his divinity and turned the stones into bread... for that matter he could have invoked his divinity and disappeared the devil. But instead, he stepped into his holy, beautiful sinless life by stepping into solidarity with our very human lives. Jesus wasn't preparing for his earthly ministry in the wilderness, he was living it.

What do you imagine could happen in your own Lenten wilderness? Whatever it is, I hope you will carry with you that same ground of being that Jesus did. Jesus knew he was blessed and beloved because he knew who he was – God's beloved Son. You see, who he was, who he is, who we are is all based on whose we are. And any temptation we face can only be faced down when we remember that. Any temptation we face... the temptation to fear, the temptation to despair, the temptation to lie, the temptation to cheat, the temptation to laziness or boredom or indifference – whatever temptations we face can only get us in their grip when we forget that we are God's beloveds. We need to remember that our God is the God whose name is love, that love will ultimately redeem everything, and that Love has promised to be with us always. Will there be illnesses or accidents or suffering along the way? Yes, but we have God and each other to help us through. Will there be temptations we succumb to? Of course there will be. But we need not succumb to anything out there that tempts us to forget we are God's beloveds and that our God promises to be with us no matter the circumstances of our lives.

For some of us, forty days can seem like a long time to be looking inside ourselves and reflecting on our foibles, our identities, our relationships with God. Perhaps we're afraid that if we look very closely, we'll find too much darkness. But it isn't so. You are God's beloved, and you are filled with the dazzling light of Christ.

We only get one shot at this. Lent comes around just once a year and I don't want any of us to come to the Easter celebrating thinking *"I wish I had engaged more in the quiet."* *"I wish I'd spent more time in prayer."* *"I wish I hadn't wasted those forty days, feasting on the stuff of the world."*

I pray you will settle into this wonderfully holy wilderness season and receive everything it has to offer. That you will open your heart to the God who loves you, who walks with you in the wilderness, and who walks you right out of it too. Amen.