

1st Sunday in Lent
February 18, 2018
Mark 1:9-15
The Rev. Carenda Baker

Hanging upstairs in the meditation area of my home is a framed landscape photograph, taken somewhere in the western United States, or desert Southwest. The landscape is wild and barren. Outcroppings of red rock formations dot the scene. Little vegetation is visible, save for the center of the picture. In the center is an old thick tree, 6-7 feet tall. Three quarters of the way up the tree, the trunk and branches turn abruptly to form a nearly perfect 90 degree angle. The caption beneath the picture reads: *"Life's challenges are designed not to break us, but to bend us toward God."*

The lesson script for today's gospel story in the children's formation curriculum Godly Play begins: ***"The wilderness is a dangerous place. You only go there if you have to."*** Mark's account is spare. Jesus is baptized. He hears the words directly from heaven that he is God's beloved Son, and God is pleased with him. Still damp from his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness. A stark wilderness, known for high temperatures and steamy heat. Jagged rocks. Wild animals. Mountains of sand. And the deafening sound - of silence. *"The wilderness is a dangerous place. You only go there if you have to."*

Mark's gospel, the first one written, has a unique in its sense of urgency, intensity, and action. Jesus is driven to the wilderness by the Spirit. He doesn't choose to go there. Driven. There is something extremely important, transformative that Jesus has to face out there in the wilderness.

"In the wilderness for forty days. Tempted by Satan. With the wild beasts. And angels ministered to him". That's it. That's all Mark gives us. We're left to wonder – a lot. What did Jesus do out there for nearly six weeks? Catch up on sleep? Go off exploring every day, hoping to find a little something to eat? Listen for the slightest trickle of water as he walked? Did he count each day to mark its passing, scratching a stroke in the sand at sundown? Sing? Make up rhymes and poems in his head? Maybe become friends with the occasional bird that landed near him? Did he worry? Talk to his Abba? Listen for his Abba's voice? Maybe shout out loudly, just to hear the sound of another human voice echoing back to him, even if it was his own? Did he lie on his back in the darkness at night and gaze upward, counting the stars until he fell asleep? Could he have dreamed about home-cooked meals back in Nazareth? Wonder what his brothers and sisters, what his mother Mary and father Joseph were doing? Pray some of those 150 psalms over and over, especially the ones that cry out, "How long, O

Lord?” Did he ever want to die, out there all alone? Who knows what Jesus did and what temptations he faced? We can only wonder. All of these things are possible.

It is good for us to remember this one thing: Jesus didn't choose the wilderness way. And neither do we. We don't volunteer for pain, loss, danger, or terror or temptation. But we too, find ourselves in the wilderness at times, usually through no intentional choice of our own. Unexpected illness or a terminal diagnosis comes. Accidental or premature death happens. Trying to live with the addiction of a family member or friend. Sudden job loss. Intimate relationships ending because of irreconcilable differences, abuse, unfaithfulness, betrayal and shattered trust. And in the midst of such things, we can quickly be drawn to question God's goodness. Is God *really* for us or not?

Our nation is now in a very troubling and trying wilderness period. Nearly every day something assaults our spirits. On Ash Wednesday this past week it was another shooting and the loss of seventeen lives at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FLA. I encourage you to go online to “On the Way”, Bishop Scanlan's blog and read the latest reflection written on Friday this week. Bishop Audrey admits with utter honesty that she has, and then describes a favorite escape fantasy she allows herself to entertain when she wants to get far away from unpleasantness and heavy, emotionally wrenching situations. The escape is an island in Maine. She tells what lovely things she would do there. And then she writes:

“This “escape fantasy” is my release valve when I am overwhelmed. And, it is thoroughly un-Christian. While the Christian tradition does have a place for hermits, or “solitaries,” the real challenge of the Christian life is to live in community and to practice the tenets of our faith- striving for love, justice and peace- in the middle of our world- in its beauty and in its messes, in the moments of joy and in the horror of school shootings. And so- I have never left, in real time, for that Maine cabin, but have only allowed my mind to go there, briefly, as I gather strength and courage and energy for living the Christian Way.”

We have all felt it, that tempting pull to run away from trouble, to go into hiding, to give in to despair, to abandon hope, to blame somebody, to become paralyzed and just “shut down”. Why in the world doesn't God step in to stop the craziness, to cast out the anger and devilish hatred, greed and selfishness that keep us stuck in such hellish mire, and on a path of continued destruction? Why does the horrific pain and suffering not end? We desperately want a quick and easy fix and an end to our individual and societal suffering. We don't want to face and endure any more pain that leaves us feeling helpless.

The wilderness time was long and intense for Jesus. It can be, and often is, long and intense for us, too. In those forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness, he was in a fierce fight for his body, mind, heart, and soul. Did Jesus need the wilderness? Do we?

This is where the season of Lent begins, in the wilderness with a question about identity. It's all about identity, about Jesus claiming his most authentic self. The wilderness posed vicious assaults on the truth of Jesus' identity, who he knew himself to be. At his baptism God had told him, "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased." But out there all alone with hours upon hours for his mind to wander, listening to the chatter in his head, the temptations come, like a voice of doubt slipping in – "Really? You – God's beloved Son?" "You think you're special somehow?" "Do you really believe you can trust God to lead you to what's in your own best interest?" "Why in heaven's name were you driven out here anyway, abandoned it looks like, left to fend for yourself? Where *is* the God who loves you?"

It's hard to accept the fact that God's beloved can and do find themselves in the wastelands. We can still be God's beloved and be uncomfortable and unsafe.

Jesus' mind, heart, body and spirit were tempered by the Holy Spirit's fire in the wilderness. Jesus fought in the wilderness to know and claim his authentic, integrated self. It's what happens in the wilderness. Wilderness time strips away our false self. In the wilderness the love that survives is fierce, not fluffy or fly by night. Wilderness time shapes in us a love that saves and is self-giving. Simple sentimentality will not survive the rigors of wilderness testing.

I speak for myself here, and I do believe it is true that our wilderness experiences test who we are at our core – what we believe about God, ourselves, others, and the created world. Wilderness time challenges us to claim our identity. I've learned a few important things. In the wilderness, God is present. God has staying power, and does not abandon you and me. And we will not always feel God's presence. We actually may feel intensely God's absence.

So there is yet one other important point Mark makes about being in the wilderness: somehow, help comes. Rest comes. Solace comes. Just enough of what is needed comes.

I wonder what those angels who ministered to Jesus looked like? Could it have been an angel, moving in something so simple as the relief of a slight breeze in the scorching heat? Or was it a wild animal come near him and gazing briefly into his eyes - knowingly, tamely, even tenderly? Or maybe it came suddenly in a flash of memory - what he saw and felt that day in the Jordan when he came up out of the water. What he

heard with his own ears - the thunderous voice from beyond. Feeling that surge of a powerful energy course through his body. The seed of certainty planted deeply within, imprinted in his mind, heart and soul – ***“You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased.”***

I don't know what you have found in your wilderness times. I have found that I can bear the starkness of the wilderness a bit more easily when I have community to walk with me. When there are companions to whom I can turn, on whom I can lean, into whose arms I can collapse in exhaustion or tears when I need to do that. I wonder - what seen and unseen angels have you experienced ministering to you in the wilderness?

God ministers to us in small ways that end up being life-giving, life-saving. A friend stops and truly listens to you, does not give you any advice. Is just there. Someone offers you a comforting embrace. Speaks words of encouragement. Prays for you. And haven't we too, served as the angels – God's messengers of grace – when others have been struggling in a wilderness place?

This is what happens every time we gather for worship, and especially when we share the Eucharist. Here is our manna, our bread in the wilderness. It is true for us who are able to come together here weekly, and it is especially true for those members to whom our lay Eucharistic visitors go out and minister. Eucharistic Prayer C which we will be using during Lent, names our Hebrew forefathers and foremothers in the faith, and then says: “Open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us. Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal. Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ, that we may worthily serve the world in his name.”

We will be sent forth at the close of worship today to serve in the wilderness places of our world. Fed and renewed here, we become for others what we receive at this altar – the embodied spirit of Jesus risen, the source of our sustenance, hope, and strength. So take heart: God has gone ahead of us into the world's wilderness, and wrestled from the forces of destruction and death resurrection and newness of life. Peace be yours and mine on this Lenten journey, as we trek through the wilderness together, making our way closer the cross and empty tomb. Watch and listen. There is a good possibility your heart slowly will be bending toward God.

Amen.

*Note: *Attribution is here given to themes and images for this sermon taken from Debi Thomas' essay “Into the Wild” (2/11/18), which appears in the online magazine Journey with Jesus (February, 2018).*