

Into The Wilderness
Mark 1:9-15
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. (Mark 1:12-13)

For some strange reason I've always associated Jesus' forty days in the wilderness with the chant, "Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!" I'd imagine Jesus all by himself in that dark and scary place surrounded by ferocious animals and devils. Of course, the retelling of this story in Sunday School by Sister Mary Thomas, herself a very scary lady, made this Bible story even more scary. In fact, I remember that same night waking up screaming for my parents because I dreamt the Devil was peering through my bedroom window (or was it Sister Mary Thomas?).

Whenever we face seasons of desperate struggle we call them wilderness experiences. In the Bible it's a metaphor for preparation born in conflict. You recall after the Jews were liberated from 400 years of slavery in Egypt, before they could re-enter the Promised Land, they were driven into the wilderness for forty years. During their wanderings they constantly complained because life was hard. But their wilderness years were important years, enabling them to shed their slave mentality and reclaim their lost identity as God's Chosen People.

Yes indeed, the wilderness is a frightening but necessary place, because once you pass through it you're stronger and wiser and better prepared to continue your journey.

One of the recurring themes found in both the Old and New Testaments is the connection between the wilderness and our salvation. Someone once said the Bible tells the story of God's rescue plan for planet earth; and if you pay close attention, you realize our salvation comes at a tremendous cost.

Certainly Good Friday makes it clear God paid a terrible price to win our salvation but we're also expected to pay a hefty tab. Why else would Jesus say, "If people want to follow me, they must give up the things they want. They must be willing to give up their lives to follow me?" (Matthew 16:24)

It's a paradox isn't it? We say salvation is a free gift, but we still have to pay for it. And our down payment begins in the wilderness. But the gospels also report Jesus put in his own real hard time in the wilderness, partly to share our struggles, but especially to prepare himself for his ministry and crucifixion.

Immediately after his baptism, Jesus wandered in the desert allowing himself to be tested by Satan. Since Mark doesn't give the details we must rely on Matthew and Luke for the rest of the story.

Briefly, Satan tempted Jesus in three ways: first, to use his miraculous powers for his own benefit (turning stones into bread); second, to do a spectacular publicity stunt and become an instant celebrity (by jumping off the top of the temple, only to be rescued at the last minute by a legion of angels) and third, instead of becoming the Crucified Christ, Jesus was tempted to become a powerful political leader (if only he would bow down and worship Satan).

These were Jesus' challenges which in a similar way were faced by the Hebrews in their wilderness wanderings. Would they abuse their favored nation status and grasp for privilege and power, or would they embrace the calling to be a servant people? The Hebrew Scriptures confess more times than not they gave into their temptation. That's precisely why God sent his only son and that's why Jesus couldn't fail. Now the salvation of the world depended on him alone.

Unfortunately, we tend to be more like our Hebrew ancestors than our brother Jesus when we wander in the wilderness. Satan is usually more successful with us whenever he takes aim at our cravings for self-promotion, security and control. That's exactly why the Spirit must drive us back into the wilderness, to confront our temptations and be purged of any desire that keeps us from experiencing our fullest humanity. There, out in the desert, we too will be surrounded by wild beasts and devils, but there are also angels waiting on us to become the men and women God created us to be.

So you see even though the wilderness brings struggle and pain, it's a necessary component of salvation. In the wilderness, God takes you deeper into faith and practice as you unlearn the lessons that drove you there in the first place. You can also become stronger and with the benefit of Jesus' experience now withstand Satan's triple assault on your cravings for security, ego gratification and power. And when you finally emerge from the wilderness you're better prepared to deny yourself, shoulder your cross and follow Jesus wherever he takes you.

The story of Jesus' wilderness experience is traditionally read on the first Sunday in Lent. For the next forty days God is calling you to go into the wilderness allow yourself to be tested and prepared for the next level of discipleship.

The climax of the Lenten journey is the Paschal Mystery or the passion and resurrection of Christ. Paschal is the Hebrew word for Passover, the event preceding their wilderness wanderings when the Angel of Death passed over the homes of the Hebrew slaves who smeared their doorposts with the blood of the Paschal Lamb. Not coincidentally it was at the Passover that Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, was sacrificed on the cross. So the Paschal Mystery is just that, a mystery that defies our understanding but simultaneously impacts our lives whenever we bow down to the Holy through prayer and service to others.

Here are some practical Lenten practices you can regularly follow in the weeks ahead to prepare you for Good Friday and Easter morning:

- Attend worship each Sunday and during Holy Week
- Make time each day for prayer and scripture, (you can go to our web site and follow our daily devotionals)
- Become aware of and don't avoid the needs of your neighbor, and finally
- Make a sacrifice every day, for instance go without lunch, or don't buy that CD, and set the money aside to give to the Deacons Fund or your favorite charity.

These are all spiritual exercises you can do that after 40 straight days will become regular routine and can be continued after Lent has come and gone.

Of course the most important thing you can do, is go deep into the wilderness seeking Jesus and letting Jesus' love motivate you both to resist temptation and surrender your life to him.

Whether you boldly barge or tread lightly into the wilderness know Jesus is already there ready to tame your lions and tigers and bears and anything else that keeps

you from becoming a child of God, born in the wilderness to serve in the Kingdom of his Christ.