

Jim Gill

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"Temptation"

Genesis 9:8-17 Psalms 25:1-10 Mark 1:9-15 I Peter 3:18-22

INTRODUCTION TO MARK 1:9-13

Last week we fast forwarded to near the end of Jesus' public ministry with the story of his Transfiguration on Mount Hermon. His appearance glowed and Moses and Elijah appeared and spoke with him, and his Father spoke from heaven and said, "This is my beloved Son, listen to him."

This morning we flashback to the First time that the gospels record that Jesus heard his Father's voice from heaven, and what happened immediately afterward. Hear the word of the Lord from Mark 1:9-15

Let us pray - Lord God, Creator and Maker of us all, speak in the calming of our minds and in the longings of our hearts, by the words of my lips and in the thoughts that we form. Speak, O Lord, for your servants listen. Amen.

Mark's gospel tells us that immediately following Jesus' baptism the Spirit DROVE him out into the wilderness. He was blessed at his baptism, and then he was driven to 40 days of isolation with no food and no companionship other than wild beasts and angels.

On Ash Wednesday, coincidentally on Valentines' Day- a day when we celebrate love for one another, we were driven into a wilderness by the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School-the 5th school shooting this year.

Traditionally, we move into these forty days of walking with Jesus as he moves towards HIS suffering, death and resurrection. We begin this Lenten season in the shadow of violence, and we walk through the valley of the shadow of death not only with Jesus, but also with the families of those who were wounded and lost their lives, and with our nation as it once again confronts the powers and principalities that lead to and permit or don't prevent mass violence in our communities and country.

We are used to using soft language about the Holy Spirit - so used to speaking about how we have "felt led by the Spirit" - like the spirit is a billowy breeze inviting us into a beautiful, peaceful place. We like to think of the Spirit as our protector, our healer, our giver of spiritual gifts. What's this business about Jesus being driven into the wilderness.....to BE Tempted? The verb Mark uses, is a very strong one. It's the same word used to describe Jesus driving out demons, It can mean "thrust" or "cast" or "under the control of."

What are we to make of this testimony that the Spirit drove Jesus to go into the wilderness - alone - to where the wild beasts howled and where the forces of evil tested his every resolve and purpose?

First, the wilderness is as much a part of the landscape of the Christian life as is the River Jordan. It is the places in our lives like the River Jordan where we are affirmed. But the wilderness beyond the Jordan is where our commitment our vision our goals are tested--where we are tempted to abandon them, to give up, to seek the easy way out. We may worship in here, and have glorious experiences, but we all have our wilderness beyond this place. The wilderness may be in the office where you do your daily work, where competition and callousness mark the style of relationships – where money is god and material success is the kingdom most folks are seeking. The wilderness may be in a partnership or a marriage relationship that is far from heavenly or affirming. The wilderness may be the new life invitation you are now experiencing because of retirement or it may be the trials you are facing as you rear teenagers or toddlers in their terrible twos or grand-toddlers in their terrible twos. It may be in the letting go of your grown children who are launching into their own marriages that on bad days may be far from heavenly or affirming.

This wasn't Jesus only wilderness. The garden at Gethsemane was a wilderness for Jesus. That wilderness came after his Transfiguration on Mount Hermon. The Garden of Gethsemane was where Jesus faced his greatest temptation-to choose the easy way out -to call upon the angels that ministered to him in his first wilderness to take him out of this one.

Second, anyone who experiences God's call experiences wilderness--the wilderness of deciding, of wrestling with a need for direction. Some of us have been through the wilderness of recovery from a painful loss. For some it has been the wilderness of recovery from Hurricane Harvey. Others have come through the wilderness of recovery from harmful relationships or the devastation of addiction. (Mike Wilson has gathered a team of community leaders to address the Opioid Crisis in the Baytown area and this next Tuesday at noon some of us will be meeting with the Chief of Staff to Congressman Brian Babbitt to see what help he can provide in combating that particular temptation. We will also meet Tuesday night at the Cease Addiction Now (C.A.N.) building on Texas Avenue at 7:00 p.m. if you are interested in joining us.

Third, life for the Christian is a Spiritual journey. The Holy Spirit descended and the Father spoke from heaven not only to tell Jesus, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased," at his baptism, but also to drive him into physical isolation for an extended period of time during which he could reflect on the meaning of what happened and so that Jesus would have time to comprehend the full significance of his baptism.

Jesus' temptation has several layers of meaning. It is first of all the story of Jesus' temptation--but it is also the story of Israel. Think about it. Noah was in the ark while it rained for 40 days and 40 nights. Israel, chosen by God and Egypt, crossed over the Red Sea, spent 40 years in the wilderness. They interpreted those 40 years in the wilderness as a time of testing and temptation.

I suspect that a lot of us divide the world of the Spirit:- that we see the high moments, the good moments, as God-given, God-filled, moments like that at Christ's baptism and

his Transfiguration as good-- and that we see the wilderness experiences, those time when we are alone, those times we are surrounded by dangers and assaulted by the temptation to take the easy way out - or to just plain give up as moments which are not God-given or God-filled. - as moments that are bad.

The journey of Jesus is not only like Israel's journey, is it like our journey - it progresses through stages: - growing to maturity -- being called to do the work that God wants us to do - being equipped for that work - and then the wilderness - the testing of our skills, our faith, our trust, followed by a time of truly being able to serve God, truly being effective in what we do in his name.

In the same way, Jesus' temptation is our temptation. How are we tempted? We are tempted to satisfy immediate needs - hunger, security, love, popularity, power - to try to accomplish God's purposes - to try to satisfy our eternal hunger with things which are only temporary.

Yesterday at the Leadership Event at First Presbyterian in Pasadena, the Rev. Joan Gray, former moderator of the Presbyterian Church USA talked about the difference between a row boat and a sail boat. We can get somewhere in our own effort in a row boat until our arms get tired. In a sailboat, we can set the sails and let the wind of the Spirit take us where the Lord wants us to go.

The striking feature of Jesus is his willingness to be Spirit-driven; his willingness to enter into the wilderness. I wonder, is it because of the immediacy of his experience of God and of his vision of God's reign that he experienced in his baptism that enables him to embrace the wilderness and then later in his life - his trial and his cross?

The journey of Jesus into the wilderness, and then out of it again to perform his work in the world seems to have the quality of confident direction that our journeys sometimes lack.

Certainly it helps to be prepared to enter the wilderness. For Jesus it was the sacred stories that he learned from his youth - the scriptures and the self-same Spirit that drove him into the wilderness. It helps if we have learned from the sacred stories what we will need to do.

Jesus passed through his temptation experience to show us that we have a Savior who not only loves us, but who loves us as one who knows us, who lived our life, who faced what we face. The writer to the Hebrews put it so beautifully: "For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect was tempted as we are tempted, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy, and find grace to help in time of need."(Hebrews 4:14-16).

Jesus matures in the wilderness. He listens to his inner voice, he connects the blessings of the past with his need to rely upon God and God alone for the day at hand

and for the days to come. He finally understands who God has called him to be and what it requires of him, not just in his head but in the nitty-gritty of actually facing trial and adversity and temptation on his own with no help other than that of the word of God he has learned, and the presence of the angels that are present around us all. It is after, and ONLY after the wilderness that Jesus is able to move back out into the world and be fully ready to serve.

In the loneliness of the wilderness Jesus discovers in his own experience that he is not really alone - that God goes with him - that the angels care for him - and that with the aid of God's word, he can survive - and in fact prosper - no matter what the situation...even if it involves wild beasts

I said just a few minutes ago that journey of Jesus is like our journey. This can be turned around, so as to say - our journey is like that of Jesus.

How many times have we had experiences like his? - filled with the Spirit, we are determined to go forward with a new commitment and serve God, we get pumped up and ready to take on the world after a special experience of God, a special blessing; and then the difficulties begin.... the time of testing comes - almost as if we are being driven into it.

My friends, The Wilderness - the aloneness - the solitude that the wilderness affords - the hardship - is a place where we can be tested - a place where we can grow into the maturity so that we can indeed face the world, in both good times and in bad, and do there those things there that God would have us do.

I can only speak for myself...but when I have made it through a time in the wilderness, I have always felt stronger, more focused on what needs to be done, more able to help others -to love others - to do what God has called me to do after having been tried and tested and strengthened by my wilderness ... temptation..

Let us pray.

Lord God - thank you for the times you have called us into the wilderness - into those places where we must rely totally upon you for our survival. Thank you for the times that your Spirit has driven us into those places. Each time we have entered those places we have been tempted and tested - tempted to turn back before the time is right for turning back..., tempted to give up before the time you have appointed for our testing and for our growing is past.

Help us, Lord, should this be a time in our lives when we feel alone - a time in which we feel oppressed by the evil one - help us to claim the blessings that you have prepared for us in the middle of the wilderness - lead us on our journey - and bring us safe to the other side.

Lord God, there are many among us who face barren times - wilderness times in their lives. Help us to minister your loving presence to them in those times so that they may

come through their wilderness. Help us to bring food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, shelter to the homeless, courage to those who faint, and hope to those who are tempted to despair.

Lord God, in this time of conflict between nations - this time when we are being tested to see if we will love mercy as well as seek to do justice- we pray for guidance - and for your light to lead the way of the rulers of our nation and the nations about us.... ..

Lord God, hear our prayers for those among us who are in need - those whom we name before you now....

Gracious God, you led your people through the wilderness into the promised land - and your Son from the wilderness into his promised ministry. As we take our Lenten journey with him, grant that our lives may be fully dedicated to your purpose so that we may inherit all your promises and bring praise unto your name. We ask these things through Jesus, our brother, our Savior, and our Lord. Amen.