

Mark 1: 9-15--In the Wilderness

Today's lectionary choice for the gospel passage is somewhat unusual. Since this is the year that the gospel readings are taken from Mark and since Mark's descriptions of events are so brief, we have actually considered a major portion of this passage earlier this year. On the Sunday when we remembered Jesus' baptism at the Jordan, we read Mark 1: 4-11. Then two weeks later we read verses 14-20 from that same first chapter. That passage was the description of the first activities of Jesus' Galilean ministry. So today as we re-read the actual baptism portion and are told that Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God we now read the two verses in the middle. We don't re-read the information about who John the Baptist was or what those activities were which initiated Jesus' ministry. The passage today just stops with the declaration that Jesus came to proclaim the good news of God. Today we find out in those two missing verses that there was a period of at least forty days between the two previously considered events—and that this period was spent by Jesus in the wilderness. If your translation of the gospel is divided not only into paragraphs, but sections with headings, this morning's reading will actually be a separate passage just as the others are. Although the lectionary doesn't seem to recognize this, these are three paragraphs, each with a different heading. Verses 12 and 13 which are the verses we have not previously encountered are titled "The Temptation of Jesus". In looking at this event in the other two synoptic gospels we find Matthew uses 11 verses while Luke uses 13 verses to describe this same event. From Matthew and Luke we have an account of exactly what temptations Jesus faced delivered by Satan and the way in which he rejected the temptations. Mark evidently was not concerned with those details. In fact, Mark's entire description of both the baptism and its aftermath are quite different from the other two accounts. Within Mark's description of what happens at the baptism you can notice two things—as Jesus was coming up out of the water he (Jesus) saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. And the voice from heaven says, "**You** are my son, the beloved; with **you** I am well pleased." Matthew and Luke describe what happens in far less dramatic terms—the heavens are not torn, but just open. And in Matthew the wording indicates that others saw this event. The voice from heaven declares, "**This** is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Mark's gospel in general is written with a sense of urgency and drama, so perhaps the tearing of the heavens is just an indication of his form of narration. Mark's urgent sense that drastic things are happening and confrontation is present is present from the beginning of his narrative about Jesus. Mark is also frequently indicates that Jesus' identity as the Messiah is to remain a secret from the general public until the time is fulfilled. So we often find Jesus telling those he heals not to tell anyone about what he has done. Last Sunday's description of the Transfiguration had Jesus telling the disciples to also keep what they had seen on the mountain top a secret until after the resurrection. That the Spirit declared Jesus' identity only to Jesus at the moment of the baptism may be part of that "secret" keeping. Because Matthew and Luke give us more details about the temptation of Jesus, those are often the texts that we remember best and which form the basis of our Sunday school teachings. The stories of the temptation to turn stones into bread, to jump off the roof of the temple or to worship Satan in return for being given all the kingdoms of the world are familiar to us. They form a basis for understanding the temptations of our lives—the temptations of pride and greed, of reliance on things other than

God's promises. They assure us that Jesus remained obedient and used God's previous revelations of what that meant as his response to deny the temptation. Another point of difference in Mark is to note is the way we are told that Jesus entered on this trip into the wilderness. In all three Gospels, the Spirit is the reason for this sojourn in the wilderness. Yet the description of the Spirit's action which results in the wilderness experience seems very different. In both Matthew and Luke, the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, but Mark tells us that the Spirit drove Jesus there. This is no trivial detail in Mark but is an indication of the entire tone of Mark's gospel. From the beginning, Jesus does not have an easy road to travel. The Greek word used definitely implies force, not a gentle leading. This is not a difference in translation. It is also important to consider what type of experience a trip into the "wilderness" meant in Jesus' time. It definitely was not a place to which people went to get away from the "stress of daily living". That may be our view of wilderness—a place to go hiking and camping, to see nature in a relatively unspoiled state and enjoy the beauty of God's creation. But that was NOT what "wilderness" meant in Jesus' time and place. Wilderness meant desert—no water, no food, hot and lonely; a dangerous and even deadly place to be. It was a place to be avoided because you could die there if you were not careful. Mark does not give us any indication of why the Spirit did this. For Mark it was just important that we know that this happened. For some reason, it was important for what would later occur in Jesus' ministry. This is true of our lives. We have periods of trial, temptation and struggle. We don't choose these, even if sometimes they are the result of our own decisions. Yet many times after we emerge from them we find that we grew because of the struggle. We learn lessons that cannot be learned when life is easy. We don't like them yet we later see perhaps sometimes there is a purpose for our sojourns in the wilderness. But it is clear in all the gospel accounts whether the Spirit led or drove Jesus into the wilderness, it was evidently necessary. That it happened after his baptism is also true in each account. Even in Mark, we find that Jesus has been claimed as beloved son by God. What we are told about this wilderness visit is that it is the Spirit who drove the one who had heard himself proclaimed the beloved son into this place of danger, of struggle and temptation. Mark is viewing this declaration of being the beloved son, not as a message of warm feelings on God's part toward Jesus. Instead, the voice has identified Jesus as the servant sent by God as promised by the prophet Isaiah. The one the prophet spoke of as the suffering servant who would silently bear much in order to redeem Israel. Perhaps it is this baptismal claim which provides Jesus the strength for the struggle to come in the wilderness and on the path to the cross. Mark doesn't tell us that either. So what does Mark tell us about this period of time. "He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited upon him. Despite the brevity of Mark and its entirely different tone, there are two intriguing little details which are important for us to think about when we find ourselves in the wilderness. First, he tells us that when Jesus was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and "he was with the wild beasts." Okay, Wild beasts..." The wild beasts are there in addition to whatever temptations Satan was offering. The sentence also does not make the encounters sequential. There is not first this and then that. The presence of wild beasts give us images of living examples of the physical dangers that lurked in that wilderness...jackals and hyenas would have been there. In this narrative, Jesus has to face those physical dangers as well as the temptations to disobedience offered by Satan. Not only that, there is no indication that there were only three offers given and then Satan

went away. I have found that everyone has some wilderness time in their life. And those times are not always defined by temptations to sin or transgressions. Sometimes those wilderness experiences are caused by life events which just happen. Some of those things which could be termed wild beasts...not the appearance of literal beasts like hyenas or jackals, but other things like "cancer" or "depression" pose danger not only to our physical state, but also to our faith. They may appear in our lives and drive us into a wilderness time. We often lift prayers of intercession for help with our struggles and the struggles of others with this type of wild beast. The list is long and includes loneliness, self-doubt and divorce; loss of health or employment; loss of a loved one. That is where the second intriguing detail of Mark becomes important. In addition to Satan and the wild beasts Mark tells us that there were angels there who waited on him. Another way to translate that was that there were angels present who served or ministered to Jesus during this time. We often think of angels as they have been portrayed in art throughout history; those beautiful beings with wings who float around. But the word literally means a messenger of God. In the New Testament that term means that God presence is there. Jesus was not alone in that wilderness when he had to face whatever happened during those forty days whether it was three challenges from Satan or more, whether it was jackal or hyenas or both. There were angels with him. God's presence was there. He was not alone. What that tells us is that when we are in our wilderness times, we are not alone. We may not see those pretty heavenly beings floating around, but we are not alone. God is present when we must face our own wild beasts. This is further confirmed in what happens when Jesus leaves the wilderness and begins his ministry. Mark tells us "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God." And what was that good news? "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near." That good news Jesus announces is simply the news that God is not far off. The good news is that God is here, God is with us. The good news is that in Jesus Christ, God has taken on our mortality, in Jesus' life and death, God has moved into our very humanness. God, in Christ, becomes "incarnate", enfleshed like us. That is the core promise that Jesus begins to proclaim: God is as close as our own breath. God participates in suffering alongside us, in dark times, and when we are bitter God is there. God is not a spectator at these times, but through the life of Jesus is the One who knows suffering from the inside out. So these two details from Mark tells us two things about our own times in the wilderness. First, there are ministering angels sent by God. These are friends and spouses, doctors and nurses, the church, and all the arms which are laid on our shoulders in times of fear and grief. And second, God is with us in the wilderness—strengthening us, comforting us, teaching us and making us whole. Thanks be to God for the truth of these details. Amen.