

Mark 1: 9-15 Wilderness

In the passage I just read from Mark's gospel only a couple of verses haven't been a part of our gospel readings already this year—those two verses are the ones which in some editions are separated appearing under their own heading—the temptation of Jesus. We know that Mark's narrative overall is brief, but only two verses being devoted to the same event Matthew and Luke describe in such detail seems anti-climatic—almost as if Mark discounted the experience, as if there might not be something important about this event that we need to recognize. Matthew and Luke each devote about half of a chapter to the same story giving what are familiar details about the temptations offered to Jesus for the use his power as God's son. The temptations listed by Matthew and Luke are to turn stones into bread, to jump off the Temple so God would send angels to the rescue, and to take over the kingdoms of the world. These temptations all could easily come under the heading of the use of God's power for self-indulgence. If we only had Mark's narrative we would not have any of those details showing Jesus' reliance and trust in the guidance and will of God present in the Torah. These details resonate with us because they illuminate Jesus' resistance to temptations focused on self. These are often the types of temptations placed before us—to have our words and actions motivated by selfish desires instead of the love for others we are called to demonstrate. Nevertheless, there are two details present in Mark's account which deserve some thought when we consider the topic of temptations—those Jesus faced and those we ourselves face. To understand the importance of one of these details we must examine what it meant to be in the wilderness in Jesus' time and place. The wilderness was equated with desert—a place with no water, no food. It was hot and lonely. It was dangerous and even deadly. Part of the reason hospitality and welcome to strangers was so important within society and reflected in the Hebrew Scriptures is based on the essential nature of welcome and hospitality toward strangers for survival as the nomadic peoples who formed the tribes of Israel traveled these lands. Being in the desert was life threatening. This is not often the images we associate with the term wilderness today. We frequently think of the sights we can visit in our National Parks; we see beautiful images captured by photographers of areas uninhabited by people, but lush with plant and animal wildlife. We think of it in terms of God's beautiful creation, even those shots taken in the world's desert regions show beauty. But this was not the reality of the wilderness experience in Jesus' time. In Jesus' day, the wilderness was no tourist destination. It was a place you avoided if at all possible because if you weren't careful, you could die there. When reading these two sentences in Mark about Jesus' going into the wilderness it is striking how differently Mark describes this journey than do Matthew and Luke. In all the synoptic gospels this going into the wilderness occurs after Jesus' baptism in the Jordan by John. However while Matthew and Luke set the scene by telling us that the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness for a period forty days and forty nights, Mark says something different. After the voice from heaven says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Mark 12 reads: "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness." Mark employs a verb in the text that has a more violent sense that we might imagine for the Spirit's leading and interaction with the Beloved Son. Being led and being driven evoke different images of the scene. Of course, Mark's depiction of the moment when Jesus is coming up out of the waters after being baptized describes no gentle opening for the dove to descend. Verse 10: "And just as he was coming up

out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.” This dove does not seem to represent a gentle alighting. Mark clearly wanted to present an image of the Holy Spirit’s activity as a powerful force. This same Spirit that confirmed his identity at his baptism, immediately drives him out into the wilderness, the iconic place of testing, temptation and struggle in Israel’s history. This early action by the Spirit alerts us to the presence of hardship, loneliness, sacrifice and even violence that permeates Mark’s gospel as it is influenced by the Isaiah passages on the suffering servant. The verb here translated as drove literally means that the Spirit threw Jesus out into the wilderness for 40 days and nights of dealing with temptation. There is no recording of three discrete encounters. The desert is a place for both arduous testing and divine deliverance. The duration of this wilderness experience is significant. Forty is also a key number when describing God’s interactions with humanity—the flood which preceded that first covenant with Noah lasted 40 days and nights; the people fleeing Egypt wandered for 40 years in the wilderness. So despite the brevity of the verse, Mark’s audience is being presented with a rich background of images which draw on their heritage. Mark can be brief because he is relying on so many words already spoken through the prophets and the Torah, words which detail the promise that God would place his Spirit on his chosen one to bring justice to the nations. The use of “beloved one” here is not an endearment but is instead meant to convey the message that Jesus is the servant sent by God as promised in Isaiah. The servant which Isaiah’s words described is one to bring good news to the people, the news that God’s reign is coming near. All this prophetic preparation and placing of Jesus within the previously revealed purpose of God does not diminish qualities of loneliness and violence that this passage embodies. Jesus’ sojourn in the desert is a solitary one in many ways representing a loneliness that will be exacerbated for Jesus as the gospel story unfolds. The loneliness of God’s servant is a theme that is present here will persist in this narrative. In Mark, Jesus alone is addressed by the voice from heaven, it is he who assumes the role and will be called to suffer much for God’s people. Mark’s description of the time Jesus spent in the wilderness not only does not give the details of what Satan used as temptation, but it instead inserts two unique elements: “and while he was there he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him.” It is an important factor in Mark’s narrative that Jesus not only knew he was God’s beloved—chosen one, but that that claim upon him had far-reaching implications as to what he was to do. From the beginning God did not set before him an easy path, driving him out into the wilderness to face Satan. And not only did Jesus have that experience of confronting Satan, but there were wild beasts present while he was in the wilderness. In the way typical of Mark these “wild beasts” are not identified, nor are the threats they posed named, but they are wild beasts, not domesticated animals. These wild beasts represent the living examples of the dangers that lurk in that unromantic deadly environment that is termed wilderness. Literally, there would have been jackals and hyenas...wild beasts in every sense present. But how can these details provide meaning for us today. This narrative is not usually thought of as a metaphor, but there is an element here that seems helpful for us if viewed that way. Because like the temptations described in Matthew and Luke can also be seen as applying to our lives, so too can the wilderness experience and presence of wild beasts be seen as relevant for us. Because even more than 2000 years after this wilderness experience of Jesus, we have our own non-romantic wilderness experiences and wild beasts to face as well. Things which if we allow them to distract us from God’s purposes, may prove deadly to our

relationship with our Lord. We may not have literal deserts, but every one of us passes through our own wilderness times of hardship and isolation. Every life encounters some wild beasts while in the wilderness. These are formed from different realities and vary from person to person—they may be formed by depression, by illnesses like cancer or degenerative diseases, by loss of a loved one, or any number of specific events. In our society there are countless jackals and hyenas, predators with names like MS, or alcoholism or opiate addiction which reach out to destroy. There are other causes of loneliness, doubt and isolation but these things are wilderness experiences for us. They form times of testing of our faith and commitment to God's kingdom, to living as we are called to do. But Mark didn't just add on detail in that verse—he added two. Not only are there wild beasts in the wilderness, but there are also "angels". And the angels waited on him, while Jesus was in the wilderness. When we hear the word "angel" our imaginations conjure up blond loveliness in white robes with wings sprouting from their shoulders. That image is a creation invented by medieval artists. It has no basis in scripture. In fact, the appearance of angels in scripture is often accompanied by their need to reassure by saying, do not be afraid. The Greek word "*angelos*" actually simply means messenger. In the New Testament "angel" means something or someone that somehow mediates the presence or truth of God. So Mark tells us that while Jesus was in the wilderness he wasn't actually alone with Satan and the wild beasts, but was waited on by angels. He was always in the presence of God's truth as guide and aid. For our own experiences, there are also angels there to wait on us. Angels may be heavenly or they may seem quite earthly. Whatever, angels—even angels that don't look like angels as we imagine them—still bear God's love and compassion to us when we are in our wildernesses; angels stand with us when we face our wild beasts. And, although we may not think of ourselves in these terms, you and I are called—called as a family, called as friends, called as the church—to be angels to one another—to carry the love and compassion of God to others in their passage through the wilderness. We don't need wings or white robes. All we need is a little selflessness, a bit of patience, and trust in God. And when some angel comes and ministers to you in your wilderness, give thanks as they wait upon you. Give thanks for the angels that bear some intimation of God's strengthening presence when you face a wild beast. But it's not just angels that God promises. There is a second promise which God offers us in our wilderness times. In the last two verses of today's passage as Mark tells us that when Jesus' time in the wilderness ends, Jesus goes straight to Galilee—populous, green, Galilee, his home turf and there he proclaims the good news of God. The reign of God has come near. Believe the good news, Jesus says. This proclamation is made in the face of the arrest of John the Baptist, in the aftermath of the wilderness testing. The proclamation is that despite appearances that God may be far off, the good news is just the opposite. The good news is that God is not, after all, far off. God is here. God is with us. In this brief text we can see two truths revealed about God. First, there are "ministering angels" among us who come to us in times of fear and grief as we travel in wilderness places. And second, God is with us in the wilderness—strengthening us, comforting us, teaching us, making us whole. Thanks be to God.

