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Mark 1:9-15

Into the Wilderness

The seven verses of our text today take us through what we thought were major events in the life of Jesus: Jesus' baptism, Jesus' temptation in the desert; the arrest of John the Baptist and the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Yet Mark dances over these events as if they are mere stepping-stones to the good stuff. In rapid succession, Mark touches upon milestone events in Jesus' story—in our story—with little detail or the flair of the other Gospels. We get the basics, but are struck by what is included and what is left out.

We have no shepherds or wise people in the first chapter of Mark. There are no dream sequences or herald angels. Yet as we breeze through this chapter we still get the message that Jesus IS the one who has come to save the world, as John proclaimed, as the prophets foretold. Jesus is the one for whom heaven opens upon his baptism; Jesus is the one who—unlike Adam and Eve—withstands Satan's temptation and who then returns to Galilee ready to hit the ground running—to preach, to call disciples, to exorcise demons, and to heal.

At the center of our passage for today, sandwiched between the baptismal narrative and the beginning of Jesus' ministry is Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. The center of this biblical sandwich is the focus for us today as we begin our Lenten journey. One side of this story is God's claim of Jesus, proclaiming who he is at his baptism. On the other is Jesus' proclamation of God, preaching God's kingdom as he begins his ministry. But at the heart of the story to which the lectionary points us is Jesus' 40 day desert experience and his encounter with the Devil himself.

Mark's version of this popular story is odd when we look at it alone. Mark leaves a lot out of this important story. We are not told that Jesus fasted. We are not given the details of his conversation with Satan—there are no offers of turning stones to bread, receiving the world's kingdoms. There is, in fact, no actual information given to us about whether Jesus actually overcame the temptations in the end.

But Mark invites us to remember God's faithfulness and power as his words remind us of Moses' wandering through the desert for 40 years and of Elijah's 40 day wilderness journey to Horeb, being cared for by angels on his way. And on the matter of temptation, he reminds us of the Garden of Eden—humankind and wild beast side by side before a temptation by Satan and exile.

But why the wilderness? Why Jesus? And why now, immediately after his baptism, immediately before beginning his public ministry? We don't know if Jesus had a desert retreat planned before calling disciples, or if he thought he was heading somewhere else and found himself alone in the desert. What we DO know is that he goes because the Spirit leads him. This wilderness time is an imperative. Mark uses the language of urgency: Immediately after his baptism, we are told, he leaves—he is driven—into the

wilderness by God's initiative, the Spirit's direction. It is a requirement for his ministry, it informs his actions and readies him for ministry. This desert time is not just central to our passage but it is a central feature of Jesus' life and his preparation to be the Messiah he was sent to be.

We have been to the desert. We can recall our own desert wanderings at the center of our life's story—at the center of our being. We can count the times when we have wandered in the desert of our lives—being cooked to the core by the heat of pressures or tribulations. We remember times when we have been alone, isolated, even abandoned. And we can name the times when it has felt like the only one talking with us is the devil himself, and when the only way out from our troubles were options that we knew weren't right. Many of us have stood before those ready to condemn us, ready to trip us up, ready to tell us that we couldn't be who we were meant to be—because of our race, gender, sexual identity, educational status, upbringing. Many of us have stood before people who sure didn't believe in us at a time when we have really needed to believe in ourselves. We have been in the wilderness.

Sometimes it has been clear that the Spirit has led us into the wilderness. Perhaps, we have endured temptation so that we might gain insight or be pushed to grow. Some trials in our life were clearly gifts from God that have refined us so that we might have an awareness of who we are and who we are to become in God's eyes. But there are other trials that have come our way NOT because of God's will but because we have either veered off track or because we have gotten in the passenger seat with someone who was not going God's way. There are trials we have endured because we live in a broken world where evil taunts us, likes to wear us down. There are trials we have endured because other people make hurtful choices or because we are limited in our ability to change forces of nature.

Yet we see in today's text that God's power can be made known in the wilderness. When all else fails around us, we can stand firm in the hope of a God who does not fail. We can place our trust in a Savior who did not claim the authority of a worldly king robed in majesty and glory, but who endured trials, temptations, risk and suffering so that creation might be made whole. We worship a God whose solidarity with creation is so profound that God, in Jesus, endured the wilderness—and not just the wilderness of these 40 days, but the wilderness of betrayal by a trusted friend who handed him over to death for 30 pieces of silver... a God who in Jesus endured the greatest wilderness of all—the wilderness of the cross.

God's power can be made known in our wilderness experiences. No matter how we got into the desert—whether led there by the Spirit or coaxed there by Satan, God's redemptive love can overcome even the most alienating and most devastating wilderness we face. God's love is so deep that it can break through the walls built around us by those who want to trip us up. And God's love is so wide that it can reach even into a desert created from our own sinfulness and transform the wild wasteland into a peaceful oasis through the power of God's mercy and forgiveness.

So through these 40 days of Lent which lie ahead of us, may we draw closer to God, driven by the Spirit, into places that can refine us, strengthen us, mold us—even as they may try us. May we likewise be equipped to move forward, with God's help, to usher in the kingdom of God in our midst and to share the good news of God's redemptive love with others.