

Where the Wild Things Are

The lectionary this week makes a surprising detour back to where we were a month ago, with a replay of Jesus' baptism. We have covered that already, so let's focus today only on that bit of Scripture we did not read before.

Mark packs several chapters worth of material into those four verses. Immediately after the baptism incident, Jesus went into the wilderness. There he encountered Satan, wild beasts, and angels. While that was going on, John the Baptist was arrested. After which, Jesus came out of the wilderness to Galilee to begin his ministry.

The other Gospels give a great deal more detail about all these things. Mark, however, is more interested in the progression of events than in the details. It is important for him to note that, between his baptism and the start of his ministry, Jesus spent time in the wilderness.

Jesus had not planned on going out where the wild things are. Mark says, "the Spirit *drove* him" there. That indicates that Jesus got the sense that he was to go into the wilderness whether or not he wanted to or not.

Something was going to happen out there that would impact the ministry he was about to take on. It wasn't necessarily going to be pleasant, but it was something he needed to do.

The key here is trying to figure out what was so important for him to do in the wilderness. Here's one possibility. Spending time in the wilderness was something he needed to do to gain some perspective and see the big picture.

When we are too close to something, it's hard to get an accurate, unbiased picture of what is going on. If everyone around us acts a certain way and thinks a certain way, we get used to it. We begin to conform to how others act and think.

This can lead to all sorts of problems, such as bad habits, failure to see what is actually in front of us, faulty logic, and even doing things we know deep down, we shouldn't. We find ourselves stuck in a rut, doing things for no particular reason, just because that's the way it's been done.

We may not recognize we have lost perspective. Much of the time we just get swept along into it by the environment we are in or the company we keep.

In the PBS series, *Victoria*, the queen and her husband, Prince Albert, travel to France to negotiate with the French court. Albert finds himself extremely uncomfortable there, and not just because the customs are all different to him.

As a newcomer to the situation, he is astounded by the oppressive aura of artificiality, pretense, posturing, backstabbing, debauchery, and self-glorification that all those around him have fallen into. There seems to be no escape from it. How did all these people get this way? How do they not notice what they have become?

While taking a walk through the manicured gardens of the palace, he enters a forest and eventually comes across a pond completely untouched by human hands. His spirits rise as he realizes, “This is the first real thing I’ve seen since I’ve come here.”

He had to get out to where the wild things are so that he could clear his head. To get out from under the blanket of conformity and human artificiality to get some perspective so that he could see what was real and what was not.

There is an element of that in Jesus’ wilderness experience. He was preparing to embark on a historic mission. I suspect he felt the need to clearly define his mission—to get away from all the trappings of society and all the overbearing influences pulling him in one direction and another, to discover within himself how he was going to make this happen.

Jesus came to make all things new—to bring new life and hope to the world. That was not going to happen if he got swept up in the mindset and the intrigue of his world, or got mired in unthinking patterns of complacency.

This journey to the wilderness that Jesus undertook is often described as a trial or a temptation. I’ve often thought it strange that the things Satan tries to tempt Jesus with in the book of Matthew are nothing that appeal to Jesus for even a moment. What kind of temptation is that?

“Command the stones to become loaves of bread?” If Jesus wanted to do that, he could have done that any time during the 40 days in which he fasted.

Satan then tries to goad him into throwing himself down from the pinnacle and testing whether God would let him get hurt. Really, what makes you think Jesus would have any interest in playing stupid, self-glorifying games with the responsibilities he's been given?

Finally Satan says, *I will give you all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor if you fall down and worship me.* You don't think Jesus can see through that ridiculous proposal? Even if Jesus had any interest in ruling all the kingdoms, he would not need Satan's help for that.

It is so obvious that Satan has nothing to offer, you wonder why he even tries.

But perhaps the reason these temptations seem so obviously phony is because Jesus is out in the wilderness, where all the distractions that hide the truth are stripped away.

Out where the wild things are, he is free from the demands and pressures of society that could weaken resolve, from the frustrations of life that could lead him to think, "If I just had a little more power, think of the wonderful things I could do for the world!"--the kind of thinking that inevitably leads to corruption.

From this clear perspective Jesus was able to see how pointless Satan's priorities are. He could see in sharp focus what his mission was, and what it would take to accomplish that mission.

Having gone through this experience, he returns from the desert and is ready to begin his ministry, with the understanding of why he has come—not to build a glorious empire, or to change all the world to his way of thinking, not to meet his own need, but to seek and to save the lost. From now on, that will guide all that he does.

While he was out in the wilderness, Jesus experienced more than just the temptations of Satan; Mark says he also experienced the presence of angels in a way that he never had before. Prior to this episode, Jesus was safe and warm and prosperous and healthy among friends and family in Capernaum.

While he certainly thanked God for what he had, he did not have to lean on God for much of anything.

That changed in the wilderness. Mark says he was out with the wild beasts, and he does not paint a picture of an all-powerful Jesus taming these wild beasts. Only that he is among them, that he is surrounded by them, and that they remained wild. In going out into the wilderness, he put himself in an unsafe place, a vulnerable place.

In order to find what was real, he needed to let go of the safety net of civilization so he could truly experience what it was like to be dependent on God. So that he could solidify his faith that God would be with him and sustain him in all the challenges that were to come as he went about proclaiming the Good News of God. Having done that he can trust God to be with him wherever this journey takes him.

I never thought of this before, but this is a perfect story for the Lenten season. Some of the parallels are obvious.

The wilderness experience wasn't something Jesus was excited about doing. The Spirit drove him there, because he needed to be there. Lent is not an experience that any of us look forward to with great excitement. The Spirit drives us there because we need to be there.

Jesus' wilderness experience lasted 40 days. Lent lasts for 40 days.

Jesus suffered from deprivation and hunger and physical discomfort during his time in the wilderness. We traditionally think of Lent as a time of fasting, of self-denial, and giving things up.

There is a difference though, and I wonder if this story of Jesus in the wilderness might be just the thing to help us get a new perspective on Lent.

Lent has in some ways become a grim exercise in self-denial. It seems to require putting on a gloomy face, and subjecting ourselves to deprivation and hardship out of some notion that our suffering is a gift to God.

It reminds me a bit of the order of nuns who cut and whip themselves daily in the belief that their pain somehow expresses their devotion to God.

That does not square with what I read in the Bible. I don't believe God enjoys suffering or requires suffering for suffering's sake, or that misery builds character. I don't believe that willingly depriving ourselves of something we otherwise would enjoy is a gift to God.

Jesus did not go into the wilderness just to build character or to see if he could survive the ordeal or to prove his love for God. Which leads me to doubt that the purpose of Lent is for us to go through a 6-week ordeal to do these things.

I have been through some Lents where the season is viewed as a time to somberly reflect on what miserable creatures we are and what we need to do to become better and more worthy in God's eyes. It reminds me of the old parental scolding when kids do something wrong, "You sit in a corner and think about you've done."

Reflection and confession have their place, and we do it here nearly every week. But I don't read in any of the accounts of the wilderness temptation that Jesus went there to learn his faults and confess his failings and to spend time thinking about them.

Jesus did not go into the wilderness to build character or to experience hardship and deprivation as a way of showing how much he loved God. He went there to prepare and clear his head to focus on the mission that lay ahead. Hardship and deprivation were byproducts of this effort to focus.

So what if we were to follow Jesus' example and use the 40 days of Lent in the same way Jesus did? Rather than use it as a time to beat ourselves up over our shortcomings and failures as Christians, use it as a time to get away.

To get some perspective on our lives. To really see the world in which we live and to see how that matches with the world God wants for us. To step back and consider what really matters in our lives. And from there to determine what our mission is, and what it will take to accomplish that mission.

What if we used this time to get some distance from the human-made distractions and pressures that turn us away from God without our really knowing it? What if we took some time to reexamine our definition of "the real world."

We talk about the world we have created for ourselves as if it is that is real world.

Just because there is sin in the world and we need to deal with it, does not mean this is the real world that God designed. What in this world we have made is drawing us away from God? What is standing in the way of discipleship for us and for our congregation? What is causing us to put ourselves before others?

We do not need to go out into a literal wilderness to have this wilderness Lenten experience, although it probably would be more effective. But we do need, at a minimum, to detach ourselves from the everyday routine of life. To spend quiet time away from societal influences in reflection and meditation.

Not to sit and think about what we've done; but to think about what needs to be done in God's kingdom.

What we find in our examination of our lives may be uncomfortable and even frightening. Being in the wilderness always has that element. But that is good thing, because it will teach us what faith is all about. We may discover that, in the light of examination, what previously might have tempted us does not seem so tempting after all.

We may come to grips with a fact that is obscured by everyday life—that when we travel in the right paths, God is with us every step of the way.

If *this* were our Lenten journey, then Lent would not simply be an ordeal, where we grind through Lent until we stagger into Easter like the finish line of a marathon and pick up our t-shirts that say, "I survived Lent 2018!" Where we hope that the misery was worth it because somehow in the process we either made God happy or improved ourselves.

If Lent were a 40-day journey in the wilderness like the one Jesus traveled, just maybe we would come out of our 40 days in the wilderness clear-eyed, determined, faithful—ready, like Jesus, to proclaim the Good News, to take on the overwhelming demands of sick and hurting people.

This Lent, instead of carrying the weight of the world on our shoulders for six weeks, why not use the time to prepare for the immense privilege and responsibility of joining God in the mission of lifting the weight of the world off of others' shoulders?

