

Scenes in the Wilderness

The First Sunday in Lent, Year B, February 21, 2021

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

Fr. Patrick Raymond

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 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. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased. And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. - Mark 1:9-13

A few weeks ago, I asked you to picture the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark as a gallery of images, each one revealing a distinctive feature of Jesus the Messiah. I also explained that the image of Christ's temptation in the wilderness would remain veiled until today, the First Sunday in Lent. That veil has now been lifted, and we may be surprised to see a series rather than a single image.

As we heard, the series begins with and arises from the Baptism of Jesus, already witnessed by us six weeks ago. At the time, we were awed by the heavens torn open, the descending dove and the divine voice that said of Jesus: *'You are my Son, the Beloved ...'* But here we read forward and notice the connection of the baptism to what follows. Jesus was still wet from the waters of baptism when the Spirit *'drove him out into the wilderness'* – the next image in our series.

As Matthew and Luke render the same story, Jesus is merely *led by the Spirit* (Matt. 4:1a, Luke 4:1b), but here in Mark he is *driven*. The verb is forceful. Jesus is coerced, pushed, compelled. He seems to have no choice in the matter. Some of us may know that feeling – even or especially if we can't explain it to anyone else or even to ourselves. The Spirit seems to have driven us to undertake some work of love, or some justice project for God's sake, and we've passed the point of imagining that we have a choice.

The wilderness into which Jesus is driven is laden with ominous, scary, promising associations that echo down through generation upon generation of Israel's lore and Scriptures: Moses and the burning bush, Jacob's ladder, Elijah and the still small voice, and, of course John the Baptist, quoting Isaiah: *"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord."*

The wilderness into which Jesus was driven by the Spirit was surely a known place, but first and foremost it is a terrain of the heart. It's the place where any of us may be driven by the Spirit, to contemplate a decision, to sort out competing voices, to let go of some tenacious burden, to commit to something new. In the wilderness, one's yesses begin with a capital Y and one's nos with a capital N, as Jesus will soon show us.

Wilderness may include a necessary ordeal but may also be the place of unique blessings, as Jesus will also show us. Some of us may associate these qualities of wilderness with a regular summer destination, or a monastery, or a familiar quiet bend in the shore along Lake Michigan where we sometimes pause. Some of us may have recognized wilderness in the confines of our own homes during this pandemic.

We are told that Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days, but we don't have a daily account of it. In fact, far from it. We don't get the eleven verses of detail found in Matthew or the thirteen verses in Luke. This gospel writer gives us only three scenes, all compressed into a single verse. Each scene is populated with distinctive characters, starting with Satan.

From the context we surmise that Satan recognized the threat posed by Jesus and that he immediately sought to undermine the purity and clarity of divine intention that was on full display at the baptism. And what pure and clear divine intention is Satan even now seeking to undermine in us?

In the next sketch, Jesus is shown ‘*with the wild beasts,*’ an image unique to Mark. Some interpreters imagine that the wild beasts are included here as props, to heighten the sense of danger in the wilderness. Others see in these wild beasts a primordial reference to the animals that co-inhabited the Garden of Eden with Adam before the creation of Eve and the Fall.

In any case, this curious inclusion of the wild beasts with Jesus in the wilderness may lead those of us so inclined to wonder about our own lost or found connections to the created order. Hear the muse of W.H. Auden, whose poem *Address to the Beasts* begins as follows:

*For us who, from the moment
we first are worlded
lapse into disarray,
who seldom know exactly
what we are up to,
and, as a rule, don't want to,
what a joy to know,
even when we can't see or hear you,
that you are around ...*

And after these wild beasts, one last wilderness sketch: *and the angels waited on him.* The angels here signify that Jesus will make it through the wilderness, and all that it represents, with his divine intention and vocation intact. The angels also suggest a human aspect of Jesus. In the time of testing and peril he is in need of divine mercy, aid and messengers – as is often the case with all of us.

I have quickly shown you five separate images arising from today's gospel passage. They could be titled *baptism, wilderness, battling with Satan, wild beasts,* and *angels.* Each image is unique, but they are united by inviting our deeper knowledge and appreciation of Jesus the Messiah. We may wish to return to one or more for further contemplation.

These images could also be viewed as a guidebook of sorts. The baptism recapitulates the ground we covered in the weeks after the Epiphany. We, too, have been baptized and called: “*Grant that your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory ...*” So we prayed on the Second Sunday after the Epiphany.

But now we ourselves have been driven by the Spirit into the wilderness of Lent. And here we aspire to a courageous faith, to reckon with our demons—whatever seduces us away from our love of God. Here we may come upon some wild beasts, challenging all artifice in our lives, inviting a reconnection to the natural world and our own primal, incarnate bodies. And here, knowing we are lost if we struggle alone, we plea to the angels to minister to us, to bless us with messages of God's mercy and love and unshakable presence with us. *Amen.*