

February 14, 2018
Ash Wednesday Service
Experience of the Wilderness
Mark 1:9-15
Rev. Dr. Charles Yoon

Today's text describes the following event. *"And immediately God's Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. He was there for forty days while Satan tested him. And wild beasts were all about him, but angels took care of him."* (Mark 1:12) *"And immediately God's Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness."* At another event involving the same Spirit, a high moment where, during the baptism of Jesus, the Spirit descended upon him like a dove and God spoke directly to Jesus and said: *"You are my own dear son, with whom I am well pleased."*

Let us think of it for a minute. The Spirit descends with blessings. And the Spirit drives the one blessed out into the wilderness, into the barren place, the dangerous place. And the Spirit allows him to be tested, to be tempted, and to be placed at risk. Likewise, we see the high moments, the good moments, as God given and God filled. We see also the wilderness experiences, those times when we are alone, those times when we are surrounded by dangers and assaulted by the temptation to take the easy way out.

The journey of Jesus is like our journey. It progresses through stages: growing to maturity, being called to do the work that God wants us to do and being equipped for that work. And then the wilderness follows, the testing of our skills, our faith, and our trust. So we need to pray to better serve God, being truly effective in what we do in his name. Certainly it helps to be prepared to enter the wilderness. It helps if we have learned the lore that we need to learn, and to we carry the equipment we need to carry.

There is a story told by Stephen Covey about a man who experienced a time in his life when everything seemed flat, boring, and dull. He went to his physician who found nothing wrong with him physically. The doctor then suggested that he take a day for some spiritual renewal. He was to go to a place that had been special to him as a child. He could take food, but nothing else. The doctor then handed him four prescriptions - one to be read at 9 AM, one to be read at noon, one at 3 PM, and the final one at 6 PM. The patient agreed and the next day he drove himself to the beach.

At nine AM he opened the first prescription, which read, "Listen carefully." For three hours do nothing but listen? He was annoyed, but he decided to obey. At first he heard the wind, the birds, the surf – predictable beach sounds. But then he found himself listening to his inner voice, reminding him of some of the lessons the beach had taught him as a child – patience, respect, and the interdependence of the different parts of nature. Soon, he was feeling more peaceful than he had in a long time.

At noon he opened the second prescription, and it said, "Try reaching back." His mind began to wander, and he discovered himself being overwhelmed by all the moments of joy, blessings, and gifts he had been given in the past. At three he opened the third prescription. This one was harder. It read, "Examine your motives." Defensively, this man listed all the motivating factors of his life – success, recognition, and security. And he found satisfactory explanations for them all. But finally it occurred to him, in a shattering moment, that those motives were not enough, and that the lack of a deeper motive probably accounted for the staleness and boredom of his life. "In a flash of certainty," he wrote, "I saw that if one's motives are wrong, nothing can be right. It makes no difference if you are a scientist, a housewife, a businessperson, or an attorney. It is only when you are serving others, and that you do the job well and feel good. This is a law as unquestionable as gravity." At six PM he read the final prescription. It said, "Write your worries in the sand." He took a shell, scratched a few words, and then walked away, never turning back. He knew, with a great sense of relief, that the tide would come in, and his anxieties would be washed away.

The wilderness, the aloneness, the solitude that the wilderness affords, or the hardship is an opportunity, a blessing from the Spirit of God. The wilderness is a place where we can be tested, a place where we can grow into the maturity that we require so that we can indeed face the world, in both good times and in bad, and do those things there that God would have us do.

Jesus matured in the wilderness. In the loneliness of the wilderness Jesus discovered in his own experience that he is not really alone, that God goes with him, and that the angels care for him. He also realized that with the aid of God's prescriptions, with the aid of God's word, he could survive, and in fact prosper no matter what the situation.

Like Jesus, we are tested whenever we try to truly serve God, to use our God given gifts and powers. But when we have made it through a time in the wilderness, we can feel stronger, more focused on what needs to be done, more able to help others, to love others, to do what God has called us to do.

I would like to end with a poem, *"The Testimony of a Confederate Soldier"* from the period of the Great Civil War in the United States. It might be familiar to some of you. It describes what God can accomplish in us through our wilderness experiences, through our times of testing. Let us read it together.

"The Testimony of a Confederate Soldier"

I asked God for strength that I might achieve. I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey. I asked for health that I might do greater things. I was given infirmity that I might do better things. I asked for riches that I might be happy. I was given poverty that I might be wise. I asked for power that I might have the praise of men. I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God. I asked for all things that I might enjoy life. I was given life that I might enjoy all things. I got nothing that I asked for - but everything I had hoped for. Almost despite myself my unspoken prayers were answered. I am among all men, most richly blessed.