

JESUS WITH WILD BEASTS

MARK 1:9-15

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Jesus' wilderness time "immediately" followed his baptism and the powerful affirmation of who he was: "*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*" Even when we are affirmed at our baptism that we too are children of God in whom He is well pleased wilderness time is a part of our lives as well.

We cannot live and love and engage life in meaningful ways without sometimes ending up in the wilderness. Wilderness times are those times when we feel we are tested to our limits, and we describe those times in wilderness terms: dry, desolate, lonely, trying, difficult, agonizing. We speak of hunger, thirst, and longing in the wilderness. There are many things we can say about these experiences but one is that we can recognize that wilderness time is a time for learning.

One of those e-mail lists making the rounds a few years ago listed significant things children have learned about life. Here are just a few of them:

"You can't trust dogs to watch your food for you."

"Don't sneeze when somebody is cutting your hair."

"You can't hide a piece of broccoli in a glass of milk."

"When your mom is mad at your dad, don't let her brush your hair."

AND, *"No matter how hard you try you cannot baptize a cat."*

These are the kinds of accelerated learning experiences we call "learning the hard way." SO, IT IS WITH THE HARD TIME IN THE WILDERNESS. A lot can be learned in the wilderness, but one lesson stands out. The wilderness can be a time of accelerated learning about priority—what really matters in our lives.

Patrick Morley in his book *The Man in the Mirror* compares the lack of a clear sense of priority to a trip to the grocery store on an empty stomach without a shopping list. Nearly everything looks delicious and you wander through the aisles without a plan, loading up the shopping cart with goodies. After the shock of the bill at checkout, there is the shock of your spouse when you arrive home with sacks of snacks and food but only three real meals in the whole bunch!

Life also presents us with many options—a myriad of ways to use our resources, time, abilities, and influence. Without a clear sense of what is most important, we can spend it all and at the end of the day find that we have not taken care of what matters most.

Jesus' time in the wilderness—coming just before he was to begin his public ministry—was a time for sorting out what mattered most and to get clear about God's will for his life.

Our text for today is from Mark and Mark dispatches the story of Jesus' temptation after his baptism in typical Mark fashion with only two verses. The other gospel writers use more space. Matthew needs five verses and Luke needs 13. It is in these longer versions of the events that we learn that Jesus was tempted by wealth, fame, and power to deviate from his mission. As we follow Jesus into the wilderness, we can see that our own wilderness time can be an important time of testing our values, looking at what is most important, and making decisions about our life's priorities.

Several years ago, a young man I knew was in the wilderness, suffering from an aggressive form of cancer. During the time of his surgeries and treatments, it was my privilege to be his pastor and to spend time with him in that wilderness. He said, "*I have learned that what I thought was very important before doesn't seem very important now, and what I took for granted and thought I could put off for another day has risen to the top of my list of priorities.*"

As painful as wilderness experiences are, they can yield more spiritual growth than the good times. They can be times of learning about ourselves, about God, about what is most important, and about

where life is headed. Without that time of stocktaking and learning—whether in the wilderness or not—life can just go along without much thought. All around us we are taught what our priorities should be.

Here are some good wilderness questions: What important relationships and friendships have I been putting off to some future time? What is God calling me to do with my life and with all the resources God has given me? What in my life right now do I take for granted? This has a lot to do with our perspective. I read a good example lately.

A businessman visiting the pier of a coastal village noticed a small boat with just one fisherman pulling up to the dock. Inside the small boat were several large yellowfin tuna. He complimented the fisherman on the fish and asked how long it took to catch them. *“Only a little while,”* the fisherman replied.

“Why didn’t you stay out longer and catch more fish?”

“I have enough to support my family’s needs.”

The businessman then asked, *“But what do you do with the rest of your time?”*

The fisherman said, *“I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, take a siesta with my wife, and stroll into the village each evening where I sip wine and play guitar with my friends. I have a full and busy life.”*

The businessman scoffed, *“I am a Harvard MBA and could help you. You should spend more time fishing and with the proceeds buy a bigger boat. With the proceeds from the bigger boat, you could buy several boats and eventually have a whole fleet of boats. You would cut out the middleman and sell directly to the processor, eventually opening your own cannery. You would control the product, processing, and distribution. You would need to leave this small village and move to Mexico City, then Los Angeles, and eventually New York City where you would run your expanding enterprise.”*

The fisherman asked, *“But, how long will all this take?”*

The MBA replied, *“Fifteen to twenty years.”*

“But what then?” the fisherman asked.

The American said, *“That’s the best part. When the time is right, you would announce an initial public offering and sell your company stock to the public and become very rich; you would make millions.”*

“Millions?” the fisherman asked. *“Then what?”*

The American said, *“Then you would retire and move to a small coastal fishing village where you would sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids, take a siesta with your wife, and stroll to the village in the evenings where you could sip wine and play guitar with your friends.”*

What is most important? Where is your life headed? These are good wilderness questions!

Although Mark gives us no details about the content of the tests, we will see in Mark’s Gospel the ways Jesus was tested by the popularity and the criticism of the crowds, by the political establishment, and by his own followers. In a way, this time in the wilderness is a preview of the struggles and testing that await him.

This is the first Sunday of Lent and we, like Jesus, are thrust into the wilderness. Lent will end in a garden, Gethsemane. That garden was also a wilderness time of testing and struggle for Jesus.

“Many of us can’t break the grip of fear and suffer from phobias we can’t overcome.” That was the headline. A virtual epidemic of fear was reported. The objects of American fear are diverse: gun violence, pandemic, economic stress, unemployment, crime, the neighborhood being overtaken by people who aren’t like us.”

And that’s one of the problems with much of our fear: IT IS NOT RATIONAL. You are powerless in the face of it and can’t talk yourself out of it. For instance, older adults fear being victims of crime. And yet, older adults, as a group, are the least likely age group to be victims of crime. The more TV an older

adult watches, the greater fear the person has of crime, suggesting that sometimes our fears have little relationship to facts.

Xenophobia, the fear of others, is widespread and generally out of proportion to the threat that's actually represented by the unknown others. Scientists say that our fear of others has been hard wired in us through years of evolution.

Before the development of human societies, vulnerable individuals found protection by huddling together in groups with similar characteristics. The tribe, (like attracting like,) provided safety. Walking in the forest, one hears a rustle in the bushes, a person emerges from the bushes. *Friend or foe?* What a relief to see that the person is "*one of us,*" a member of our tribe, somebody like us.

Today, we don't live in tribes and few of us are in danger of being jumped by someone hiding in the bushes. Still, through millions of years of evolution, our bodies react with anxiety and fear when another appears.

For example, you are walking holding the hand of your child. When we come to a place that has people you don't know you grip the hand of your child more firmly because they are not people of your own tribe and by that unknowing act (of gripping the hand of your child) you teach that child to be fearful of someone who could very well become a long and trusted friends if you met them, but now are people more likely to be shunned. Many of the 'WILD BEASTS' we encounter generate a fear that is irrational.

Sadly, what was a helpful, protective defense mechanism is now part of our xenophobia, our unhelpful, irrational fear of others. The otherwise helpful, necessary defense mechanism of fear of harm from others had become an irrational, unhelpful, unwarranted force separating us from others.

Another problem with fear is: WE CAN'T HELP IT. We speak of being "*overcome by fear,*" as if fear is this force that jumps us, comes out of nowhere and is unjustified by the circumstances, as if some wild beast has overtaken us and we are powerless to defend ourselves against it. What is a "*phobia*" if not some fear that, if we think about it, doesn't make much sense? But still we are powerless to resist and no amount of reasoning with ourselves enables us to overcome its grip.

The First Sunday of Lent always focuses upon the temptations that Jesus faced at the beginning of his ministry. Here's how this Sunday's Gospel describes that event:

"The Spirit forced Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among the wild animals, and the angels took care of him" (Mark 1:12-13).

With just a couple of sentences, Mark sketches in the briefest way what it was like for Jesus to be in the wilderness. All we are told is that Jesus was in the wilderness with "*wild animals.*" That's it.

Jesus is thrust out beyond the safe confines of his native village, out beyond the protective walls of Jerusalem, out in the wild, untamed, pathless wilderness. There he is encountered by, maybe threatened by "*wild animals.*"

Mark doesn't tell us anything about the identity of those "*wild animals,*" their species or how they were disposed toward Jesus, who is out there alone, vulnerable. That leaves us free to use our imagination. Who were those "*wild animals*" and what did they mean for Jesus? Who were the "*wild animals*" lurking in the darkness, ready to pounce upon Jesus?

When we diverge from the path we set out to travel, when we do something that is, as we say, "*out of character,*" some action that is really counter to what we know we should be doing, maybe even what we want (in our better moments) to do, it often feels like we are being jumped, pounced upon by a force that's not within us, but that has come to us.

"*What were you thinking?*" he asked the undergraduate who had just committed a terrible, immoral act.

"*How long have you been chaplain here?*" the student asked, impudently. "*That's a dumb question.*"

Obviously, if I had been thinking, I wouldn't have done this!"

Over the years I've had many Christians say to me, when they have done something they knew they should not have done, *"I was just overcome by..."* or *"I couldn't resist the desire to..."* or *"something just came over me."*

Maybe they are deluding themselves, but that's what temptation often feels like, doesn't it? We are jumped from behind, unsuspecting. We give in to an inclination that we may have felt before, but heretofore have been able to resist. We are horrified by our own actions. *"I can't believe I did this!"* we say. *"It's not me."* As if some *"wild animal"* has come out of the bushes, jumped us, and we are powerless to resist its clutches.

So, Jesus begins his ministry, out in the wilderness, alone, and vulnerable. He is jumped by *"wild animals,"* but HE ISnot powerless to resist their clutches. And because of Jesus and his power to stand up to the *"wild animals,"* even we with our fears, weaknesses, and vulnerability are also not powerless.

A seminarian in a class on Christian ministry had been an attorney in his former life, having had experience as a prosecutor and a defender. Now, the Holy Spirit had led him into seminary. He felt called by God to spend the rest of his life in prison ministry, working in behalf of the incarcerated. His classmate said he immediately liked him and his outspoken, challenging comments in class, his intensity and engagement. In conversation with him, he complemented him on his passion and his strong sense of vocation.

He responded, *"To tell the truth, I don't know how to be restrained or polite. I was raised by wolves."*

"My mother gave birth to me while she was on crack and abandoned me a few days later. Of course, never knew a father. I then bounced around at one foster home after another. Had a police record by the time I was sixteen. Then Christ came into my life, showed me a better way. He set me on the right path, tamed my demons, and well, here I am."

That phrase, *"I was raised by wolves,"* is an evocative phrase that describes what it was like for this child to go from one foster home to another, to be alone, wandering through adolescence, vulnerable. Raised by wolves. Vulnerable to, sometimes the victim of, *"wild animals."*

And yet, by the grace of God, there he was, a person of great academic, professional, and spiritual achievements. With Christ's help, he had done what Jesus had done. It could have gone the other way. The *"wild animals"* could have crushed him. Yet he persevered, with God's help. He resisted the temptation to let the wild animals best him.

It was sort of Mark's Gospel all over again. Behind the story of Jesus in the wilderness, faced by the *"wild animals,"* is a promise of Jesus: *I overcame the fear, temptation, and threat, and with my help, you can too.*

As you go forth from here, out into the wilderness, otherwise known as the place, we live, know this my friends: The one who defeated the wild beasts who would seek to harm him and change him from his course, or allure him and give him false comfort, knows firsthand what you are going through. When you are in the wilderness, He is with you.