



The First Sunday in Lent February 21, 2021

“Wilderness Times”

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“You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.”
(Mark 1:11)

Let us pray: Merciful God, you continually show us your ways of forgiveness and steadfast love. Remember not our sins, but recall your compassion to your children, satisfy the longing of your people, and fulfill all our hopes for eternal peace through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Mark’s gospel for today includes three short passages that Matthew and Luke include in their gospels too but Matthew and Luke expand the passages. Mark seems to keep the passages short and sweet but that makes one wonder why. First, we have the baptism of Jesus which was the focus of our readings a few weeks ago for the Sunday of the Baptism of our Lord. Then Mark includes the temptation story and ends with the beginning of the Galilean ministry. The Revised Common Lectionary always includes a temptation story or as some

scholars believe it should be translated as a testing story for the first Sunday in Lent. In the middle part of our gospel for today, we have Mark's version of the temptation story.

"Just what's going on out there in the wilderness?" This is a question that Matt Skinner asks in his commentary for our Gospel from Mark. It is intriguing to me to ask this question while keeping in mind the many wildernesses that we find ourselves in. Right after Jesus' baptism, the gospel states, "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." We should keep in mind that it is the Holy Spirit who leads Jesus into the scene where he has to contend with Satan. The Spirit forcefully compels Jesus there, indicated with the verb "drove out" according to the NRSV translation. The same verb appears elsewhere in Mark when Jesus exorcises unclean spirits from harassed people. The Holy Spirit possesses Jesus having entered "into him" at his baptism.

One of Jesus' first roles is to face a formidable foe in Satan. But in Mark we do not have the temptations that we read in Matthew and Luke. We do not know in Mark if Jesus was successful in passing the test. But we can get a hint from the next section of the gospel reading in which Jesus announces the advent of God's kingdom which suggests he prevailed in the wilderness. Maybe in Mark's version

of the temptation story, we are left to fill in the blank. Maybe it's our own experience of the wilderness time we face today.

I read a story this week from a pastor who said that she looked up the meaning of wilderness and said, "the definition surely rings true." Wilderness is "an uncultivated, uninhabited, and inhospitable region." This past year, at times, surely made us feel like we were living in a wilderness. For one thing, this past year has surely given us much to talk about. This story included a piece where the writer talked about a time of conversation with a group of nurses who were working on the front lines of the Corona Virus in a local hospital. The conversation was on the end of life.

These nurses as so many others in our country found themselves at the bedsides of people dying from the virus. They were the only ones in the room as family and friends were not allowed to visit. How many nurses and doctors and other medical personnel have watched more individuals take their last breath than ever before. We have seen these stories all over the country and how it has been so troubling for these workers. They find themselves in tears as they are on the front lines of the medical communities work to save lives and not able to always do so. I can only imagine how hard it has to be. I have stood by the

bedsides of many people as they take their last breath and it is very eerie at times. I cannot imagine having to possibly do that every day.

The writer of the story went on to say after she talked with the nurses and heard about their experiences, "Oh, it has been an 'uncultivated, uninhabited, inhospitable' time and place, to be sure. And yes, this has always been so, that 'wilderness' is where death is near."

What have been your wilderness experiences over this past year or even at other times in your life? The struggles that people face on a daily basis are incredible. People are lining up in long lines to receive some food from local food pantries. Some of these folks are newly unemployed and this is the only way they can try to feed their families. We keep hearing about the moratorium on evictions and the struggle of the owners as well as the people who are unable to actually pay their rent right now. There is the struggle right now to receive a vaccine for the virus. The winter cold blast and snow and sleet and rain that has taken over the weather reports throughout the country right now has caused so much havoc right now. People in Texas without electricity and water and heat in their homes has become their news headlines. There seems to be so many

examples of life in the wilderness right now. Our struggles can differ from each other's experiences.

What does this all mean for us as we continue to navigate this wilderness? The promise today is that God is in this wilderness right here and right now. No matter where the wilderness has grabbed hold of any of us or those who we hear about, God is present. God is present in the hospital corridors and at lonely hospital bedsides. God is present in our homes or in our offices, on frozen city sidewalks, beside us on another online meeting, in the classrooms with our teachers and children where there are masks to be worn and distancing to be in place.

Jesus was driven out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit and was tempted by Satan and he was with the wild beasts. We do not hear what those temptations were in Mark's Gospel or what the wild beasts were about but we do hear that the angels waited on Jesus. Going back to the story about the nurses and I repeat this is true for many nurses and medical folks throughout the country and the world, the angels are present. In the story, it was shared that one nurse talked about staying at the bedside of a dying patient from the virus and just being present for them because the family was not able to be there due to the virus restrictions. As she was caring for this patient and just being present with

them, her coworkers picked up her other patients to make sure they were being cared for and meds were being given and so on.

This nurse was keeping vigil for her patient and she talked about her fellow nurses who, without asking, picked up the rest of her work so that she could be where she was called to spend that shift. Without a doubt, she would rather have been anywhere else. Without question, it would have been better if the one dying could have been held by those who knew and loved them best. But in the absence of that, at least this one was able to be true to her own humanity. If she would no longer be a conduit for physical healing, she could be a loving presence. And as she was, perhaps she was the bearer of the only healing that really mattered. Surely those who passed meds and answered call lights on her behalf while she did so were the presence of God's own angels then, who so often appear in such times and places. Surely the angels were present.

May we have the eyes to see, to sense, to recognize those angels who wait on humanity just as they waited on Jesus. May we have ears to hear, eyes to see, senses to receive what God intends for us in this "uncultivated, uninhabited, inhospitable" time and place. We have experienced the wilderness in ways that we may not have done so in the past. At least these wilderness times are different. When we pay attention with our eyes, ears, mind, heart, and whole

being, we can find that these places do have the presence of our Lord working alongside of those who are working to relieve the pain of others.

All of those wilderness places do have the holy right there infused as they are with the presence of God. Indeed, as God comes near, aren't they at least as holy as the places we always counted on meeting God before? The final part of our gospel for today says that the kingdom of God has come near. It goes on to say that we should repent and believe in the good news. The good news is right in front of us on a daily basis. It is hard to see it or hear it at times but it is there and all we have to do is pay attention. Pay attention so that we do not dwell on the wilderness but dwell on the presence of God in our midst in so many ways.

Jesus was driven into the wilderness to be tempted but we read that the angels waited on him. The angels of the Lord are always present among us to help us through those wilderness times you know those "uncultivated, uninhabited, inhospitable" times and places. God is always pointing us to the way and has always promised God's nearness, love, provision, and hope. Jesus was baptized and God claimed him as his beloved. May his presence direct all of our wilderness times. Amen.

Let us pray: God our creator, you have given us work to do and call us to use our talents for the good of all. Guide us in our wilderness times as we work, and teach us to live in the Spirit who made us your sons and daughters, in the love

that made us sisters and brothers, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord,
amen.