

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
March 1, 2009
Mark 1:9-15
1st Sunday in Lent

And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness.

Each time I go to see her at the nursing home, I pause for a moment before punching in the code (1,2,3,4,*), and I take a deep breath. I never know if she will recognize me or not. Sometimes, we have the most wonderful conversations. We share smiles and laughter and clear connection. Other times, the conversations feel awkward for both of us because it is clear that she has no idea who I am and why I am there.

But regardless of her memory on any particular day, she always tries her best to act like she is glad that I have come. Even when we stammer to make small talk, grasping desperately for shared topics of conversation, turning once again to the family pictures on the wall for inspiration, she always tries valiantly to make me feel welcome in her presence. “Here dear,” she insists. “Come and sit on the edge of my bed.” And she will take my hand and hold it tightly, even when it is obvious to me that she does not know who I am.

And I inevitably find myself wondering about her as I make the drive back to church. What must she think, not knowing what to think? What would it be like to live with such emotionally taxing mental confusion? Her mouth smiles at me, but her eyes speak of loneliness. In her more lucid moments, she must wonder how it happened. How did she make such an unanticipated journey from independence to dependence, from clarity to confusion, from lush riverbank to parched wilderness? And even though her daughter and son-in-law are so dedicated to her care, even they cannot penetrate the isolation that now resides in her soul. Only she can do the battle with the wild beasts of dementia, of illness, of confusion, as she sits in wilderness.

Jesus was in the wilderness 40 days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts...

Last month I drove down Northwest Highway to go and teach a Bible study at another Presbyterian church. I stopped at a stoplight and looked over to a church’s playground. This church has a school attached to it, so the playground was full of kids who looked to be 5 or 6 years old. Suddenly, I saw a mass exodus occurring. The little boys were pushing each other quickly to move in one direction, laughing as they did it. The little girls all moved en masse into this playhouse structure, slamming the door behind them. I could not figure out what had just happened.

And then I saw her—a little girl with long brown hair, a bow lovingly clipped on the side. She just stood there with this painful look of confusion and rejection etched on her little face. Her posture signaled defeat. I watched her walk up to that playhouse turned fortress to try to get in the door. She pulled and pulled. Finally, the door flew open. The little girls on the inside had their hands on their hips or crossed in front of their chests. Then, another long-haired, bow clad girl made a mean face, reached out and slammed the door again on the brown headed child.

It was all I could do not to pull over and run up to the fence shouting “Stop it! Stop it!” I wanted so badly to rescue that little girl from her peer-imposed wilderness. Her head must have been spinning. One moment, she is surrounded by her friends laughing and playing. And the next moment, somebody decides she is no longer acceptable and they all run away, clinging to the security of each other. And she is left standing in a playground wilderness, totally alone, no teacher in sight, no mommy or daddy to protect her. Her little 5 year old mind permanently recording what isolation and abandonment feel like—lessons we all end up learning, but lessons we all wish we did not know. Lessons of lonely wilderness and wild beasts.

And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. Jesus was in the wilderness 40 days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts...

Jesus had traveled from his hometown for his baptism. And what a baptismal celebration it was! When he rose from the water, blessing showered down upon him. The heavens were ripped apart. The Spirit descended as if on the wings of a dove. God's voice pronounced him "Beloved" and gave him divine affirmation. Jesus was blessed and Jesus was beloved and he must have let those words soak his soul, the way the water soaked his clothes.

But, Jesus had little time to rest in his baptismal celebration moment. For immediately, the same Spirit that had gently descended turned forceful and threw Jesus out into the wilderness, far from the waters, far from the crowd of family and friends, far from the comfort of home. His heart must have beat wildly as he realized he had moved from blessing and belovedness, to wilderness and fear. At one moment, he is standing in the waters of the Jordan. The next moment, he looks around and discovers he is sitting in the lonely wilderness. Learning lessons of abandonment and isolation and wild beasts.

It is a strange turn of events for the one who is God-with-us. It seems like only yesterday he was an innocent baby in a manger. But today, he is fighting the wild beasts in the barrenness of wilderness. But why? Why did Jesus have to go there? Why did God's Spirit seem to turn on him and drive him out into the abandoned land? What might this story tell us about our God, and, consequently, ourselves?

I think this biblical story unveils for us a very human reality. It appears that we do not have much choice as to whether or not we will have to encounter the wilderness during our lives. Regardless if we land there due to illness in our old age, or due to the plotting of others in our youth, or due to economic crisis, or a failure of relationship; try as we might, the wilderness does not seem to be an experience we can successfully avoid.

Now, we try to like crazy to avoid it. We silently bargain with God, promising to live more faithfully or to do better at resisting temptation, if God will just give us that little "get out of wilderness free" card. We live our lives, hoping against hope that our journey will simply circumvent wilderness, perhaps skirting its edges, but avoiding the wild path that cuts through the middle of it.

But that silent bargaining act of evasion is an illusion. Our Scripture shows us that even Jesus could not avoid the wilderness. Even Jesus could not run from that sense of abandonment, of fear, of tragedy. With Jesus, God's Spirit drove him there, in the very beginning of his ministry. Waking up in wilderness was an experience that not even God's Son could avoid. Like my friend in the nursing home and that little girl on the playground, Jesus found himself learning lessons of abandonment, of loneliness, of isolation, of fearful wrestling with wild beasts.

And the reality of Jesus' wilderness experience leaves us with a hard truth. It helps us see that time in wilderness is a part of faithful human living. None of us has an escape hatch. Therefore, it does us no good to spend so much of our time and energy trying uselessly to avoid it. We will all have moments or days or months or, God forbid, maybe even years when we will find ourselves in wilderness, living with the wild beasts. But, even if we cannot choose whether or not to experience it, we **can** choose how we will encounter it and survive it, once we look around and realize we are there.

Our Gospel story offers a clue about our survival. When we suddenly look around and realize that we are sitting in the wilderness, this story reminds us that we do not sit alone. For in some mysterious way, Jesus sits with us. This is one thing Jesus' wilderness encounter tells me. It tells me that it was so important for God to endure everything we have to endure as creatures, that God's own Spirit drove God's only child out into the wilderness so God might feel our suffering with us. It is truly incredible, when you take it seriously.

Jesus did not have to stay in the wilderness for 40 days. He was a part of God and possessed such power that he could have ended his suffering at any time. But this God of ours was not content to overpower the human experience. This God of ours wanted to take it all in, for our sake. And this meant that not even Jesus was immune to the suffering of the wilderness.

Professor Nicolas Wolterstoff has come to the same conclusion. Years ago, his bright, life-loving son was killed in a mountain climbing accident. In his book Lament for a Son, he daily reflects on his wilderness journey through the tragedy. He writes, “God is not only the God **of** the sufferers but the God **who** suffers. The pain and fallenness of humanity have entered into his heart. Through the prism of my tears I have seen a suffering God... And great mystery: to redeem our brokenness and lovelessness the God who suffers **with** us did not strike some mighty blow of power but sent his beloved Son to suffer like us, and through his suffering to redeem us from suffering and evil. **Instead of explaining, our suffering God shares it.**” (1)

Instead of explaining why we encounter the wilderness, our God chose to encounter it with us. In Jesus, our God chose to take even that sense of abandonment, of loneliness, of isolation, of fearful wrestling with the wild beasts into God’s own heart, so that when we found ourselves in that place, we could remember that Jesus had been there too and we would survive.

But our Gospel story also gives us another clue about Jesus’ experience in the wilderness. When Jesus was out there, by himself, surrounded by the wild beasts, the angels waited on him. Even in his sense of abandonment and fear, God did not leave him completely alone. The one who proclaimed him blessed and beloved sustained him, even in the barren wilderness. It was an important lesson for our Messiah to learn—that he could depend on God’s sustaining power. That even when all he could see were the wild beasts and the face of evil, the angels were always hovering nearby, making sure he would endure.

That is a promise I take with me every time I visit my friend in the nursing home. And that is the promise I held back up to God, as I looked at the little girl on the playground. The promise that, even as they wrestled the wild beasts in wilderness living, God was always hovering nearby, making sure they would endure. And that one day, just as Jesus did, they too would leave that wilderness time behind.

Those two things are all I can say for any of us living in times of wilderness. That somehow, God is present in a way that strengthens and sustains. That somehow, even the barrenness and hostility of the wilderness sits in the middle of God’s heart. We know from Scripture and we know from our own lives that walking through or sitting in the wilderness cannot be avoided. It is a part of life. But it can be endured.

And for me, that is powerfully good news from this story. For while we won’t be rescued from it, we won’t be left alone in it either. And on most days that promise of presence is enough.

(1) Wolterstoff, Nicolas. Lament for a Son