

“A WILDERNESS GIFT”

Mark 1:9-15 February 18th, 2017

As you know, today is the first Sunday in Lent. A pastor of a congregation which was then a new mission boasted of a membership of all sorts of people who were relatively young in the faith. They had made a decision about the observance of Lent. “We don’t celebrate the season of Lent here,” she told me. “It’s just too depressing.”

Pastor Janet Hunt on her web site [Dancing with the Word](#), one of my favorite sites, told this story. She continues with her reaction to this decision: I remember walking away puzzled. I remember looking hard at myself knowing it would never occur to me to just ‘skip over’ an entire church season. I was surely neither creative nor courageous enough to do so. At the same time, I can also remember knowing that, at least in part, she was on to something then. For not long before I had seen the truth of this in the church I was then serving. We had experienced several devastating deaths—including that of a young child. It was a time of lament and I had not shied away from the difficulty of our shared experience in my preaching. We had a young family come to visit us in the midst of that hard time. I followed up with a phone call to learn that they were going to keep looking. Our place, she told me, was just ‘too sad.’ And it was. We were. I tried to explain that it wasn’t always that way, but that just then we were, as they had experienced in a ‘sad time.’ No matter. They continued their search for a congregation which they believed would uplift them on their journey.

Pastor Hunt reflects on their journey: I remember being sad about that, but I was not sorry. For such times of testing come to us all. Sometimes we can see them coming. Sometimes we can’t. But to ignore them. To pretend that

they are not, would seem foolhardy at best. I am of the same mind about “Lent.” For yes, it can be sad—or “depressing” as another pastor once told me. But I have always been of the mindset that to enter into the experience of Lent even or especially with its sadness or its struggle—particularly at times in our lives when we are not ourselves especially sad or struggling—can be a great gift to us at those other inevitable times when we are. Sad or struggling, that is. It can be a time of looking at and “trying on” such struggles and losses head on with the result that in that time when they become ours to experience, and those times will surely come, we will then have some resources with which to deal with them.

This Sunday we are beginning a Lenten sermon series on Rehab. The idea of rehab could be for us a helpful approach to the high holy season, which has historically led people on a path of readiness for baptism on Easter morning. This path included making an intentional choice to turn away from present practices, beliefs, relationships, and patterns of behavior, in order to enter into a time of intense spiritual preparation that led the exploring believers not only to entrance into Christian community through baptism, but to live as disciples in a state of hope, healing, and wholeness, which Jesus called eternal life.

First we are called today into the wilderness with Jesus. It seems clear that the rehabilitative needs we face today call upon us, both as individuals and as a human family, to begin this season by following Jesus into the wilderness. Cardiac rehabilitation is but one form of rehab the people today may need to undergo. We think about the present opioid and heroin crisis that is sweeping the nation. We think about people in recovery from alcohol abuse, gambling, and sex addiction. We think about people being released from prison and re-entering society. We think about soldiers returning from difficult tours of duty. We

think about people grieving the loss of a loved one, or the loss of a job, or moving to a new community or into retirement.

The only thing that seems clear is that the rehabilitative needs we face today call upon us, both as individuals and as a human family, to begin this season by following Jesus into the wilderness. Because these problems are each a kind of wilderness, aren't they? As they say in the twelve-step programs, "The first step is admitting we have a problem."

What is the wilderness? I want to suggest that the wilderness represents those times in our lives when we begin to face, head on, our own brokenness. We admit we have fallen and can't get up on our own. We admit we have lost our way. We admit we are facing trials and temptations. We admit we have come face to face with evil. We admit that we can no longer manage on our own. We need help. We need a Savior.

For some, being in the wilderness is a temporary condition. For others, it is the status quo of their entire lives. But whether our wilderness is temporary or seems to be permanent, we experience it the same. Being in the wilderness is a time of testing.

When we speak of wilderness, we find ourselves primarily pointing to places: the desert, uncultivated land, unsettled spaces. The wilderness is where the wild things are. The wilderness is where there is no ready supply of food or fresh water. The wilderness is desolate. It is a place of desperation. But wilderness also speaks to periods of life or states of mind: lost, unsettled, wandering, discerning, tempted by Satan, tested by God. The wilderness is also a time of trial. It is a probationary period.

Mark describes this period in Jesus' life immediately after his

baptism. “The spirit drove him into the wilderness” a separate place, far away from the hungry crowds that would follow him in the months ahead. This was the only place and the only sustained time he would have to wrestle with the forces that work against the will of God.

It wasn't a choice for him to go there: it was a godly necessity. The Spirit drove him into the wilderness, not like a chauffeur in a limousine, but drove him like a cowboy prodding a steer. Before he could begin work as God's beloved, Jesus had to face hard realities—he had to prepare for the test that would eventually ensure his obedience to God, even unto death.

The test involved beating down temptations to follow the ways of the world instead of the pathway to God, temptations to give in to the seductive powers that work against love and grace. Though alone, Jesus was comforted, in the form of angels, by the same Spirit that announced him as God's beloved and that required his 40-day test in a dark place of ultimate danger.

As we referenced earlier, the wilderness was where the wild animals were. In today's reading from the passage in Mark it said: “He was with the wild beasts.” This emphasizes the difficulty of Jesus' time in the wilderness and serves as a symbol of the strength of the temptations that confronted him. The Greek word used for “beasts” refers to animals with a brutal nature—not Isaiah's image of lambs lying down with lions. Being tempted by Satan was as demanding as wild animals threatening to devour him.

St. Mark reveals a vivid scene, but with briefest description, leaving us to flesh out the details. Perhaps the image of the beasts can help us understand the lonely ordeal of Jesus' experience. He had to face down the powers that would seek to prevent him from doing God's will in his coming ministry.

Proof that Jesus defeated those powers—totally, completely and decisively—is found in the way he conducted himself after he left the place of temptation. Afterward, Jesus moved out among God’s people, loving them as God loves, teaching them about God, and finally proving that we are loved by God without condition, by his making us all worth dying for.

In responding to that gracious love, we find ourselves once more in Lent. We are reminded that we too are “assaulted by many temptations.” We are called to dedicate ourselves in our ‘weaknesses’ to face the same tests that Jesus confronted in his wilderness-but not alone, for we each can find God ‘mighty to save’ us.

In the wilderness, the aim of the tempter was to move Jesus from faith in God to doubt. The forces that work against God also press us toward selfishness and away from love. Jesus resisted temptation by keeping himself connected to God. And that is exactly how we can resist the beasts of our lives, how we can overcome the evil that lurks within us and the sin that is a part of us, all that lingers in the midst of our humanity.

We resist, as Jesus did, by staying connected to God through the power of the scriptures and prayer and sacraments, and through regular self-examination and confession, through repenting of our sin, accepting God’s forgiveness and leading renewed lives. By these means we defeat evil and overcome temptation.

Yes, we can defeat these beasts, as Jesus did, by staying connected to God. And we don’t have to do it alone! As the angels waited on Jesus in his wilderness experience, we are sustained by the Holy Spirit of God and through the aid of God’s beloved disciples in our midst, our brothers and sisters in Christ,

who minister to us and help us face down the beasts of our lives as they face down theirs. Just as Jesus' time in the wilderness came after his baptism, so does ours, as our Christian formation continues to flow from that foundation.

Self-examination during Lent comes as essential reappraisal in the midst of our journeys in faith and takes form in our baptismal renunciations. As we promise at baptism, we commit to turning away from “all the spiritual forms of wickedness that rebel against God” that “corrupt and destroy the creatures of God.”

The beasts that we encounter in our wilderness reflect the power of evil that is real and active in our lives. If we dare become self-aware, we see it, feel it. It is a power that gets inside us and an influence that comes from outside of us—a force that draws us toward what is wrong. It is personal, because it deals with each of us as a person; deals with each of us individually in our darkest and most trying moments.

Evil can enter our lives when hard decisions need to be made, and we encounter it most strongly in those areas where we are weakest, in our desire to serve ourselves first, through greed, excessive pride, divisiveness and prejudice, gluttony of food and material possessions, the desire to control others, cowardice, faithlessness and many other forms of selfishness that draw us from the way of God.

Above all, the temptations we fight are destructive. Satan's beasts find a way to poison and harm what is good and loving in the world and in our lives. The evil that works in us is our enemy, seeking to grab hold of us to work against God and against our brothers and sisters whom we hurt when we give in to such powers. The evil also works against us individually, eating us from the inside out, like a cancer.

The temptations that Jesus met in the wilderness are also our temptations, drawing us to a selfishness that prevents us from showing love and respect to others, pressing us to manipulate the world into the form that we want rather than that which God intends. But the power of God's love can help us resist the temptations and defeat the beasts that dwell among us. From our baptism, we gain the sign that marks us Christ's own forever. Our success in resisting evil, turning from our sins into lives renewed in love, moves us beyond our time in the wilderness. And as recipients of the Good News Jesus proclaims, we are empowered by the reality of God's kingdom that has come near, and we can become a people, who, with God's love, can transform the world.

Perhaps it is enough for us to know that for all the terror the wilderness can hold, God's protection is there for us, too, even as it was for Jesus. And as we remember this? Perhaps our deep remembering is also enough to enable us to withstand the evil which threatens to overcome us when we find ourselves embattled, too.

As we close this morning I would like to share with you the story of Kayla Mueller, the young woman who recently died while in captivity by the terror group, ISIS. This young woman endured much during her imprisonment. Somehow she managed to get out a powerful witness as to what sustained her then. Let me read to you a part of her letter to her family which was written nine months ago:

“I remember mom always telling me that all in all in the end the only one you really have is God. I have come to a place in my experience where, in every sense of the word, I have surrendered myself to our creator because literally there was no one else...by God and by your prayers I have felt tenderly cradled in free-fall. I have been shown in darkness, light and have learned that even in prison, one can be free. I am grateful.”

It seems to me that if there is a gift in wilderness times it is this: we are reminded that “in the end, the only one you really have is God.” And what a wonder it is in such time to experience being ‘tenderly cradled in free-fall’ by that same God. So the next time you feel embattled remember that God is all there is AND trust that you will be “tenderly cradled in free fall” by God’s great love. I expect that will be more than enough. Amen? Amen.