

Lent 1B
Mark 1:9-15
Wilderness

The wilderness, or desert, is a major component in the biblical landscape. Wilderness was physically a desolate place – and around the River Jordan, where we meet Jesus today, it was a barren wasteland of limestone hills and deep ravines.

For the ancients, the wilderness wasn't a benign, friendly place. It was beyond the bounds of safe civilization. It was a place that existed outside of what was culturally acceptable. Nice people didn't choose to go there. You were likely to meet unwholesome characters there, even wild beasts. And if the devil was to be found lurking anywhere, he was most certainly to be found in the wilderness –the very place considered to be the abode of evil spirits.

Jesus was baptized by John “*and immediately, the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness*”. He was **driven** by, thrust out by, the Spirit - not a Sunday School picnic wandering, nor a moseying off to a secluded, silent retreat – he was driven; forced; there was no real choice. There's urgency implied here. And it's no mere coincidence that this wilderness experience which involved temptations from Satan and the presence of both wild beasts and angels, immediately follows Jesus' baptism. His baptism marked him as ready to begin his work and mission.

This period in the wilderness is often thought of as an interlude in which Jesus was preparing for this work and mission; as if he was baptised, then tested and, having passed that, was then ready to set about his work. And this is how we tend to read the Gospel accounts, in that sort of sequence. In our modern work-oriented mind-set, we would tend to equate Jesus' work with the healings, the teaching and all that which followed.

But let's back up a bit with this. And I think this is where Mark's economy of words and detail puts a different spin on things. Unlike the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Mark's Gospel doesn't give us any detail. There's no prolonged story here of the different temptations that Satan put before Jesus, no detail of Jesus' responses. There's only one verse that deals with this wilderness time: “He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him”. Then in the next verse, we find him coming to Galilee to proclaim the Gospel.

A strong theme in Mark's Gospel is that of Jesus' confrontation with the forces of evil –we've seen this already in the passages from Mark we've encountered earlier this year – Jesus gets into casting out demons very quickly in his ministry. The title of one book about the Gospel of Mark is "*Binding the Strong Man*" says it well– Jesus as the one proving to be stronger than Satan. Jesus' kingdom is presented as a kingdom, an environment, a place of being where evil has no hold, where evil has been defeated and bound. Mark portrays Jesus' primary work as being the throwing over of the claims and causes of evil in our lives: the battle with the forces of evil.

And this work starts in the wilderness, with Jesus being tempted by Satan. In Mark's account, tempted seems to mean tested, as in a wrestling, a test of strength. "Jesus' forty days in the desert were the first phase of his struggle with Satan, his battle against the forces of evil. The Spirit drove Jesus into the abode of evil to begin the showdown"¹: a showdown which would continue with Jesus' healings and exorcisms, and culminate in Jesus' final work –his defeating of death and his rising again. So, the wilderness isn't the preparation for Jesus' real work, it is his real work.

Now here's where we can begin to join some dots into our own lives, and particularly into this season of Lent. The character of Lent is often described as a desert-like stripping back to essentials. In our personal lives we may deny ourselves of some of our usual life pleasures. In the externals of our worship life, we dress down the church and remove ornamentation and make other changes in the liturgy. All of these serve to reflect God's invitation to strip ourselves back as an inner or internal work –to remove the facades and decorations of our lives to bring ourselves face to face with God, in order to do some serious work on our lives as Christ bearers, on our lives as people baptised into Christ's life and death.

So we hear the phrase "the wilderness within". Just as in our Gospel passage we see Jesus going into a wilderness, into an untamed place where evil lurked and where great temptation and testing was to be found and where he did his real, primary work, so we also –if we are to take our baptism seriously –may be taken by the Spirit into our own wildernesses.

And why do we call it the "wilderness within?" Because that's where lurk all the temptations, all the things that can seduce us away from a true

¹ George Martin *Bringing the Gospel of Mark to Life*. 2005 P.14

Christian walk. Not only that, these same things obstruct the deep work of God in which God is able to transform us and heal us. We might blame the lures of the world out there for sin, or for those things that get in the way of a deep and close relationship with Christ –but the choices are made *within* us –the choices we make for how we live our lives, how we think, how we respond to others, how we speak –these all come from within us. I’m not talking essentially big ticket items like pornography or theft or adultery; I’m talking of the stuff that just *is*, in us – the hurts and bruises we carry which so often drive the un-Christlike reactions and responses we make to life situations. And so often too, we keep these tucked away from our immediate awareness. These inner hurts and life damages are often held so deep, out of reach –and, in that way we have of intuitively setting up functional protection - often kept there to protect ourselves from the pain there is in the awareness of them; but still this pain reaches out to drive our behaviour, getting in the way of truly showing Christ in our lives in the way we want to. The work of Lent is to bring these from the darkness into the light of Christ for healing.

Lent gives us opportunity to enter and face our internal wildernesses with all their wild beasts and forces of evil. Following the way of Christ in his wilderness work, Lent calls us into an intentional seeking of a deeper walk with God, and to that primary work of our Christian lives which must be done in our insides –in our hearts and minds. When we allow the reflective and penitential and austere character of the season to sharpen our awareness and senses –which is part of that stripping back, that Lenten discipline and observance –in the quietness and reflection, those things that stand in the way of deep transformation are able to rise and make themselves known. And they’re painful to deal with. So it can certainly seem like we’re being thrust into the wilderness, into hostile territory.

And to finish –in case you’re seeing this Lenten business as all doom and gloom: Jesus’ work in opposing and defeating the forces of evil was to open the way for us into an abundant life, where we would be transformed and freed from all that gets in the way of the fullness and overflowing joy and peace that God intends for his creation. This is life-affirming work, not life-denying. But it does require that we attend to our inner life and be open to a mega clean-up.

As a symbolic example: Yesterday, as a parish, we got stuck into all sorts of nooks and crannies and shadowy corners of the church, and brought into the light of day things that had been neglected or hidden for decades. We sifted and sorted, we scrubbed and cleaned, we tossed an

enormous amount of rubbish out, we got rid of things that had had their day and were no longer functional. We celebrated finding things that were thought to be lost. And it was hard work and tiring. And we put things back together again, in order— and in all, the place was transformed. You can see some of this around about, but the real work, the real focus and transformation, was done inside the closed places, behind the doors. And that will actually make a difference in the life of this place.

And the questions as we begin Lent: are you open to being drawn by the Spirit into the desolate places of your own lives? Are you open to working with Jesus in the transformation, the renovation, the cleaning out of your lives? Or at least of taking the first step —of asking God to show you what is lurking within, ready to come into the light and be dealt with?