

## **SITTING IN THE ASHES**

The author of Mark's Gospel, with almost shocking brevity, relates three major events: Jesus' baptism, temptation in the desert and first preaching in Galilee. The sequence of events is significant, not simply because it seems the natural order of things, but because in a new exodus Jesus recapitulates the journey of Israel: baptism (in the experience of the Red Sea), struggles in the desert (40 years wandering in the wilderness) and good news (entry into the promised land). In a similar move, Paul drew a parallel between the Corinthian church's experience of baptism, table fellowship and temptations, and Israel's baptism in the sea, sharing of God-given food and drink, and temptations in the desert. The texts and the experiences of God's people unfold, layer upon layer...

**Baptism** *In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

Baptism is our response to God's initiative, our reply to God's gift . Through baptism we accept who we are – named as beloved and invited into a new life. Because of baptism, because we know and affirm that we belong to God, we can face desert testing with the confidence that God is with us always.

Jesus comes to be baptized out of obedience to God and in solidarity with all humanity. In this act, Jesus enters into the common circumstance of lost humanity – he identifies with sinners and outcasts of this world. He is baptized, because that is what God desires – God claims and names Jesus in this act of baptism – establishes his true identity.

Similarly, when we are baptized our true identity is established. We celebrate the gift of belonging to God. We respond to God's divine activity in our lives and in our world. We participate in the right relationship with God made possible in Jesus. We become who God's says we are – *children of God*. Remember your baptism and give thanks.

**Temptation** *And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*

Remember also Jesus' temptation in the desert. Moments after he was baptized – as soon he was named God's beloved, Jesus was sent by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted. There are no details concerning the experience in Mark's account – nothing about hunger or fasting, nothing about the nature of the struggle or its outcome.

Jesus' forty days in the wilderness parallel Israel's forty years in the wilderness, Moses' forty days on Sinai, and Elijah's forty day trip to Horeb. It is what we commemorate in the forty days of Lent. Hopefully, the forty days of Lent will provide you with an opportunity for prayer and reflection. What draws you away from God? Lent is a time to change our ways and face a new direction.

And we need this wilderness time. We need to experience the crisis induced by a sense of God's absence. Wilderness is a place of hostile forces, a place of despair and menace. One way or another we all walk in the wilderness. Our wilderness may be that of addiction and substance abuse; it may be a jungle of depression and despair. Perhaps our wilderness is an economic wasteland that reflects the world's current financial disarray and capitalizes on fear and anxiety. Our wilderness may be one of grief and pain, of illness and chronic health struggles. Wilderness takes many forms beyond the literal place of desolation and loneliness.

This biblical image of wilderness – of desert – is key to our spiritual maturity. We are meant to take these forty days of Lent and to imitate the experience of Jesus – to metaphorically spend our own time in the desert.

There is a saying in Jewish literature, "Every tear brings the messiah closer!" It expresses the belief that a certain quantity of tears needs to be shed before any true joy can inhabit us. It is to be understood mystically rather than literally – in order to be filled by God one must first be emptied. Because we are human we are a murky cauldron of emotion and desire – full of inner confusion that distracts us from God's grace and God's loving desire for us. In the wilderness we pour out that chaotic cauldron. The desert empties us. We experience and expose ourselves to silent, unseen, transforming things in the desert times of our lives.

I mentioned at our Ash Wednesday service the other evening that every culture has ancient stories, myths, which teach that all of us, at times, have to sit in the desert – in the ashes. We all know, for example, the story of Cinderella. The name itself literally means, the little girl (*puella*) who sits in the ashes (*cinders*). The moral of the story is: Before you get to be beautiful, before you get to marry the prince or princess, before you get to go to the great feast, you must first spend some quiet time in the ashes, humbled, smudged, tending to duty and the unglamorous – waiting. Lent is that season, a time to sit in the ashes.

**Gospel Proclamation**    *Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."*

Knowing that we are children of God, emptying ourselves so that we can be filled by the Spirit of God – this is what helps make us able to receive and believe the good news that Jesus proclaims: we are not alone in the ashes – we are not alone in the desert or in our wilderness journey. Jesus spent his time in the wilderness. He understands what we face. Jesus was driven out into difficult days and places. He was tempted and was with the wild beasts. The angels waited on him. Jesus was not alone.

Jesus tells us that this is the place and now is the time – God steps into human history in a unique and decisive way through the person of Jesus – through him we become an invaded planet, enfleshed by God. And Jesus tells us how to respond: repent and believe. Turn around – shift the direction of your life – look, listen and give your full attention to God’s way.

According to Mark, Jesus came out of the wilderness and entered into public ministry. We, too, can emerge from the wilderness and walk into the world ready to serve – to be the hands and feet of Christ. Jesus is with us in our wilderness sojourn, and Jesus is with us as we work to be a part of the world’s healing. We are never, ever alone – we can walk confidently by faith.

Through Christ we are empowered to live boldly, to be fully present in each moment, and to live for the sake of the world. As we enter this season of Lent may we open ourselves fully to the experience, remembering that without sublimation we can never attain that which is sublime – to truly enter a feast there must first be a fast – to come properly to Easter there must first be a time of desert, ashes, heaviness, and tears. Let us pray...

*Mighty Spirit, lead us in the wilderness, but do not let us go. Help us learn through times of testing to follow Jesus. In the wilderness we are purified, almost against our will – it is through God’s effort that we endure the time of testing – we need only the courage to show up. Give us that courage, Holy One. Guide us in the wilderness experience of Lent to courageously face the chaos and demons within us. Help us to remember our baptism – to spend this time in the desert – to repent and believe the good news. **Amen.***