

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text for today is the Gospel of Mark. In today's lesson, we hear about Jesus being baptized then tested in the wilderness, John the Baptist being arrested, and Jesus beginning His ministry with the proclamation that the kingdom of God is at hand. That's a lot of action packed into eight little verses! And there's a lot here we could talk about. But today is the first Sunday in Lent, and so it's those forty days in the wilderness that I want to focus on.

When Matthew and Luke tell the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, they provide quite a bit more detail. It's a full-blown drama with two actors, Jesus and the devil, set in the desert. Mark, by contrast, is so laconic in his description of what happens that you could almost miss it if you're not careful. "He was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan, and He was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on Him." Then boom, it's over, and Jesus is off getting started on His ministry.

But even if it sounds to *us* like Mark is breezing over the important details of the temptation story, his original audience probably did not feel that way. They would have had no trouble understanding what Mark was getting at, because they were steeped in the Scriptures and they knew that every word, every image that Mark uses is dripping with significance. As far as Mark and his hearers were concerned, this was not a new story but the continuation of a very old one, one that goes all the way back to the beginning.

Everything in today's short text takes on new layers of meaning when considered in the light of the Old Testament. For instance, when Mark says that the heavens were "torn apart" as Jesus was being baptized, those in the know would have recalled these words from Isaiah. "Oh, that You would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before You." (Isaiah 64:1) They would have known that God Himself was doing something big, that He was making His presence known in this Man Jesus. And the location of the baptism itself, the Jordan River, brims with significance, because it was the final border the Israelites crossed to reach the Promised Land. Even John the Baptist's outfit – his camel hair and leather belt – mentioned in the previous verses, are an allusion to the prophet Elijah that Mark's original audience would have recognized immediately.

So when Mark gets to the part where he reports that the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness, his hearers would have been more than ready to recognize what a momentous thing was about to occur. They would have remembered the children of Israel, wandering in the desert for forty years, struggling to be faithful and obedient to the God Who had saved them. They would not have been at all surprised or puzzled that Jesus's ministry had to begin with a lengthy stint in the wilderness, contending with wild beasts and the devil himself, because in some ways, that is how their own story began. And Jesus is about to rewrite the ending to that story.

That rewritten story ends of course with Jesus's victory on the cross and His glorious resurrection, but right now, on this first Sunday of Lent, it's the wilderness that is my focus.

Just that word, wilderness, is evocative. For us today, or most of us anyway, it's a word with positive connotations. Wilderness is beautiful. It's pristine. It's a place we city dwellers go to escape the daily grind and get fresh air and peace. We often pay good money to get away to the wilderness for a while.

Not so with the ancient Israelites! Wilderness in the Bible is a place of desolation, of testing, of trial. For one thing, land that is isolated and wild in that part of the world is always desert. Deserts may have their own stark beauty, but they are not places filled with flowing water or shady trees or other features that might offer human refreshment. And Mark's one detail about the desert to which Jesus is driven makes this clear. There are wild beasts in this desert. It is a dangerous place!

The grimness of the Biblical desert holds spiritual significance. Maybe in a village or on a farm, you could still labor under the delusion that you can make it on your own, or make it as a society at least. But those comforts are stripped away from you in the desert, where, in order to survive, you must throw yourself upon the mercy of the Lord.

Such was the case with the Israelites who traveled with Moses. At first, when the Hebrew slaves escape from Egypt and the cruel Pharaoh and reach safety on the other side of the Red Sea, it sounds like a happily ever after story. But the very next scene has them in the desert, crying out for water and food and grumbling to Moses that he has taken them away from the meat pots of Egypt to die of hunger in the wilderness. God gave them water at Meribah, and He gave them manna from heaven to eat, and still they grumbled. In that first flush of victory, as the waters closed over their captors, they praised God as their savior, but it wasn't long before they were worshiping a golden calf and turning their backs on the Lord.

So another way we might think of wilderness is that it is a place that reveals your true self. Without your creature comforts, without your distractions, separated from the things in life that you cling to, what do you become? The Israelites became disobedient. Ungrateful. Idolatrous. Faithless.

This is the story of Israel, and Mark's hearers were well aware that they were still living that story. At the beginning of Mark's Gospel, Israel is again in the wilderness, this time flocking to John the Baptist, and they find themselves again standing on the banks of the Jordan at the threshold of the Promised Land. Let's call it now what it is – the Kingdom of God.

Enter Jesus.

Jesus is driven into the wilderness. Now the Greek word that gets translated as wilderness here, or in some versions, desert, is *eremos*. This is significant, for reasons which I will come to in a moment.

So Jesus is driven into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. We don't get any other details about the nature of this testing, but Matthew and Luke do such a wonderful job describing the temptations that I will leave you to reread those passages if you like, and if I get to preach the first Sunday of next year's Lent, I will have a lot to say about what those temptations symbolize.

The only thing we get from Mark really is that Jesus goes to the desert to do battle with the devil, and obviously, He wins, because the very next thing that happens is He starts to proclaim the good news that the time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand.

It's not a final victory over Satan, but it's the beginning of the end for Old Scratch. In fact, in Jesus's first public miracle in Mark, He heals a man with an unclean spirit. He's coming after the junior devils too. There will be another battle with sin, death, and the devil, on the cross, and then the victory will be decisive.

Jesus goes into that wilderness to rewrite the ending to Israel's story. He goes to blaze a trail for us, too, we who are also part of Israel's story. This means we can begin the season of Lent on a triumphant note; Jesus has already jumped into the ring with Satan and knocked him out, so what have we to fear?

But now let's go back to that word *eremos*. I began this sermon with the claim that wilderness in the Bible conjures images of danger, desolation, and fear.

But that's not all it is. There is a positive side to wilderness as well. It is also a place of miracles and revelation and transformation.

Although Jesus is driven into the wilderness in today's text, there are other places in the Gospels where He chooses to go to *eremos*. Consider, for instance, Luke chapter 5, verse 16. Jesus is here in the thick of His earthly ministry and pressed in on all sides by the crowds. As my ESV Bible puts it, Jesus responds by choosing to "withdraw to desolate places and pray." And then He's right back at it, preaching, and teaching, and healing.

The word translated as "desolate place" is that word *eremos*.

In other words, wilderness is also something that Jesus Himself seeks out. And as it is our job as Christians to model our lives on Jesus, I would like to suggest that we too should seek out *eremos*. In fact, that is what the ancient tradition of Lenten observance is all about.

A lot of people love to be in nature because they think it's a place where they can *find* themselves, as in, find their true selves. I think the Bible supports this notion, in a metaphorical sense of course, but also, if you have read your Bible attentively you will know that you should be careful what you wish for!

The Israelites found their true selves in the desert; they discovered they were disobedient and faithless!

When we withdraw into the wilderness, we too might find more than we bargained for.

The idea of seeking out wilderness, metaphorically, is akin to the discipline of fasting. And in fact, some type of fasting might be your particular route to *eremos*.

When we fast or withdraw into an isolated place or otherwise seek to deepen our spiritual practices, what we are doing is letting go of some of our crutches. That is one reason that fasting from food has always been such an integral part of Jewish and Christian spiritual tradition. Not because it is self-punishment or a way to do penance or earn favor from God. It's because when you are hungry, like the Israelites were when they entered the desert, you find out something important about yourself. When you are hungry, do you get closer to God or further away from Him? When you are put to the test, in what or whom do you place your trust?

There are lots of other ways to fast besides not eating, of course. Many people fast from other comforts, distractions, or things they have come to feel they cannot live without but know deep in their hearts they *can* live without, and maybe should *try* to live without, just for a little bit. When people fast from such things, they often find their assumptions about themselves are shattered. They find they are weaker than they thought, more inclined to disobedience or doubt than they realized. Fasting can be one of the quickest ways to shatter our illusions about our own strengths.

It's at times like that when the devil would like to jump in and offer us all sorts of goodies – pleasures, riches, power – so that we will depend on him and he will have us exactly where he wants us. But that's also when Jesus jumps in and invites us to turn to Him instead, to come to know Him and love Him and rely on Him in a way that is deeper than what we have experienced before.

I think it's significant that the Israelites were tested in the wilderness *after* their miraculous rescue from Egypt. The story doesn't just end with "and they lived happily ever after." It continues and gets more interesting. The life of faith is like that; it has peaks and valleys, highs and lows. We know that. You may have had wonderful times of spiritual peace in your life, even spiritual ecstasy. I hope you have. But there will always be trials of one kind or another so long as we live on this earth, and the last thing we want is for those trials to take us further away from Jesus.

And many times, those trials come on us against our will. Sickness, sorrows, depression, broken relationships, financial difficulties, career disappointments, shattered dreams; these can all feel like spiritual wildernesses. It would compound our suffering a millionfold if in those times of trial we turned against God, like the Israelites in the desert turned to a golden calf, instead of using that suffering as an impetus to draw closer to the Lord.

One of the reasons for voluntary withdrawal into *eremos* is to prepare us for just such times of involuntary suffering. So that during life's inevitable lows we deepen our relationship with Jesus rather than let it grow cold. It's why fasting and other Lenten practices are so important to church tradition.

If you find yourself without drink, will you seek out the Living Water? If you find yourself without food, will you be even hungrier for the Holy Supper? If you find yourself lost in the wilderness, will you give way to doubt, question your faith, give in to despair? Or will you let God lead you to the Promised Land?

Because of Jesus, we no longer have to be terrified of the desert, the wild beasts, or Satan himself. We no longer have to fear life's trials or our own weaknesses and shortcomings and sinful impulses. Jesus has already won the victory. And yet we still allow ourselves to be led astray. We still find ourselves lost in the desert sometimes, even though we have the Map!

Lent is a good time to stop and take stock of the reasons we get turned around in the wrong direction. How can we get better at following Jesus? How can we make more space in our busy lives for prayer and worship and thanksgiving? How can we walk a straighter path?

If you were to set off on a trip to the wilderness, the actual wilderness, say Alaska, the Australian Outback, or the Amazon jungle or some place like that, what would you bring? Odds are, you would pack the essentials and leave the nonessentials behind. You would bring the things you need to survive, but you would be very foolish to try to take anything that would weigh you down or distract you from concentrating on the terrain or which would imperil you in any way.

Now imagine that Lent is like taking a spiritual trip into the wilderness. I don't mean plan some severe or stringent fast or wear a hair shirt or anything like that. I mean, take the time to think afresh about the essentials of the spiritual life.

What do you really need to draw closer to Jesus? His Word. His body. His blood. A contrite heart. Spiritual fellowship. Prayer. I could go on and make a whole long list, but I think you get the idea. The real question is, what is distracting us from those essentials? What is getting in the way of a closer walk with Jesus?

Let's use Lent as a time to remember our priorities and keep our eyes on Jesus, to Whom belongs the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.