

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, First Sunday in Lent, 2/21/2021 Mark 1:9-15 (Elizabeth Felicetti)

Good morning. We are back in that crowded first chapter of Mark today, because the reading on the first Sunday in Lent is always about Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. Mark's account of this period is much shorter than Matthew or Luke, who offer specific temptations and how Jesus dealt with them. Here, however, the story is sparse, only two sentences. First, the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, immediately following his baptism.

That line troubles me. The Spirit immediately—there's Mark's favorite word again, immediately—the Spirit immediately *driving* Jesus into the wilderness seems to take away some of Jesus' agency, and it's important to me to think of Jesus as embracing the wilderness willingly. Of choosing to become tempted just like he chose to become baptized. Like he chose to become crucified for our sins.

This Lent, however, I'm leaning into my discomfort with the Spirit driving Jesus into the wilderness. Maybe the wilderness wasn't something Jesus chose. Maybe that wouldn't be so terrible. After all, we know that Jesus wasn't thrilled about the crucifixion because of his prayer in the garden of Gethsemane in the gospel of Luke, when he prays that the cup be taken from him; yet not his will, but the Father's, be done.

I resist the image in the Lord's Prayer of "And lead us not into temptation." I'm not crazy about "save us from the time of trial" either, but at least in that translation, we're asking to be saved, not asking for God not to do something that I don't believe God would do, that is, to lead us *into* temptation. That seems a lot more like something Satan, the tempter would do.

Yet in today's Gospel, the Spirit drives the newly baptized Jesus, onto whom the Spirit had just descended like a dove, into the wilderness.

The story of Jesus in the wilderness in the Gospel of Mark is short, yet that is the story that we attempt to recreate somehow with our liturgical season of Lent. We spend time in the wilderness, preparing for Easter. Sundays are *in* Lent, not technically a part of Lent, because every Sunday is a little Easter. But we don't say that celebratory "A" word, and we wear purple, and our liturgy is a bit more penitential, including, this year, Rite 1.

In my Ash Wednesday sermon, I talked about how Lent usually involves three facets: prayer, almsgiving, and fasting. I shared that I am not as interested in fasting this year as I have been in previous Lents, because the pandemic already means that we are fasting from so much in our lives, including, right now at least, in-person worship. I hope and pray that changes before Easter: the diocese indicates that we will be allowed to return to in-person worship, with restrictions like we had last summer and full, after the percent positivity rate drops below 8% for two weeks. But given all that we have had to give up already the past year, as well as reduced incomes for many of us, I plan to focus on prayer this year in Lent more than fasting or almsgiving. I will focus my comments on prayer but hope that you all will share with me your practices if they are different and if you feel like embracing fasting and almsgiving this year.

But let's think about wilderness right now. The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. The Common English Bible translates that the Spirit *forced* him into the wilderness. Eugene Petersen translated in The Message that the same Spirit *pushed* Jesus *out into the wild*.

My resistance to these translations makes me wonder if my image of Jesus is perhaps too much of him as a cowboy, strutting in into the wilderness like he's spoilin' for fight with the devil. Maybe pushed isn't so bad. Maybe we can let Jesus be human here. After all, in John's Gospel, Jesus was pushed in a different way. In John's Gospel, Jesus' mother Mary pushed him into his first miracle. I love that story, how she ignored him when he was reluctant and she spoke to the servants because she had decided that Jesus was going to fix this problem of running out of wine. So what if Jesus was pushed, into a miracle or into the wilderness?

We've been pushed or forced or driven into this pandemic, after all. The world has slowed down, even stopped in some ways. None of us chose this. But we have to keep going, and we know God is with us.

I love that Mark, even though he's so brief in his account, adds that wild beasts were with Jesus. The Message calls these animals Jesus' companions. So they aren't menacing him, like Satan was. The animals were just there. They lived in the wilderness, and the fact that they are mentioned at all indicates that Jesus took some comfort in their presence, and that the wilderness isn't empty. Think about that with any wilderness in your life right now. Who are your animal companions—maybe something that others might find scary, but that you have learned are helpful? With the pandemic, for example, I think about health care workers. Being in a hospital is intimidating, but the people who work there, from the cardio-thoracic surgeons to the janitors, are there to help us during our time in the hospital. In the wilderness. They are companions.

Finally, I love that Mark's brief description of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness ends with angels waiting on him, taking care of him. To me this shows that Jesus was never alone. The Spirit pushed Jesus but did not abandon him. Animals were his companions, and angels took care of him after the ordeal. Mark skimps on the details of the actual temptation, instead focusing on the companions and angels. Mark's Gospel doesn't even mention the fasting, just that Jesus was there for forty days.

I think Mark's version of Jesus' temptation is the right one for us this Lent, when many of us feel like last Lent never actually ended. Instead of focusing on fasting and temptation, this Lent we can focus on prayer and on our companions on the journey and the angels waiting to take care of us, as we make our way toward Easter.