

LENT AS A WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE
I. JESUS IN THE WILDERNESS

(02/28/10)

Scripture Lesson: Mark 1:1-13

“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.” (Mark 1:12)

Today is the second Sunday of Lent. The season of Lent, the time set aside in preparation for the celebration of Easter, is forty days (and six Sundays) from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday. Our word “Lent” is derived from the English word *lencten*, meaning “lengthen”, because in the Northern Hemisphere Lent takes place as the days begin to lengthen in the season of spring.

Lent is traditionally a time of study, reflection, and the taking on of a spiritual discipline that will help us understand God and ourselves more deeply, that will help us understand and experience the deeper meaning of our Lord’s last week with his disciples: his entry into Jerusalem, the Last Supper, his time in the Garden of Gethsemane, his crucifixion and resurrection.

In our Lenten reflections this year, I would like us to focus on the number forty. As you know, the number forty appears several times in both the Old and the New Testaments. Whether it refers to days or years, forty is a special number. It is what C. G. Jung would call an archetypal number, a number which is hard wired into our psyche because of its psychological and spiritual significance. When it appears in the Bible it carries a symbolic as well as a literal meaning.

The number forty, when it is applied to a unit of time, signifies not simply a certain amount of chronological time but a time which has special meaning for the person undergoing the experience. When it appears in the Bible it is invariably accompanied by a spiritual growth or transformation that comes through what we would call a wilderness experience. If we can understand what happened to those who experienced forty days or forty years in the wilderness, we might gain the strength and

insight we need to be psychologically or spiritually transformed by our own wilderness experiences.

A few weeks ago, we celebrated Epiphany, the date set aside for the celebration of Jesus' baptism. Jesus' baptism was a special event, but not for the reasons we commonly associate with baptism. It does not seem that Jesus needed to be baptized to wash away the stain of original sin or the sins he had committed in this life. It did not mark his entry into the Christian community, as is the case in infant baptism, for there was no Christian community when Jesus was baptized. His ritual immersion in water had little impact on whether he would go to heaven when he died. Because he lived so close to God, Jesus was already in the kingdom of heaven while he was here on earth.

Jesus' baptism was a transforming experience. His baptism filled him with the power of the Holy Spirit. From that time on, his life was radically changed.

In our adult Bible study a few years ago, when we were studying the Gospel of Mark, I remember our discussions about when the very human Jesus of Nazareth became the Christ. One possibility is that he was special from the moment of his birth or even earlier, from the moment of his conception.

Those who hold this view note that both Matthew and Luke regard Jesus' birth as important. We are deeply touched by the Christmas message. There is something so special about God's incarnation in a lowly manger with the star shining overhead that we, like the shepherds and the magi, are moved to kneel before the Babe of Bethlehem.

Jesus was human, like us, but Jesus was special. It is possible that he was special from the moment of his birth. It is also possible that Jesus became special at the time of his baptism. According to this theological understanding, the first thirty years of Jesus' life were relatively uneventful. Around age thirty, when Jesus was baptized, he received the Holy Spirit. That was the point in his life when God entered into him in a special way. From that time on, he was the Christ.

Those who hold this view would note that the legends surrounding the birth of Jesus were apparently not important to the religious tradition or church that gave rise to the Gospel of Mark. Mark, the first gospel to be written, makes no mention of Jesus' birth. Mark begins his account of Jesus' life with his baptism. So Mark must have felt that whatever happened to Jesus before his baptism was of little consequence.

There is a third option. Perhaps Jesus was special both from the moment of his conception and also through his experience of the Holy Spirit as an adult. Since Jesus is an archetypal figure as well as an historical figure, and since he symbolizes a part of us, a part of our own psyche, then this would be true of us as well. This would mean that we are special to God from the moment of our birth. When we consciously choose to build our lives around God and become the person whom God wants us to be, we open ourselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is a special moment in our life.

The same theological debate has taken place with regard to the Buddha. When did Siddhartha Gautama become the Buddha, the enlightened one? Some Buddhists believe that he was set aside as special from the moment of his birth. After all, it was foretold by the oracles that he would become a great spiritual leader. There are also legends surrounding his birth, just as there are with Jesus. It is said that he was born from his mother's side at the level of the heart chakra. While this is probably not literally true, it is very meaningful symbolically. It means that his life was an incarnation of compassion and his teaching was a message of the heart.

Did Siddhartha become the Buddha at the time of his birth or when he sat under the Bodhi tree and had his experience of enlightenment? Just as with Jesus, I don't think we have to choose. Siddhartha had a Buddha nature, a divine dimension within him, just as Jesus did. This nature, which became manifest through his enlightenment, finds its parallel in Jesus' baptism. The rest of Siddhartha's life was spent helping others to discover this Buddha nature within themselves, just as Jesus tried to help us discover and strengthen the Holy Spirit, the Kingdom of God within us.

Jesus, at the time of his baptism, had a powerful spiritual experience. There are several accounts of what happened immediately following his baptism. The Gospel of Mark, the first account we have, is direct and to the point. Mark tells us:

“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.” (Mark 1:12-13)

The Holy Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness. I suspect Jesus was already in the wilderness, far from the trappings of civilization, for Mark 1:4 tells us that John the baptizer “appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” I suspect, therefore, that this verse either emphasizes the loneliness of the place or that it is being used to describe a psychological state of being, what we would call a wilderness experience.

Mark does not say much about the temptations. Actually, the Greek word that is translated as “temptation” might better be translated as “ordeal.” What is of significance to Mark is not the temptations but the ordeal, the wilderness experience itself.

What happened to Jesus in the wilderness? If the Holy Spirit is the energy of God, then while he was in the wilderness Jesus must have consciously strengthened the power of the Holy Spirit within him, the spiritual energy he received at the time of his baptism. We know he must have strengthened the power of the Holy Spirit within him because when he emerges from the wilderness he is a changed person.

As soon as he emerges from his forty days in the wilderness, Jesus begins to tell people that the “kingdom of God is at hand.” He calls the first of his disciples, Peter, Andrew, James, and John, who follow him because they sense the power of both his words and his spirit. Jesus then cures a man with an unclean spirit. There is no record of his healing before this. Now he suddenly has the power to heal. The only conclusion I can draw is that during his wilderness experience, Jesus so strengthened the power of the Holy Spirit within him that when he emerged he was transformed by its presence.

What did Jesus do for forty days and forty nights in the wilderness? The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, in his book *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*, suggests that while he was in the wilderness, Jesus spent most of his time in prayer or meditation. The reason he believes this is because Buddhists strengthen the Holy Spirit within them through meditation and Christians strengthen it through prayer.

This little statue, a gift from my wife, depicts Jesus in a meditative stance. Through prayer or meditation Jesus opened himself so fully to the power of the Holy Spirit that when he emerged from the wilderness it was the central power of his life. It doesn't matter whether he sat, stood, knelt or walked while he prayed. It doesn't matter whether he prayed in words or emptied himself, as one does in meditation. What matters is that he strengthened the power of the Holy Spirit within him.

The same is true of us. What matters is how we strengthen the Holy Spirit within us. Do we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit in worship? Do we enter into the presence of the Holy Spirit in our prayer? Do we invite the Holy Spirit, the energy of God, to guide us in our relationships? We can do what Jesus did. In fact, we are called to do what Jesus did. If Jesus strengthened the power of the Holy Spirit while he was in the wilderness, then we can do this as well.

What are the wilderness experiences of our lives? They are the times when life drives us into a situation that we did not choose, much as the Spirit drove Jesus deeper into the wilderness. It is a time when we feel cut off from the resources from which we normally live. It is a time of hardship. Even if we have friends, it is an ordeal through which we pass alone. Each of us, in our own way, has many wilderness experiences.

Our wilderness experience may be the period of mourning following the death of a loved one. Our wilderness experience may be the experience of being abused or abandoned by our spouse. Our wilderness experience may be the lingering trauma from abuse we suffered as children. Our wilderness experience may be a loss of physical health or the realization that we have contracted a disease like cancer. It is

often, at least initially, experienced as a depression. Each of us, in our own way, probably has many wilderness experiences.

What makes the difference between a wilderness experience that destroys us and a wilderness experience that makes us stronger? I would suggest that scripture gives us the answer. Scripture tells us that the difference is whether we turn to God in prayer or meditation while we are in the wilderness. If we open ourselves to the healing power and the guidance of the Holy Spirit while we are undergoing our ordeal, we may emerge from the desert even stronger.

In this Lenten season, let us think about Jesus' experience in the wilderness immediately following his baptism. Jesus used this time away from the normal demands of life to strengthen the energy of God within him. It was a trial by fire, but it strengthened him. He emerged a different person.

In this Lenten season, let us think about our own lives. Perhaps we, like Jesus, are passing through a difficult time in our lives. If this is so, then how can we use this time to strengthen the power of the Holy Spirit within us? Obviously this cannot happen if we do not attend worship, attend to our daily devotions, or talk to God or Jesus about our lives. If we do nothing, we will either be broken by our trial or, at best, we will emerge from it much as we were when we entered. We will have lost the opportunity to experience a psychological and spiritual transformation.

Throughout the forty days of Lent, let us try to do what Jesus did in his forty days in the wilderness. Let us be open to not only the wilderness experiences of our lives but to the ways in which God would guide us through this ordeal. Let us take as our single Lenten discipline, the resolve to strengthen the Holy Spirit, the energy of God, in our lives in whatever way we can. If we can do this, we can enter into Easter as transformed people.

A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson

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