

JOURNEY THROUGH THE WILDERNESS
LENT 1--JESUS IN THE WILDERNESS

(03/10/19)

Scripture Lesson: Mark 1:1-13

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

Today is the first Sunday in 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.

Lent is traditionally a time of study, reflection, and the taking on of a spiritual discipline that helps 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, his resurrection, and then his post-resurrection encounters with Mary Magdalene and his other disciples.

In our Lenten reflections, I would like us to focus on the number forty, the number of days in Lent. The number forty appears several times in the Bible. 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 chronological time, but also a time that has special meaning for the person undergoing the experience. It is invariably accompanied by dramatic spiritual growth or a 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.

It seems like only a few weeks ago we celebrated Epiphany, the date set aside by the early church not only to commemorate the visit of the three wise men, the magi, to the manger, but also 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. I assume that 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 of the gospel of Mark a few years ago, we tried to understand 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, too, are deeply touched by the Christmas message. There is something so special about God's incarnation in a little baby lying 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, but Jesus was also divine. He may have been special from the moment of his birth. It is also possible that he 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 note that the legends surrounding the birth of Jesus were apparently not important to the religious tradition 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. Mark must have felt that whatever happened to Jesus before his baptism was of little consequence. Paul's letters to the early church, which were written even earlier than Mark, also make no mention of Jesus' birth; it was apparently not important to Paul.

There is, however, 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, later on in life, 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, a transforming moment in our life!

I find it interesting that a parallel theological debate exists with regard to the Buddha. Buddhists ask, when did Siddhartha Gautama become the Buddha, the enlightened one? Some believe that he was set aside as special from the moment of his birth or before. After all, it was foretold by the oracle 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 symbolically meaningful. 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 spark of divinity within him from the moment of his birth, 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, this spark of divinity within themselves and also within others, within all sentient beings,, just as Jesus went around teaching, healing, and helping us to discover and strengthen the Holy Spirit, the Kingdom of God within and to honor this in our brothers and sisters..

At the time of his baptism, Jesus had a powerful spiritual experience! There are several accounts of what happened immediately following his baptism. The Gospel of 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. Jesus was probably 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 it is being used to describe a psychological state of being, what we might 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 three purported 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 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. I believe that during his wilderness experience, Jesus so strengthened the power of the Holy Spirit within him that he now has the power to heal!

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 just as Christians strengthen it through prayer.

This little statue, a gift from my wife, depicts Jesus in a meditative stance. Like Thich Nhat Hanh, I believe that 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 Zen meditation. What matters is that he strengthened the power of the Holy Spirit within him!

The same can happen to us. What matters is how we strengthen the Holy Spirit within us. Do we open our hearts 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 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, 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. During a wilderness experience, we feel cut off from the resources that normally sustain us. It is a lonely time. It is a difficult and painful time. 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 the verbal, emotional, or physical abuse we suffered as children. It may be a loss of physical health or the realization that we have become a host to a disease like cancer. It is often, at least initially, followed by a severe 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? Scripture gives us the answer. Scripture tells us that the difference is whether we turn to God in prayer while we are in the wilderness. If we open ourselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit while we are undergoing our ordeal, we may emerge from the desert even stronger than we were before we entered!

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

In this Lenten season, let us think about our own lives. We, like Jesus, may be passing through a difficult time in our life. If this is so, 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, turn to God in prayer, or talk to 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 powerful 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 face into the wilderness experiences of our lives, not try to run from them in all the various ways that we try to escape from the trials, the challenges, the growth experiences of life. Then let us open our minds and our hearts to the ways that 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 do this, we will enter into Easter, the resurrection, new life, as transformed people!

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March 10, 2019*