

In the Wilderness

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Rev. Peter Smith <http://www.stjamesuc.com>

“He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.” (Mk 1:13) That’s the full account temptation story from Mark’s gospel. No mention of what Jesus is doing during that time and no specifics about the temptations he faces. Just that Jesus was in the wilderness, tempted, surrounded by wild beasts and waited on by angels.

And in some ways that quick description is very unsatisfying. There are no specific temptations for us to consider, no responses from Jesus for us to help us, no details for us to understand what happens in the wilderness. Just one short verse sandwiched between the story of the baptism and the start of Jesus’ ministry. And yet in the lack of detail isn’t all bad because it actually allows us to hear not just what happened to Jesus but understand the good news when we are in the same place.

Jesus is in the wilderness. Now in scripture the wilderness is a place you travel through to get somewhere better. Wilderness is where the people traveled from bondage in Egypt to freedom in the promised land. Wilderness is what the people faced coming back from exile and returning home. Wilderness is an untamed, unpredictable, and unwanted.

But the fact is that wilderness describes where we don’t want to be but sometimes end up anyway. A place where life is not necessarily terrible but difficult. Where nature is untamed and can throw our lives into chaos and where the simple things in life are more precious to us.

And in many ways we have been in the wilderness this past year. Life has been stressful and confusing. And I’m not saying it has been unliveable just that everything has become complicated because of Covid 19. The pandemic, the virus, has turned life upside down. And difficult things have become more difficult and uncertainty has become something we have lived with on a daily basis. We’ve been in the wilderness.

And I’m not sure about you but since all this started last March I keep looking for this to be over. I want to sing in church, not worry about a mask, go visit family and friends out of province. I want to know when life will return to normal. And there doesn’t seem to be an answer other than sometime in the future.

Jesus is in the wilderness for 40 days. And in the Bible anytime you hear 40 , be it the

40 days Jesus is in the wilderness or the Noah in the ark, or the 40 years the people wandered to get to the promised land or the 40 years the philistines rules over the people, anytime the Bible says 40 it means a long difficult time. A time where there is struggle and challenge, a time where there is soul searching and the danger of despair.

And while 40 doesn't indicate a precise number we can count down on the calendar the number tells us something important- that there is a limit and end to how long the difficult time lasts. Because there is a point where Jesus finishes his time in the wilderness, that the rains end and the flood recedes, an end to the people wandering before they reach the promised land and the philistines are driven off. Which is good news because it reminds us that while things may be difficult and things may be rough but our time in the wilderness will not last forever. That there will be an end even if we're not sure if it will be in the summer, the fall or even early next year.

But that is where the temptation comes in. Because while Jesus is in the wilderness for 40 days he is tempted. Because it is easy to despair when times are rough and we can't see an end in sight. Just as it is easy to try and find an escape from all of this. And that is why we are told that Jesus is tempted by Satan.

Because even if we don't know what happens specifically we do know that in the wilderness Jesus faces the choice of remaining faithful or turning away from God. Of keeping on the way that is good and leads to what God intends, or being selfish and thinking only of himself. Of remaining hopeful or despairing.

And again we can relate to all of that. Because we want this to be over. We want things to get better now and the short cuts seem so appealing. But the truth is that turning away from God will not make things better, being selfish will isolate and hurt us even more, and being angry or impatient about things beyond anyone's control will not help this time pass faster.

Which brings us to a section of the verse we often overlook. Jesus isn't alone in the wilderness being tempted. He is with the wild animals. Now wild animals can be dangerous and that might just be another way of reminding us of the difficulty of the wilderness.

But wild animals are also a way that Bible tells us that we can see the handiwork of God. Through them we can understand the beauty and wonder of what God has made. In them we can see the joy and delight God has through them. For in the animals we

catch a glimpse of God's majesty. Whether that be a soaring eagle, a howling wolf, or a leaping whale.

Because we may be in the wilderness and we may not know how much longer we are going to be here but that doesn't mean we don't see signs of what God has done and what God can do all around us. In the skies, on the ground, in the oceans are the creatures God has made and reminders that we are not alone. That there is a greater purpose. That God is at work.

Which brings us to to what I think is the most fascinating part of the verse. And the angels waited on him. In other words the angels, the messengers of God, are there with Jesus encouraging him and speaking God's word to him. And while that is wonderful and incredible to imagine the phrase in Greek actually says that they wait on him or depending on how you want to translate it they serve him or even they minister to him.

Which lets us know that they are not standing off at a distance shouting encouragement but they are with him, beside him if you will, and helping him in the wilderness, during this difficult time, as he faces temptation. They are there to remind, to witness and to support. And that my friends is very good news.

For the truth is that while we may be in the wilderness, and while may not know how much longer we are here and while we may be tempted we are promised that God is here as well. That as well as the signs of God around us in nature that there are angels who have been sent to care for us. To check in on us when we are down, to support us when we are hurting, to encourage us to keep going. To remind us that God has not forgotten or forsaken us and to give us that divine touch into our lives.

And I'm not sure if for you that is through words, actions, prayer, song, phone calls, even the breaking of bread and the sharing of cup. All I know is that during these past 11 months I have had angels helping me, some of whom are sitting in the pews this morning. So watch for the angels in your life and be grateful. And be that angel for someone else. Make that call, say that prayer, be the person God needs you to be so that another can have the strength, the grace, the hope they need this day.

For the time in the wilderness will end, the temptation will pass, and what will remain with us is gratitude and a deeper understanding on how God is faithful and how through our actions and words God is building the kingdom of heaven here on earth.