

Jesus' Journey
the kind of retreat no one signs up for
Mark 1:9-13

It seems like a funny thing to say out-loud, but sabbaticals are 'in' now; there is even a new policy making a sabbatical a standard part of the terms of call of all ministers coming into the presbytery. What it does is recognize that in jobs that are emotionally and physically and mentally challenging, jobs that require lots of "giving of yourself" 24/7, building in time away for rest or study is important, necessary.

What I would argue, though, is that all our lives are demanding. All of us need to get away from time to time to regroup, to think, pray, look at our lives with a little more perspective than we have in the midst of living them. That's why retreat and conference centers are such big business now. But you'd be hard pressed to find one in Death Valley or the arctic circle, wouldn't you? When you want to get away you look for some place you think will nurture and protect you, some glorious, yet comforting place, preferably with great food and electricity, and hot showers.

Not so, Jesus. Or I guess I should say, not the Holy Spirit. The minute Jesus steps out of the Jordan the Holy Spirit sends him off to prepare for his ministry, and where Jesus ends up offered none of the creature comforts we look for in a retreat setting. No beautiful surroundings or homemade soups and breads to comfort body and soul; no shelter at all, in fact. Jesus was out exposed to the elements in that same barren wilderness that Elijah was in, scrubby and rocky and inhospitable. In the words of one Bible commentator (Lamar Williamson, Interpretation), it was a wilderness filled with "forces hostile to [both] God and human life."

Because this is Mark's gospel and not Matthew's or Luke's, this version of Jesus' time in the wilderness is very different. It's remarkably short, for one thing, and in the other gospels this is about the temptation of Jesus. In Mark it is the testing of Jesus. Now I know that the word 'temptation' is actually used in the NRSV, but the way Mark uses it in other places it really means to test, not tempt. Nothing more than a semantic issue? Are they really one and the same? I'll let you decide.

At it's most basic, temptation is being enticed to sin, to do something you know shouldn't do – eat that doughnut, sneak a peek at someone's test, have a fling, take a nap instead of doing the much-needed and long overdue yard work. When you are tempted, the little devil sitting on your shoulder tells you to go ahead, take a bite, or more likely, a silky voice of reason and flattery convinces you that you deserve to let your hair down and have a really good time at the party, after all the stress you've been under. It tells you you need another pair of shoes, that you would be so much better off if you replaced your first generation iPad with the new one. With temptation, in the end, you either fail because you are weak and undisciplined, or you succeed; you are tough and strong and virtuous.

Of course, at another level, temptation is about more than the 'thing,' the donut or the other woman or the indulgence. Frankly, God doesn't much care if you eat a donut. It's why you eat it, and what you think it's going to do for you that matters. Food will make me feel better. Food will comfort me, satisfy me. Food will help me celebrate. A pint of Ben and Jerry's will be my

friend when I feel like I'm all alone. Or, money makes you feel strong, powerful, in control of my life, so you play with the numbers a bit on tax return. Being successful – as a student or a professional – makes you feel good about yourself. Respected. Admired. Important. Competent. Now, like the doughnut or the nap, there's nothing inherently wrong with money or being at the top of your game in life. It's what you need them to do for you that matters. Ultimately, temptation isn't about indulgence, or power, or comfort, it's about God. It's about having something in your life that takes the place of God. It's about using things to try to give us what God gives us, our sense of self, and worth, and security.

Mark takes a shortcut to get us nearly to the same place. He wants to get to that conversation about God and all of the things that get between us and God, but he avoids all that talk about temptation, maybe because we get so bogged down in the particulars of our specific weaknesses and how well or badly we resist those enticements. All he says is, the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness, to that place of testing, and left him there for 40 days and nights.

There is a pitfall in Mark's shortcut, though, one that he probably couldn't have anticipated. Our modern minds don't much like a void, an absence of information. And we do like a good allegory, so we have a hard time going right where he wants to take us. Here's where we go instead – the first thing we do, even before we talk about the testing itself, is talk about the testing grounds, the wilderness. Denied the specifics of the temptations, we want to jump to specific situations that might be seen as wilderness – your child has cancer; your house burned; you lost your hearing; the kids didn't turn out the way you had always hoped and planned; the loss or illness of your spouse. And then, because Mark says the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, the natural conclusion we want to draw is that God did this. God caused this bad thing to happen so that I could be tested. God causes catastrophic, heartbreaking situations, just so we can learn and grow. And that's a dangerous path to follow; it leads you straight to a God who operates out of a utilitarian kind of ethics, where the ends justify the means; a God that none of us wants to know, much less follow.

A far better approach is to paint with a broader brush stroke and simply look at the wilderness proving ground as a time when God's absence and silence are acutely felt, when we feel all alone, the words of hope and comfort that usually keep us going have been silenced. The warmth of God's presence is gone. Divine promises and assurances of blessing and abundance and providence aren't backed up by anything we see happening in our lives. We feel hung out to dry by life and by God. For Mark the wilderness isn't just the place where bread and electronics and power are dangled in front of us, it's the place where the demons and wild beasts are louder and more evident than God or the angels who are supposedly waiting on us. You might be on the brink of financial disaster, or just going through a long, dark night of the soul, but along with the Psalmist we cry out, "How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire?"

And that, of course, is the test. The tempter wants you to fail. The tester wants to see what you are made of, what you know. The tester wants to know if you really believe what you say you believe, or if they are just words. Does Abraham trust God, really trust God, that God will give him the promised heir and nation and land? Does he trust God enough to give his son back to him? Does Israel trust God to provide for them and love them and protect them, no matter how

frightening and unlikely things look? Will they gather manna for six days and trust that there will be enough on the seventh, or will they find another god to meet their needs, like a golden calf? Do you believe that you are God's beloved? That you are more precious to God than the flowers of the field and the birds of the air, and that God will protect you and shelter you and comfort you all the days of your life?

Like Job, it's easy to say "yes, I believe all that," as long as your pantry is full and your bank account is fat and drawing interest and everyone you love is safe and you are well-insured and your car is still under warranty. It's easy to believe that while you enjoy an intimate, or at least companionable, relationship with God, and you feel like your prayers are heard and God is leading you and guiding you and comforting you. But take all that away, and then what? Do you still believe it, even though God is silent and the evidence against God's providential care is stacking up?

The purpose of the test isn't to make you fail, or even to see if we are strong and disciplined; it is to make us grow, make us stronger. It is to help us say, believe, and then live out those words that were said at our baptism, the words we hear over and over again, that we are God's beloved, that no matter what comes our way we can trust God with our very life – to provide for us, to make us feel secure, to give us meaning and purpose and rest...all those things we wanted from the pint of Ben and Jerry's and the other woman and the money and even, maybe the nap.

The wilderness is no picnic; don't let anyone tell you otherwise. The time of testing is no fun. But if we are to be Christ's disciples, if we are to make a difference in the world and be a witness to the good news in a profound way, our faith must be true; tried and true. Otherwise it is no faith at all.

May God's blessing be on us as we journey through the wilderness.