

February 18, 2018
1st Sunday of Lent
Mark 1:12-15



12 At once the Spirit drove him [Jesus] out into the desert, 13 and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him.

14 After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: 15 "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."

Background

Mark's account of the temptation of Jesus follows right after Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan. His account of both the baptism and the temptation are very sparse. We might be tempted to fill in the details with what we remember from the descriptions from other gospel accounts. But this might hinder giving adequate reflection on the text that Mark has provided.

The opening verse of this gospel states that the Spirit drove Jesus into the desert. Mark's community would be aware that "the Spirit" was the expression of the great power of God throughout their religious tradition. Examples of this would include when the Spirit enabled Othniel to help the Jews defeat their enemies:

"Because the Israelites had offended the Lord by forgetting the Lord, their God, and serving the Baals and the Asherahs (foreign gods), the anger of the Lord flared up against them, and he allowed them to fall into the power of Cushan-risha-thaim, king of Aram Naharaim, whom they served for eight years. But when the Israelites cried out to the Lord, he raised up for them a savior, Othniel, son of Caleb's younger brother Kenaz, who rescued them. The *spirit* of the Lord came upon him, and he judged Israel. When he went out to war, the Lord delivered Cushan-risha-thaim, king of Aram, into his power, so that he made him subject." (Judges 3:7-10)

When Samuel anointed the young shepherd, David, as the next King, the Spirit came upon him to guide him.

"Jesse sent and had the young man brought to them. He was ruddy, a youth handsome to behold and making a splendid appearance. The Lord said, 'There--anoint him, for this is he!' Then Samuel, with the horn of oil in hand, anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and from that day on, the *spirit* of the Lord rushed upon David." (1Samuel 16:12-13b)

It was also that same spirit who came upon ordinary people and led them to be great prophets of God. The spirit who had animated so many people throughout their history was now acting once again to drive Jesus into the desert.

In the second verse Mark states that Jesus stayed in the desert for forty days, was tempted by Satan, was in the company of wild beasts, and was ministered to by angels. All of these statements would have been full of meaning for the people for whom Mark was writing. They would have presumed that the declaration of honor that was heard throughout the spirit world at Jesus' baptism would be challenged: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:11) While Mark does not give the details of the testing, he lets his audience know that Jesus has prevailed. In the very first verse of Mark's gospel he states, "The beginning of the proclamation of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God (Mark 1:1). Mark states in the second verse of this reading that Jesus is present in the desert with the wild animals and that angels waited on him. Then in the third verse he begins to describe Jesus as he begins his public ministry.

Without stating the details, Mark is indicating that Jesus has come through his trials and has prevailed. That Jesus was among the wild animals and they did him no harm would have suggested to people of the day that the original order of creation as it was in the garden had once again been established.

Reflection Questions

1. What do you associate with a desert, with dryness, and with being tested?
2. What have been your desert experiences?
3. What would those who heard that Jesus was “driven” into the desert recall? How did the experience of the desert affect their understanding of themselves and their relationship to God?
4. What are some of the ways that Jesus might have been changed by his experience of being in the desert, being tempted, being with the wild animals, and having had the angels minister to him?
5. Do you think there is a connection between Jesus’ experience in the desert and his ability to proclaim, “This is the time of fulfillment”?
6. Given the everyday life of the people of the day, what are some of the things that might have gone through their minds as they heard Jesus proclaim: “This is the time of fulfillment”?
7. When you hear this gospel proclaimed, do you take these words seriously?
8. Where do you see the action of the spirit operating in your life?
9. How will your Lenten practice lead you into an experience of desert, temptation, wild animals, being ministered to by angels, and being able to proclaim that “this is the time of fulfillment”?
10. Can you take some time now to talk with God about whatever thoughts or feelings arose within you as you reflected on this gospel; about your desire for your Lenten journey this year; or about any other thought that you need to bring to God?

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