

Lent 1 Feb. 22, 2015
Mark:1:9-15
God's Empowering Wilderness

With the imposition of ashes on Ash Weds. we were invited to a holy Lent, a time for introspection and preparation for renewal of our baptismal commitments at Easter. In her Ash Weds. homily, lay preacher Dana Jenkins described Lent as 'a homecoming of faith.'

We have been reading the Gospel according to Mark through the lens of Epiphany, the bringing of the light of Christ into the world. Now the Lectionary circles back to the beginning of the Gospel of Mark and we re-read the same stories, through the lens of Lent:

Wilderness, temptation, salvation history that *involves God* in human suffering and loss, the story of sacrifice once and for all.

The end of the Lenten journey is resurrection and Life. Every Lent begins with a wilderness story. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is covered in a scant two verses: the Spirit drove him into the wilderness, there were temptations, wild beasts, and angels who waited on him. That's it. Matthew's and Luke's Gospels each spend thirteen or more verses describing temptations, and emphasize Jesus' faithfulness in the wilderness.

Mark's sparse telling of the story frees our imagination to wonder what was really happening out there in those 40 days, and to bring our own experiences of wilderness into the story.

For many of us, the hallmarks of wilderness are chaos, death and destruction. "Wild" suggests confused, out of control. Wilderness is dark, scary, desolate, a barren desert without life. 'Wilderness of faith' suggests the fear that we are unworthy, or that we are lost to God.

There is another kind of wilderness – where God's creation is untouched, new, pristine, no human footprints, roads, habitation. A recent article about the Antarctica wilderness suggests that area holds truth about the scientific evolution of the earth, the oceans, life itself. Here in the Northwest, there 'wilderness preserves' where animals interact freely according to their nature, plant life responds according to the light and water naturally available. This kind of wilderness offers hope, beauty, awe, truth, and connection with God.

The Old Testament story of Noah is about both kinds of wilderness.

I wonder, frankly, why we paint the Noah story on nursery and Sunday school walls, why this Scripture is a favorite for our youngest people. The great Flood brings death and destruction – what kind of God would destroy the whole of creation because it displeases God, and save only a few worthy humans and animals? (8 in all, Noah and his sons, and their wives, Gen. 6:18-19)

The Flood brings a wilderness of death and genocide. God uses violence to address the problem of human violence. God says to Noah, “*I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth*”, Genesis 6:13. This vengeful, angry God chooses to save Noah according to some heavenly scale of worthiness. It is an awful story, this unmaking of creation.

Why doesn't God simply forgive the people? We ask that question because we hear through eyes and hearts that know God through the Son, Jesus.

In Weds. evening discussions during Lent, The Rev. Armand Larive will introduce the work of french philosopher Rene Girard, who developed mimetic theory. Stated briefly, mimetic theory holds that all human desire is mimetic – that is, all our desires are borrowed from other people, imitative. Conflict and violence have their source in mimetic desire; the cycle of rivalry is appeased, or temporarily interrupted by scapegoat sacrifice. Girard's work grew out of his anthropological studies, and has been extended to a variety of disciplines – economics, theology and elsewhere.

The Noah story is rooted anthropologically in a culture of violence. In the story, God uses the scapegoat sacrifice of every living creature to interrupt the cycle of violence. God's violence trumps man's violence.

With that sacrifice, God turns away from vindication. God makes a covenant – a one-way unilateral promise – never again to destroy all the living creatures of the earth. God hangs a rainbow in the heavens as the sign of his covenant.

We might dismiss this story as an irrelevant myth repeated in many ancient cultures. We might file this story in the ‘mystery of God’ section of our faith, this is ‘just the way God is.’

Or, we might hear a profound message: all of creation is dependent on God's active compassion. In this un-creation, *God* suffers the loss of humanity, takes upon God's self the consequences of our human sinfulness. The human refusal to live in communion with God results in the destruction of life *because* God is the source of Life. The involvement of God in human suffering and loss is the Easter story, the story of Jesus. Jesus on the cross bears witness to the impotence of violence when compared to God's life-giving power.

God's rainbow commitment is creative compassion, it is not counter-force.

The dramatic first event in Mark's Gospel is the baptism of Jesus. His cousin John's baptismal ministry focused on repentance and the washing away of sin. Baptism was cleansing. When Jesus comes to the River Jordan, the heavens are torn apart as God acknowledges his Son. The tearing of the heavens is an image of violence – then the Spirit descends like a dove on Jesus. The dove – symbol of the holy Spirit – is also the symbol of peace, of non-violence.

In the tearing of the heavens there is a timeless echo of the renting of the curtain of the Temple at the moment of Jesus' death on the cross. Violence and peace, juxtaposed. The boundaries between heaven and earth, erased. As in the Flood story, the waters of Jesus' baptism symbolize drowning, death, and rebirth.

“*You are my Son, the Beloved*” is not a heavenly pat on the head: it is empowerment. Like God's rainbow covenant with Noah, “*You are my Son, the Beloved*” is affirmation and promise, unique and God-given.

The Spirit *drives* Jesus into the desert wilderness. Jesus did not just wander away. In Mark's Gospel, the wilderness is a threshold, a liminal space where Jesus is shaped for his ministry, personal boundaries are reconfigured.

In his book *The Prodigal Son*, Henri Nouwan speaks of a desert experience as the absence of the perceived powers around which we build our lives and careers: the desert is where social and cultural status are irrelevant. The prison of appearances is left behind. There is opportunity to give up one's self-reliance, social reliance, cultural reliance – and to discover God's love. Nouwan gave up his position as a Harvard professor to live in a community of people with mental disabilities. There he found clarity about his life and reaffirmation of his self-worth – what he called the empowerment of the spirit within himself.

A friend, who gave me permission to share her story, experienced a number of devastating events in short order: the still-born birth of her first grandchild, death of her spouse, and death of her mother. Dealing with this painful chaos, she retired early and moved to a small community where no one knew her past. This was not a time of hiding out – she started a community garden; she organized a wellness clinic for rural school children. For her, this was a period of redefinition and renewal. In that liminal (threshold) time and space, she rediscovered God's affirmation and her gifts; her wilderness experience empowers her life.

Jesus' forty days in the wilderness mirror the ancestral experience. Moses spent forty years in the wilderness where he encountered God. The Hebrew slaves spent forty years in preparation for settling in the promised land.

In the wilderness Jesus was invited to misuse his power, to distort his calling. Was Jesus served by, or protected by the wild beasts? Were the angels guardians or servant companions? Whatever happened, Jesus emerges determined: he does not use his power for personal comfort and pleasure, he does not seek earthly power and prestige. He is not a warrior Messiah, but the author of peace and healing.

Jesus' time in the wilderness is not so much about testing as preparation for the journey to the cross. Have you experienced hardship or temptation? I wonder how the experience shaped or prepared you.

Some years ago, my son in law began signing his e-mails “me”. Occasionally he calls and instead of his usual proper British, “Hello, this is Richard”, he says “hi, it’s me”. There is a vulnerability in being just “me”. “Me” is who I am, not defined by status or relationship, by career or education, by appearances. “Me” expresses my worth and dignity rooted in God’s love. “Me” is who I am in the wilderness. “Me” is who I am in relation to God.

In the gentle quiet of Lent, ask yourself, who is ‘me’? To each of you, God says, *you are my beloved.*

Amen

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