

Sermon for February 18, 2018
“Love Starts Here: Seeking God”

Mark 1:9-15

After Jesus was baptized the Spirit threw him out into the wilderness. He was there 40 days, was tempted by Satan, lived with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him. The end.

That’s all Mark tells us about Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. We are used to Matthew’s and Luke’s accounts. They narrate the dialogue between Jesus and Satan. They describe three temptations.

Mark leaves all that out. He doesn’t even say that Jesus was fasting! Just that he was in the wilderness 40 days facing temptation and beasts. And that the angels waited on him.

We usually focus on the temptations in this story. How was Jesus tempted? What did Satan say to Jesus to tempt him? How did Jesus respond? That’s what we usually fixate on when we consider this event.

In contrast Mark carves the story down to its bare bones. What’s it really about? The first thing Mark says is that it was the Spirit that drove Jesus. The Greek literally says the Spirit “threw him out.” This was the start of God’s plan. This was essential to Jesus’ transition from being the “Carpenter of Nazareth” to be the “Son of God” who would teach, heal, raise the dead, and then eventually suffer, die, and rise again.

But where did the Spirit drive him? Into the wilderness. The word “wilderness” appears twice in these two verses. Even the words “tempted” and “Satan” only appear once! This is really about Jesus’ journey to the wilderness. “Wilderness” is the object of where the Spirit drove Jesus. “Wilderness” is the place in which the tempting took place and where Satan, the wild beasts and angels met Jesus.

So why is the wilderness so important? When we hear “wilderness” we think of the desert. When I was a kid there was a song on the radio that said: “I’ve been through the desert on a horse with no name, it felt good to be out of the rain. In the desert you can remember your name ‘cause there ain’t no one for to give you no pain.” The desert is a place of isolation. It a place where you can get to know yourself: “remember your name.” There is no one there to bother you. That solitude can give perspective and meaning.

But perhaps more importantly, the wilderness played an important part in Israel’s history. It was through the wilderness that they were driven when they were leaving slavery and becoming a nation. For 40 years they wandered in the wilderness. God met them in the wilderness and appeared to them in pillar of fire and smoke. In the wilderness God camped with them in a Tabernacle. In the wilderness God fed them manna and quail and gave water from a rock. In the wilderness God gave them the law and the commandments.

For Israel, the wilderness was the place to meet God. The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness to seek God. Of course, as we just read, the Father had already said, “You are my Son.” We know that Jesus was God in the flesh. But Jesus was also a human being. He experienced pain and temptations as we do. Jesus was there to get to know himself so that he could journey toward the ultimate act of Love on the Cross.

Jesus in the wilderness is a story the Church usually reflects on at the beginning of Lent. In Lent we are going through a 40-day preparation to celebrate Jesus' death and resurrection. This year we have been led to focus our Lenten activities around the theme of "Love Starts Here." Part of that idea is that Love starts with what Jesus did in his death and resurrection. But it is also that Jesus' life and teaching show us the way of love. So where do we begin to love God and our neighbor?

Love starts here: seeking God. At the beginning of his ministry that would lead to the cross, the ultimate act of love, Jesus went to the wilderness for 40 days to seek God. If we want to follow Jesus in the way of love, we need to start by seeking God. By knowing God, we can better know that love that is God. To seek God, we must know ourselves and look for God's presence in our world.

Take this season of Lent as an opportunity to seek God. Dedicate yourselves to a journey of looking in to know yourself. But also, a journey out into the world to practice the love of God as taught and shown to us in Christ. Go into the wilderness looking for burning bushes and rainbows and pillars of fire and smoke. Go into the wilderness seeking God manifest in teachings and commandments. Go into the wilderness seeking God in service to your fellow human. Go into the wilderness seeking God in acts of justice and righteousness.

There are many things you can do to seek God this Lent. You can seek God in personal devotion. Some people fast during lent. Our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers don't eat meat on Fridays. You can also give up some food or activity. The hunger or yearning reminds us that our souls hunger and yearn for God. You can seek to spend more time in prayer and study. Try reading through the Psalms or through one of the gospels during this time. Get a hold of the Bible on CD or an MP3 and listen.

You can seek God in worship. Of course, there is the regular worship each Sunday. Make attending every Sunday a priority. There are also special services for Holy week: Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Plan to attend the Sunrise Service. You can also invite people to join you for any of these service's, so they can seek God and know God's love too.

You can seek God in Service. We will not be having a single "Great Day of Service" this year. Instead we will be loving our neighbors through a great 40 days of service. There is a banner in the Commons that says "Love Starts Here." We encourage you to make plans to put aside time to live out God's love for someone in service. And when you do we encourage you to take one of the hearts in the Commons and place it on the banner. You don't have to put your name on it. This is not about blowing your own horn. Jesus warned his disciples against that kind of false piety. Rather do it to encourage others to do the same kind of service. You can bring food for the food offerings the first of the month and put a heart on the banner. You can volunteer at any of the ministries we support like United Ministries or Triune or others. Our next Interfaith Hospitality Network week is not until after Easter, but you can sign up for it and place a heart on the banner. You can place a heart on it for any number of serving activities from giving your Lenten offering to inviting and friend to church to serving at a soup kitchen. Make plans to seek God through service this Lent.

Go into the wilderness to seek God. It may be a difficult pilgrimage. You may face hunger and thirst and temptation and wild beasts. But God will meet you there and the angels will minister to you. Do you want to follow in the way of God's love? Then seek God. Love starts here: Seeking God!