

Into the Woods
Mark 1.9-15
First Sunday of Lent
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A week ago, every pew was packed, and the whole place came to its feet with singing and dancing. *Lord I want to be in their number, when those saints go marching in.*

Today, the lingering marks of ashes are still with us. *From ashes you come, to ashes you will return.*

On Tuesday, I was offered a king cake cheeseburger and thought, well, if ever there's a time to say "yes" to that offer, today seems like the day. Yesterday, I was offered a brownie and a buttery croissant and passed them by.

Last week you logged into Facebook no less than half a dozen times each day. Today, the likes and comments remain unchecked.

Last week you binge-watched Netflix as you sank down into your couch. Today, you go for a walk in the sunshine and breathe deeply as the fresh air moves over you.

Last week you fretted over what you will eat or what you will drink or what you will wear. Today, you join with this congregation in a prayer practice that begins with examining your honest self and moves in concentric circles outward until you and this entire room have prayed for each other and this neighborhood and on and on until we've prayed for the entire world.

This is Lent.

This is a time of prayer and fasting, of letting go and of taking up. We will spend the next six weeks considering the true life God calls us to live. The things we have let go remind us of our health, of our family, of the beauty in the world around us. In letting go, we are drawn back to wholeness of community, of self, of relationship to God. In taking on, we welcome practices that do the same. We desire to become present to ourselves, present to God, present to one another. It is a season of returning.

And so, we return, yet again, to Mark chapter 1. Last month we went from Jesus' baptism to Jesus proclaiming the kingdom of God and kept skipping right along through nine chapters of Mark. Today we look at that little space between baptism and proclaiming; the space between Jesus being called "beloved" by God and Jesus proclaiming that message of God's love throughout Galilee. And the in-between message happened in the in-between place where Jesus was driven out into the wilderness by the Spirit, the Breath, the hovering wind of God's presence.

Wilderness is a favorite setting in scripture. Wilderness is a wandering place, a testing place, a place where decisions get made and lives get changed, a place where people end up because they are no longer welcome in the civilized place, a place where people hide, a place where people meet to talk and pray and baptize, a place where the wild things and the angelic things and the satanic things are. And the Spirit sends Jesus there.

The Spirit descends on Jesus, covers him as the blessing of belovedness marks every part of him. Then the Spirit *immediately* drives him from the river and that scene where all is clear and blessed to a deeper, wild place where the rightness of Jesus' baptismal blessing must be remembered.

Being driven into the wilderness is significant because it clues us into something important happening between baptism and praxis. It is not enough for Jesus to receive a blessing and be marked as beloved. Jesus doesn't bask in Divine Love and suddenly transform the order of this world. No, Jesus is going to have to live something out that is difficult. He is going to have to consider it, reflect on it, teach it, and live it again. The emerging process will be his Way; the Way that you and I are trying to live into now. Lamar Williamson notes, "This literary context [of wilderness] is a key to interpretation: Commissioning means conflict; sonship means struggle."¹

Testing follows saying "yes." We've talked a lot in recent months about the things we say "yes" to and saying "yes" as a way of becoming very clear about who we are, who we are shaped to be, the things we form our lives around. The test will come that challenges our confidence. There is no final point of mastering whatever Way it is that we are seeking. The way of commerce, the way of Jesus, the way of Jimmy Buffet, the way of high society; whatever truth we hold and claim to know so clearly will be tested.

For this faith community, we are seeking to live into the way of Jesus, so it follows that everything we profess to believe will feel right and effortless one day and then *immediately* be challenged when we are driven by God's Spirit to live it out. At St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, we aspire to serve God by asking questions, loving neighbors, seeking justice, and welcoming all. The questions, the neighbors, the loving, the welcoming, the asking and the seeking will be tested. Do we really mean it? Do we really want to live this out?

"The root meaning of temptation is that it *tests* a person, with the person's response determining his or her identity."² This really is not "I gave up chocolate for Lent. Oh, no, I was so tempted and ate the chocolate two days later." This is a deeper testing that gets at the core of who you are.

¹ Lamar Williamson, *Interpretation: Mark*, p. 36

² *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, "Temptation" pp. 851-854

You profess to give yourself to the way of peace-making, you have been affirmed in your community as a peace-maker. You pray at communion each month, "God, I aspire to live in love and peace with my neighbors." But does that apply to real, physically close neighbors? Or is it a lovely sentiment? Because there's that neighbor of yours who insists on waking up early every Saturday morning to do some heavy, aggressive yardwork by 7 a.m. on the one day of the week you can sleep in and get a slow start to the day. The first week was one thing. Then the second. But it just keeps happening, and he doesn't know you've said "yes" to living in the way of God's peace and that you value living in harmony with your neighbors. What do you do? It's a testing moment.

You profess to not just value but really practice the way of forgiveness. You live it out with your friends. You welcome hard conversations. You speak honestly and openly with the people you love and the people who love you. Buuuuut...there's that one family member who you only see once or twice a year. And she just knows how to push all of your buttons and can cripple you with her words. She isn't going to change. You hate her for it. You hate who you become when you're around her. How do you practice forgiveness in a relationship that is a broken record and in which you feel so stuck? What shape might forgiveness take? What action might forgiveness require? It's a testing moment.

And here, in this place, the place where we are feeling so confident and so glad to be together. The place where we growing and thriving as a community. The place where we are learning to bring our honest selves to each other. Something will test us here. Will it be in the questions we ask or the neighbors we love? Will it be in the justice we seek and the "all" that we welcome? There will be a testing moment when we must remember who it is we have said "yes" to and what it is we have said "yes" to.

And that testing moment for Jesus does not come from God. In Mark 1 it is the face of darkness that tests Jesus. The test comes from the ways and forces that compete with the way of Jesus. The test comes from that which is in opposition to God. Whether that is a true presence of evil or the real pressures of this world, we are tested from outside the Way we seek. Yet in the testing, we are not alone. In that same verse, Mark reports the angels waited on Jesus through those 40 days. God provides support and presence while Jesus is left to decide which way he will go.

God provides support and presence while you and I are left to decide which way we will go. We will love our neighbors? Will we love ourselves? God will be with us as we make our way through the easy and the hard of it. God is near even when it seems only wild and evil things surround us. God is near.

Mark doesn't tell us anything else about what happened in the wilderness as Jesus lived among the wild beasts. But once Jesus emerges, John has been arrested, and Jesus takes on the call to preach a kingdom not of this world. Jesus steps from the wilderness into the

world and calls out, "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news."

Rev. David Sellery offers a consideration of this call to repentance that may serve us well through the next several weeks. He writes, "Repent does not mean breast-beating and lamentation. It literally means to re-think; to put some quiet time aside; to stop; to interrupt our routines; to re-assess and adjust our priorities and our behavior. Jesus understands our natures. He knows we are a bundle of reflexes and instincts. He knows that we constantly need to reorder our lives to bring them in line with God's plan for us. He knows we must constantly repent to get ourselves right with God. That's why we have Lent."³

Wilderness and testing and repentance are not easy concepts to welcome into our days. In fact, we do pretty much whatever we can to deny unpleasant realities. We distract, we over-commit, we lose ourselves in vices and habits. And that's why we have the "letting go" part of Lent. This season invites us to stop resisting and open ourselves up to the full truth of our lives. Now is the time to get quiet, to silence the background noise, to clean out our metaphorical and physical closets, release all that clutters and keeps us from living into the Way of Christ. Now is the time to repent and believe.

³ David Sellery: <http://www.episcopalcafe.com/speaking-to-the-soul-jump-starting-lent/>