

A Sermon for DaySpring
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Staying, Enduring, Redeeming
Mark 1
February 18, 2024
Lent 1

Each year the season of Lent begins with a gospel reading about Jesus' experience in the wilderness where he spent 40 days. This is to prepare us for the season that stretches in front of us now. The forty-day sojourn in the wilderness gave shape to the forty days of the Lent season as the practice developed. As Jesus was 40 days in the wilderness, so we take 40 days of the year in Lent as a spiritual season of repentance, preparation, special devotion to Christ, and special generosity in compassion toward others.

Lent can be a season to endure begrudgingly, or mostly ignore, if you wish. Protestants have a long history of such. And there's grace enough for all on Easter Sunday. For those who enter into Lent in any way, often through fasting or some other kind of self-denial or through spiritual disciplines, the season has a wilderness-type edge to it. Fasting of any kind brings about some hunger and some discomfort. Self-denial brings about longing for comforts, especially if you've drifted through the year into patterns of ease and habits of self-indulgence.

Most of us do this. We want something to make us happy, say coffee, for example. Now, in the interest of full disclosure, there will be no giving up coffee in our household for the season of Lent. I'm using it as an example. Maybe you need to give up coffee, but we can quit any time we want. This is not on the table, but it does work for the psychology. We want something that makes us happy. We get that thing that makes us happy. Then we need that thing to keep from being unhappy. And then we want something more to make us happy again. It's how coffee works. It's how lots of things work that become habits in our lives. And it is how the treadmill of consumption works psychologically.

Lent can be a resetting of that basic ordering of life—what I really need (some coffee) vs. what I think I want (gallons of coffee). Substitute just about anything else here, including serious, very serious things. Simplicity then, makes space for generosity. All of this can be a spiritual renewal and a reset. If you want to think of it this way, it's a spring cleaning for our souls. No doubt there's some work in that, but there's also real pleasure in getting back to the basics, keeping the main thing the main thing. All of those clichés point to something true, embodied in a wilderness experience.

But wilderness is not another name for a spiritual day spa. It's rugged. It's tough. And it can eat you alive. As Beldon Lane plainly puts it in his spirituality of fierce landscapes: wilderness doesn't care about you, and what you bring to it. That kind of terrain is often a marvelous antidote to the problem of the ego. Wilderness is the geography of Lent.

After his baptism, Jesus goes into the wilderness. The gospel of Mark puts it more directly: he was driven into the wilderness by God's Spirit. If you've been driven in the wilderness of Lent or some wilderness of life, you're not the first, and you're not alone. Jesus has been there. Jesus, may we say, is there with you. The writer Wallace Stegner saw the wild, open places of the western United States in these kinds of spiritual terms. Advocating for their protection and preservation, he said, "We need those wild spaces; we need to know they are still there, even if all we ever do is drive to the edge and look in."

You may intend to just drive to the edge of Lent and look in, or you may just intend to drive to the edge of life's wilderness and look in, only to find yourself driven out there by forces beyond yourself. Maybe your compassion leads you to the edge of some wilderness that others sojourn in, and you're driven by your compassion and love to go deeper to be with them in it. There are people whose whole lives are transformed by doing more than driving to the edge and looking into the wilderness of the suffering of others.

Mark doesn't tell us many details. Just this: Jesus was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan, and he was with the wild animals, and the angels waited on him."

Matthew and Luke's gospels say much about the testings of Satan. Mark's contribution is the comment about the wild animals. The word in the Greek is *meta*, is the same one used early in Matthew in that beloved line so familiar at Christmas: *Emmanuel* which means "God is with us." With, *meta*, it's the same word that describes Jesus' proximity to wild animals. Jesus *meta* the wild animals. So, that's interesting, right? Is Jesus really with the wild animals in the same way God is with us as Emmanuel? Wild animals? Were they tamed by him? Is that what Mark is saying?

Maybe. If so, there's a beautiful prophesy being recalled here: a vision in which a comprehensive shalom is possible as a peaceable kingdom brought about by the Messiah. Hear again Isaiah 11:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

In this vision, the danger posed by wild animals is removed. If St. Francis is known for preaching to animals, Jesus, you can imagine, pets them. The key word is *with*, a word not only of proximity but of intimacy. And even of advocacy. Emmanuel, God with us, from

Matthew, we sing at Christmas time; here in Mark is pictured as supernatural, messianic, shalom, with-ness, even with wild animals.

What we may have here is a recapitulation of Adam in the idyllic garden of Eden as the world began, just this time it's Jesus in the desert wilderness, and wilderness as emblematic of what the world had become since Adam's fall. Adam lived at peace with the animals. So does Jesus. Jesus is in the wilderness and the vast wilderness of the world is transformed from a place of danger to a place of peace. If that's the story here, then Mark, which doesn't include a birth narrative of Jesus, gives us a rebirth of the world, this rebirth taking place in the most unlikely place: a desolate, dangerous place, thought devoid of divine grace or hope. Until Jesus, the 2nd Adam comes, to begin a new creation, all right there in the opening chapter of the gospel of Mark.

I love that telling of this story. It gives me hope; it's a sign that Jesus inaugurated a peaceable kingdom. The world's wilderness has already been tamed and we ought not fear no matter how it feels or seems to us now. And that's a story worth holding onto, the story of Jesus with the animals in the wilderness.

But, while we're here, I want to suggest even another way of reading what's going on in the story and how to receive it. It hinges on that one little word. The word *meta* can simply mean wild animals were in the area, in proximity. It can also mean with as in friendship, the wild animals as a petting zoo. But the word *meta* also can mean *against* in Greek. Jesus is against, or in a conflicted relationship with the animals, or with the animals in a way that he better sleep with one eye open. I know that's confusing, how one word can be in English either with or against, but I'm not in charge of the Greek language.

If the word with is oppositional then what does that mean? Jesus with the wild animals invokes a kind of fear for his safety, a concern for his well-being out there with the wild animals. I think this reading may be suggested by our Old Testament reading for today. In that story, with all those animals and Noah, I don't think the ark was all Love Boat. I think it was more a floating, tenuous lifeboat for creation, held together by the courage of one man who was willing to face down everything he had to, including, surely, a reasonable fear of wild animals, all of this to be part of God's redemption project of creation. Wild animals were still wild before and after the ark.

So Jesus *meta* the wild beasts can also mean what it would mean for a normal, human, vulnerable person out there in the wild. He's in danger from them. And yet he goes, and he stays. And that gives me hope, too. That Jesus was willing and able to go into the world's most dangerous danger, the world's wildest wild places, the world's most desolate, hopeless, and even godless experience, and endure and redeem.

Wild animals in the wilderness side of the Jordan River were serious: lions, bears, poisonous snakes. The word used for wild animals can also mean flies, gnats, and bees. In other words, things that can hurt or kill you, or at least drive you crazy.

This is why Jesus' experience in the wilderness is called a time of testing and preparation for all that was to come. For the rest of his ministry, he will face down human versions of gnats, flies, and bees swarming around him in the form of Pharisees and Sadducees, buzzing around him with their complaints, and lions and bears in the form of the betrayal of his friends and his own wrestling with God's will for his life. He will live and move and have his being in the wilderness of human cynicism, rejection, condemnation, and sin. And he will not abandon us in our wilderness. He will stay and he will endure, and he will redeem.

40 days in the wilderness with its dangers is serious, but it is nothing compared to the wilderness of human interaction he will navigate for the years of his ministry. One will test him. The other will kill him. Lent remembers all of this.

You may experience the disciplines and prayers of this season in beautiful ways. You may experience them as a renewed intimacy with God. By cutting out some things that have a grip on you more than they should or some other habits, you find you simplify your life in beautiful ways and rediscover a joy of knowing and following Jesus. Your wild animals have been tamed, at least for a while, and you walk with renewed focus and intimacy with God. The spiritual wilderness becomes like a new Eden as Jesus recreates you. What a gift this season can be.

But you may experience the disciplines and prayers of this season as if they are a force working against you, at least in the moment. It may not bring you renewed peace and joy. It may be hard. You may find that the small thing you offer to God (no more cookies after dinner, maybe?) cracks open some other struggles you haven't wanted to look at in a long time. You may even find, if I may put it this way, that as Satan tempted Jesus, you feel like you are square in the sights of the great tempter. Here's the thing: you always are; you're just now aware of it when you're not such an easy mark.

With or against, either way, this time is no ordinary time. God will use whatever you submit—whatever you offer and make available—whatever that is, God will use it to prepare you for what's to come in your life. Everything in God's mercy is redeemable for God's purposes. So, let us do more than drive to the edge and look in. Let us let God drive us deeper into the wild than we ever knew, and find, one way or another, that in doing that we are drawn deeply into the heart of God. Let us take up our cross and lose ourselves.

Amen.