

The Wilderness

I. Jesus' Temptation

- A. This 1st Sunday of Lent we tell each year the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness.
1. The brief account we have just heard is so typical of Mark's gospel with its very succinct summary of the event, -- only two verses.
 2. What may sound strange to us is that the temptation follows immediately upon Jesus' baptism and his anointing with the Spirit.
 - a. *"The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness 40 days, tempted by Satan."*
 3. During Epiphany we heard the story of Jesus' baptism, how the Spirit descended upon him and how this event was the beginning of his ministry.
 - a. Today we look at another side of this same text.
 - b. It is how the spirit "*drove*" Jesus into the wilderness.
- B. The season of Lent is a good time to consider the wilderness, a place of emptiness.
1. But to begin it will help to reflect briefly on the place where human beings usually live, which is the city.

II. The City and the Wilderness

- A. In ancient times the people of the world almost universally lived in walled cities.
1. The Greek philosopher Aristotle described human beings as essentially "*political creatures*."
 - a. He means that by nature humanity lives in a "*polis*" (Greek for walled city).
 2. Outside the city - one is either a god or a beast.
 - a. The territory between cities is not governed by law but is a place outside the structures that guide everyday life.
 - b. The desert/wilderness is the risky territory outside the city walls.
- B. In our times: there is much less physical territory that we call "*wilderness*."
1. Our cities do not have walls. For the most part our civilization has internalized the laws and structure we must have to live together.

- a. The laws and norms of conduct that civilizations depend on for survival have become the structure of our inner lives.
- 2. This spread of civilization has usually been seen as a great benefit.
 - a. In America we say that we have tamed the “*wild west*” where not long ago it was true that everyone who had a gun was a law unto themselves.
 - b. Lately it seems there are many who would like to still have it that way – individual rights rule. –
- C. A successful civilization with its built in structures and conventions shapes our inner lives and our outward behavior.
 - 1. But for all of this, - there is a price to pay.
 - a. The structures and conventions blunt our awareness because we think that they describe the world as it really is.
 - b. With a little bit of wisdom it is not hard to see how these structures are only a partial and fallible description of life and the world.
 - 2. This problem is magnified today with an ever increasing population and technology that shrinks our world into one globe.
 - a. Our various cultural descriptions, at odds with one another come into a disturbing clash.
 - b. It seems God is telling us that no longer can we live insulated from one another,\ content in our cultural bubbles.
 - c. No longer can humanity together afford the narcissism that is blind to our deep connection with one another, to God & creation, this sacred Earth, our island home.
 - b. We could say that we still do live in a walled city,
 - (1. and it’s as if we have walled ourselves in,\ oblivious to a bigger world all around us.
 - (2. It’s the case physically, socially and spiritually, on a local scale and on a global scale.
- D. So we come to the relevance of the wilderness. “*The Spirit of God drove Jesus into the wilderness.*”
 - 1. That old idea of the desert as the risky territory outside the city walls is like the wilderness that lies in you and me - or in our community when our conventional lives are called into question.
 - a. It is not surprising that the experience of the Spirit of God is often to drive us into the wilderness -
 - (1. outside the world of familiar landmarks
 - (2. outside the predictable patterns of living.
- E. In the “*conventional world,*” we are involved with many activities; -- we are preoccupied with many concerns and agendas.

1. Altogether there is too much noise and static for us to hear the “*still small voice*” in which the presence of God is known.
2. It seems that the “*conventional world*” almost conspires against our hearing, -- making us deaf to that voice.
3. Henri Nouwen (*Spiritual Direction, Forward Movement*) has described the spiritual life in the context of the “*conventional world.*”
 - a. He writes that the spiritual life is the one in which we struggle to move from absurd living to obedient living.
 - (1. The word *absurd* comes from the Latin word *surdus* which means *deaf*.
 - (2. Absurd living is a way of life where we remain deaf to the voice that speaks to us in our silence.
 - (3. We too easily fall into this way of living when our life is bounded by the conventional structures of our culture.
 - b. Our lives may be filled with many events - so many that we often wonder how we will fit them together.
 - (1. But at the same time we may feel very unfulfilled and wonder, are my preoccupations worth all this energy?
 - (2. We are filled yet unfulfilled,\ busy yet bored,\ involved yet lonely - these are the symptoms of the absurd life,
 - (a. the life in which we no longer hear the voice of the One who created us,
 - (b. the One who keeps calling us to the deeper life in which we are created.
 - c. The Spirit of God calls us out of this world that is filled up, yet unfulfilling, into the silence and emptiness of the wilderness.
 - (1. The wilderness is that place where we are freed to go beyond the boundaries of our conventional world and ways of thinking.
 - (2. The wilderness is the world where we can listen.
 - (3. This is the other end of the spiritual spectrum - the obedient life.
 - d. The word, *obedience* comes from the Latin word, *audire* which means listening.
 - (1. A spiritually mature life is the one where we can listen to the voice of God’s Spirit within us, among us.
 - (2. It is the life where we try to respond to that voice day by day.
 - e. Our God is a God who cares, heals, guides, directs, challenges, confronts, corrects.
 - (1. Christ in you and me wants to lead us closer to the full realization of our humanity.

- (2. To be obedient means to be constantly attentive to this active presence and to allow Christ -who is love- to be the source and goal of all we think, say and do.

III. Obstacles to the Spiritual Life

- A. It is far from easy to live a life of listening. There are strong resistances in us.
 1. First, it is hard to create some empty space in ourselves and give up our occupations and preoccupations even for a while.
 - a. We suffer from a fear of empty space.
 - b. We are so concerned to be useful,\ effective,\ and in control.
 - (1. A useless and uncontrollable moment scares us.
 - (2. It drives us right back to the security of having to have, something to do. ---
 2. Stronger than our fear of empty space is our fear of the voice of God which we might come to hear.
 - a. Although we are unsatisfied and unfulfilled, we are not so sure that we want to change direction.
 - b. We know the stories of those who have truly listened to God's voice within and have found themselves being called away from the familiar and relatively comfortable places, -- to places where they must take risks.
 - (1. This was true for the Israelites who complained to Moses they would rather be in Egypt - than wandering unpredictably in the desert.
 - (2. It's true for many men and women who followed Christ and found themselves subject to persecution and painful trials.
- B. So to move from absurd living to obedience is far from easy.
 1. It asks for discipline.
 - a. Discipline in the spiritual life is required if we would follow Christ.
 - b. It takes discipline to let go our tight grip on things we take for granted,\ knowing that a day is coming when we will have to let go of it all.
 - c. Why not discover the freedom of that life now while we have a choice?
 2. As we go with Christ into the desert, the wilderness for Lent we are invited to a vision of an obedient life, sensitive and full of the presence of God.