**Forty Days in the Wilderness**

Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship

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Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

There’s a small town and a well-known local man who has been away for a while. He looks thin, and tired, and yet there is something about his bearing and charisma that you find attractive or off-putting.

He’s been making a splash. Some people have heard him speak, and swear it’s the best speaking they’ve every heard. Some people have seen him do things that recalled the miracles of old.

*What gives him his power and charisma?*

It’s not for nothing that Matthew, Mark, and Luke put this account of Jesus in the wilderness right before Jesus begins his ministry. There’s something just so right in the account, and I hope to explore that this morning.

We read this passage, naturally, in the season of Lent and so we should keep in mind what it means for us, and our own observance of “forty days.” And perhaps there are ways outside the liturgical season that you are feeling stuck out in a wilderness. So listen, too, for lessons and connections in your life.

Answer one: The Holy Spirit

Luke says Jesus entered the wilderness after his baptism “full of the Holy Spirit,” and we recall the lovely image of the Spirit resting on Jesus “like a dove.” Matthew’s version says Jesus “was led up by the Holy Spirit.” Mark is even more direct: Mark says “the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness.”

So, that’s the first and primary source of his power and charisma: the Spirit was very present. There is some debate – a lot of debate, actually – about how aware Jesus was of his being God, and when he was aware of it. (Even in the face of the gospel writers’ relating that, at his baptism, he and others heard God say, “You are my beloved Son, who pleases me greatly.”) But it is clear from our accounts that his awareness of the life of the spirit was very keen, and it directed and guided his life.

Answer two: The Wilderness

In all of the accounts, we have the temptation of Jesus taking place in the desert while he is on a fast. Somehow, this place and this action empowers him. I think a number of us can testify how difficult times can refine us. More than the easy times, they make us who we are. They can also break us if the times are too difficult. Jesus makes a deliberate choice about starting his ministry with this refining experience. And it prepares him for the many difficult times ahead: the life without a home, the scorn of neighbors and enemies alike, the betrayal by one of his closest friends, and, of course, the torture he underwent and his scandalous death.

In other words, Jesus didn’t need to *seek out* difficulties; they were coming his way. But he chose this particular difficult beginning. The forty days in the wilderness was a strong echo of the forty years in the wilderness of the people of God, and even the recollection that “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor” as we read in our first lectionary reading.

A poet I once heard said that tattoos were scars that you give yourself: they allow you to mark yourself, to literally brand yourself, as the kind of person you are. Jesus’s trek into the wilderness was a choice he made (under the influence of the Spirit). His emaciated body and deep hunger were his first scars, and they marked him as the Man of Sorrows; they branded him as the one who would undergo anything for the sake of the kingdom he announced and the salvation he proclaimed.

Answer three: The Victory

Going into the desert was extremely difficult for Jesus, especially given the great temptations that came to him. Matthew’s gospel even says that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness specifically to be tempted by the devil. It was no accident that Satan was waiting for him in these wasted spaces: just as Jesus was especially aware of the presence of the Spirit, he was aware of the presence of the spiritual anti-Spirit.

Jesus’s victory of these temptations were among his first signs of his power. This success bred success. To defeat Satan himself must have told Jesus (and later, his disciples) something of the special nature of who he was. He was important enough to draw Satan’s specific ire, and powerful enough to defeat him.

It’s good to remember how Jesus defeated Satan: it’s something we may have heard many times, but it’s just as true. Jesus deeply held Scripture in his mind, soul, and Spirit, and Scripture reminded him of who he was and what he was about. He had come to the wilderness to put aside normal eating and to feast on the Word and presence of God. He remembered that spiritual power isn’t given to see how far we can go to make God prove something to use. He remembered that God alone deserved to be praised and worshipped.

This depth of wisdom, of knowing who he was, and where he stood, provided him with the power to even command the Satan: “Begone!” he said, and Satan left, just like that.

The response

All of this calls us to respond in praise: to God the Father, for protecting the Son in the temptation, to God the Spirit for leading the Son in power and charisma, to the Son himself for undergoing this initial trial, which I believe he did on our behalf.

But I wonder what lessons we might learn from this story for ourselves? Are their echoes and reverberations for us? After all, we need power and charisma for our own lives.

I think we should be about pleading for more of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, to guide and empower us. We should be pleading for more of the presence of the Spirit in the life of our church and conference and in the Christian churches of our area and nation and world.

I think we should remember this time of Lent as a time to become more vulnerable to the Spirit’s influence in our lives. Lent is a “mini-wilderness” where God just might meet us with the Spirit, and provide the small victories that will help us overcome in general.

I think we should reflect and give thanks for all of the victories that God have given us so far: “We’ve come this far by faith.” It is so easy to get discouraged when we see our own frailties and failures, so it’s good to recollect what God has done for us.

And of course, we must rely on the grace of God in the midst of those failures: unlike Jesus, we can pretty much guarantee that we’re going to mess it up! But we mustn’t neglect the power of grace to empower us: Knowing that God makes haste to forgive us can encourage us to live into the kind of risks that can empower us.

Bess and I have told you about how, in the early days of our marriage, we risked going to Spain as self-supporting missionaries, and it was nearly the breaking of us: we were cold, sad, broken at the end of a year there. It took us years to recover, but I wouldn’t go back and erase that time. God’s grace was greater than our failure. God began a work in us led us to learn to depend on God’s people for grace and counsel. God’s Spirit worked to bring us back to Kalamazoo and the particular shape our lives took, including the adoption of our children.

As I often do, I wonder in what ways God has brought your through wildernesses, either of your own choosing, or not. Or are there ways you are feeling weak and incapable, and long for the power of the Spirit to be present? Can Jesus’s journey into the wilderness be a model for you?