

As happens every year on this first Sunday in Lent, we begin our forty-day Lenten journey and we encounter Jesus experiencing forty days in the desert. In Mark's telling of the story, we find Jesus is **driven** or pushed into the wilderness. The gospel writer tells us Jesus has just been baptized by John, an experience in which he saw the sky violently split open and God's Spirit descend upon him in the form of a gentle dove. He has just heard God's voice say to him, "You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love. You are the pride of my life." Then, **immediately** following this experience, the same Spirit that descended upon him as a gentle dove, turns into a dive bomber or mac truck and **pushes** Jesus out into the wild. We are not given any hint or clue that Jesus chose to do this of his own volition. The writer of Mark's gospel makes it clear that Jesus was forcefully **driven** into the wilderness by the Spirit, pushed there by something outside of himself.

Now, the wilderness is **not** a safe place. It is a treacherous, wild place with tricky, barren terrain. It is a place where one experiences the burning rays of the beating sun, the hungry wolves and wild beasts, and something many of us do not like to face – solitude. We can probably

surmise that, like most of us, when Jesus faced solitude, he faced his own inner voices.

Mark tells us that, having been driven into the wilderness, Jesus was tempted or tested by Satan. Jesus did not **choose** to go into the wilderness, **and** he did not **choose** to be tempted. Beyond this, Mark simply does not give us many details about Jesus' forty-day experience.

Unlike the **other** gospels, we are **not** given any scripted arguments between Jesus and Satan and **no** details about hunger for food or power. All we are told is that Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days, was tempted by Satan, was with the wild beasts and the angels waited on him. Yes, the angels took care of him. God's presence was there **for** him and **with** him throughout that forty-day experience. And, as we begin **our** forty-day Lenten journey, we remember Jesus' experience and we are given the promise that God is **with us** as we face our own challenges in the wilderness experiences of our lives.

The wilderness or the desert is not only a physical, geographical place. It is also a spiritual place where we find multiple spots to engage in self-examination, struggle, and repentance. It is a place where we often discover we must face **ourselves**. And, the wilderness is **not** a place where **we** eagerly volunteer to go. Quite frankly, **we** do not choose to

experience times of temptation, struggle, sorrow, or pain, let alone deep self-examination. We do not go out actively seeking challenging situations or hardships. Now, I do **not** for one minute believe that God **causes** us to experience hardship or suffering in life. I do **not** believe that God causes us any kind of misery to teach us a lesson or punish us in any way. That is **not** the kind of loving God Jesus proclaims. Yet, we **do** face times of struggle, trial, and misery. In fact, for many of us, this past year of living through a pandemic has been such an experience. However, just as God was present to Jesus during those trying forty days, God **is** present to us in **all** of our challenges in life. God is present with us and to us in those times when a marriage comes to an end, those times when we find our children struggling, those times when a loved one dies, those times when a loved one struggles with addiction, those times when we lose a job, those times of hardship when we cannot sense a glimmer of hope, those times when we as a nation and as a global community live through a ravaging pandemic that brings enormous death and sorrow, those times when our experience seems **void** of the presence of God. **God is there**, present to us in **all** the struggles and temptations we face, in **all** of the chaos and pain. And, God is at work in the depth of those experiences, **transforming** them, bringing order out of chaos and bringing forth newness and life.

As we intentionally take time for reflection and repentance during this Lenten season, **we begin** in the wilderness. Lent can be a time to take stock in our lives, and to really begin to come clean about those things that tempt us. The wilderness is a place where we can **let go** of all pretense and allow ourselves to be honest and vulnerable. This wilderness experience can allow us to take a real look at the way we try to hide our pain, take a look at the perfectionism that plagues us, the competitive nature that drives us, the denial that is epidemic within us and around us, and take a look at the way our brokenness shapes our entire being and way of life. This wilderness can be a place where we find the freedom to confess the messiness of our lives. And, the truth of the matter is, the wilderness experience is **not** just a Lenten experience. Whether we like it or not, the wilderness is **the** place where we live out our lives.

When I was young, a time that increasingly seems to have been long, long ago in some far away place, I used to love watching MASH. Those of you who watched that show might remember one episode where Father Mulcahy, the unit's priest, tried to talk with a wounded soldier who had been severely traumatized by what he witnessed on the front lines of war. When this soldier finds out Father Mulcahy had not once even been close to where the fighting was taking place, the soldier decides they just cannot

talk. You see, he had no interest in hearing the pious platitudes of a person who had not been on the front lines, so he felt he could not begin to relate to the priest. Later in the episode, after Father Mulcahy **does** come under enemy fire and is forced to perform an emergency medical procedure on a different soldier, even as shells are exploding all around him, the first soldier then **welcomes** Father Mulcahy after all. **Now** they have a common frame of reference, and **now** they can talk. And, it is then that Father Mulcahy gets it and understands why the soldier had not been able to relate to him.

In the person of Jesus, God has entered the front lines of our human existence. In the person of Jesus, God has already **been** in the wilderness. In the person of Jesus, God has entered into the wilderness of **our** lives and engaged the sharp, jagged edges of this broken, sorrow filled world. God **does** walk with us through **all** our experiences in the wild. Jesus walks **with** each one of us through the front lines of our lives. As he walks with us in the wilderness, we discover we can let go of the sinful, false self, be honest and vulnerable, and entrust our messy, broken, mixed up lives to God. And, guess what? It is then that we finally discover our **true** selves. Then, we really discover what the **grace** of God is like. Then, we begin to discover more deeply what it means to be named as God's beloved child,

to be made God's very own. Then, we begin to discover more deeply that our entire life is enveloped and bathed in God's grace. And, then we begin to discover how immeasurably we are loved by the God of all creation.