Mark 1:9-15 Pr. Cheryl Muncy

First Sunday in Lent/B Bethel Lutheran – Joplin

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

On the first Sunday in Lent, we hear about Jesus being sent or driven into the wilderness comes right on the heels of his baptism. It is the same Spirit that descends on him in his baptism that sends him to the wilderness. The one and the same that set his baptism apart to who he is, God’s Son. Mark’s gospel is short on details that Matthew provides on this particular text.

Being identified as God’s Beloved Son, child, being filled with the Holy Spirit is something that is needed for him to weather the temptations and struggles that he will encounter as he moves through his time between his baptism and his death. Just because he is God’s Son, he isn’t exempt from the things we mortals struggle and deal with each and every day. But we do have the same Holy Spirit bestowed on us at our baptisms.

When I look back over the last four years and how our world, our lives, and so many things were turned upside down and inside out, the temptations to do things we know shouldn’t do were pushed to the front of our minds. We still struggle with boundaries, suggestions, limits, opinions of others, and on some days, it was, and can be, downright hard not to say the heck with it all and just stay home, becoming a recluse. The first couple of years of that seemed to bring about a change that we are still moving through – one where it seems to be a “me culture, I’m the one who matters most.” We still struggle to try and be kind even while expressing our opinions and thoughts on just about everything under the sun . Just because we are children of God doesn’t mean we aren’t going to be tempted, to have struggles, to be driven to our own wildernesses. Some things have improved in this time, also.

But why would Jesus need to be driven into the wilderness? What does that show us? What does that prove? There is little said in this text, 12And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.” Does this time in the wilderness provide him with something? Does it give him something he needs for his ministry? Or is there some underlying reason for this that we don’t hear? Mark doesn’t say.

Could it be that him being driven into his wilderness period would give us cause to think about some of our own wilderness times? None of us want to be there, and I’m sure it wasn’t something Jesus preferred to do, but during this time, he had to rely on the Spirit, and on the angels sent by God to help him. I believe if we had a choice to go or not, we would say not. This we do need to remember though, that it is not God we are at odds with, battling with, in our wildernesses. It is Satan, our own fears and doubts, the temptations that show up or come up in the most deserted of places, places we would just as soon not be. But we all do have struggles and are tempted by the things of this world. We aren’t there alone, though. Even if you feel that God has given up on us, God has not.

When we are in the wilderness, when we are experiencing hard times, or battles that no one else can see, where do we turn? Who do we seek answers from, ask for help, for guidance? We are to turn to God, to the one who has experienced wilderness time. And it is not just a one-time experience for Jesus; just think of all he went through before his passion came about and his cruel death. And we could ask ourselves what we could learn from this time, from these struggles, that may help another person, may help the ministry we are sent out to do. we might wonder ‘how might God be at work in this? How might God be using me through this?’ On this side of the cross, we can be assured of the ultimate victory of God, but in the midst of our battles, some may not feel absolutely certain of that.

We don’t choose to go to these places. We don’t look for ways to struggle. We don’t want to have any sufferings. I’m sure Jesus wouldn’t choose this either, hence the Spirit driving him to the wilderness. But these things happen to us. Even if it’s something we have created ourselves that we are facing – or those put on us by others – we don’t normally actively seek out any hardships.

I’m going to reiterate this point - here is something to think about – could we be in the wilderness to serve Jesus, just as the angels were? Could we be sent to be with those who are alone; for those struggling in their own wildernesses; to walk beside those who are oppressed, hungry, lonely or alone, frightened, discouraged, grieving, depressed, ill, homeless, poor, lost? Yes, we are. We would rather not jump out of our comfort-zone boxes, but as disciples of Jesus, we are called to share the love and grace, the promise of God with others. What you may have experienced in your life could be of help to you when you listen to and better understand someone else’s struggles, to help them navigate and turn to God.

We aren’t going to escape this life without struggles and temptations. Jesus, God Incarnate, doesn’t escape the wilderness. It didn’t go away. In these places, we find the presence of God going along with us. I have said this many times, we never go alone on any part of our journey. It might just be harder to see the Light in front of us, alongside us, in us and among us, but he’s there. Jesus in his divinity, and his humanity, especially his humanity, is with us in our wilderness experiences has he has been where we are.

When we walk with others, with each other, when we lift each other up amid our own pain and struggles, God is with us, right there with us. With us giving us hope and peace and making our barren spots into a place where we spend time in prayer and contemplation with our God.

Let me make a note here to be absolutely clear – I am not suggesting that God causes us any suffering or hardships. Not for teaching us any lessons or putting us in place. That is not how our God works. We notice it is not the Spirit that tempts Jesus. God does not want any of God’s children to suffer, to have times of struggle. And please, this isn’t meant for anyone to stay in a place where they are in situations that could be dangerous or possibly degrading to them. Our God only wants good things for God’s children, for all the people everywhere.

I’m not sure who said this, but it speaks to this very well. “At the moment of our baptism, we, too, are driven up out of the water and into the wilderness that is our world. We are not able to remain, free of sin, immersed in the holy water of true life, but rather must emerge, forced to confront the wild beasts that exist all around us in our mortal life. Thank God we have the example of the One who has gone before us, along with all the other angels prepared to serve us and protect us if only we will open our hearts to love.”

A thought for you: as we journey through Lent: we all have our times of struggles and temptations, but I invite you to look to who, what and where they may lead you and how God is working in your life to help others as you serve God and neighbor.

Amen.