

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 3/5/06
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Text: Mark 1:9-12

In today's story from the Gospel of Mark, we hear the familiar account of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River, and the descent of the Holy Spirit upon him, with these words from heaven: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Quite an extraordinary beginning to Jesus' earthly ministry!

Then, Mark writes that that same Spirit immediately drives Jesus into the wilderness, where he's tempted by Satan for forty days. While in the wilderness, Mark says, Jesus finds himself in the company of both wild beasts and angels.

It's hard not to mentally insert into this scene the descriptions of the temptation of Jesus given by the Gospel writers Matthew and Luke, with which most of us are familiar. But right now, I'd like to focus only on what Mark writes, and pretend that we haven't heard the stories of Satan suggesting that Jesus turn stones into bread, jump from the top of the Temple, or bow down and worship him. All Mark tells us is that Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan.

In the stories and tradition of the people of Israel, the wilderness has been a place of great danger. This is how one commentator describes it: "It is a place of untold hardship – a broiling sun during the day, and numbing cold at night. Parched, untillable land stretches seemingly forever. Waterless and windswept, the desert is not fit for human habitation. Dust bowls and ferocious sand storms can be followed by deadly flash floods. Creeping things and wild beasts rule the landscape. No 'civilization' can survive there – or would want to."

Can we imagine the utter isolation that Jesus must have felt in the wilderness? Can we imagine his confusion as to what good could possibly come out of an experience of living in such desolation? Can we imagine Jesus wondering, "Where in the world is God in all of this?"

Many of us are living through a personal wilderness experience right now. The death of a loved one, or the end of a relationship might have driven us right into the wilderness – the wilderness of intense loneliness, of the complete upheaval of our life as we knew it, of the uncertainty of what comes next. The loss of a job might find us in the wilderness of financial disarray, of the inability to act as our family's provider, of plummeting self-esteem. A child's painful struggles might land us in the wilderness of doubting the wisdom and effectiveness of everything we had been about in our years of loving and intentional parenting. Serious health issues propel us into the wilderness of living with pain, of negotiating the maze of diagnosis and treatment, of no longer assuming that there will be a tomorrow.

Even those of us not experiencing a personal wilderness right now find ourselves very much in the midst of a national and international wilderness. The news from Iraq grows more horrifying by the day.

Terrorist attacks throughout the world take place with alarming regularity. The people of the hurricane-ravaged gulf struggle to rebuild their lives with an appalling scarcity of resources. What's going on in this country and in the world certainly feels like the wilderness to me. I can't help asking God, "What good can possibly come from this?" I find myself wondering, "Where is God in all of this?" Maybe that's the most basic of temptations that we face in every wilderness experience – to believe that we've been abandoned by God.

The good news is that even though Jesus was in the barren wilderness with all those wild beasts, he wasn't alone. The angels were there, too, caring for him. Whether or not he knew it or felt it at the time, Jesus had not been abandoned by God. And surely good did come out of Jesus' wilderness experience. We, his followers, know that he knows what it's like to live in a parched and desolate place, stretching seemingly forever. He has walked where we walk. He has lived where we live.

For the Israelites, the wilderness was a place of uncertainty and danger. But it was also a place of God's revelation. The same commentator writes: "In the wilderness ... they not only escaped the tyranny of Pharaoh, but also, as a people, first met the Lord God ... It is in the desert that they came to know God's lordship and steadfast love ... In the desert for years on end, they came to be transformed from a rag-tag group of slaves into the people of God."

We may find ourselves in a personal wilderness right now. We surely find ourselves in a national and a global one. And, as if that weren't enough, we're also at the beginning of our Lenten journey – a season in the church year during which the faith community enters into an intentional wilderness period. We allow ourselves to be vulnerable. We take stock of our relationship with God and each other. We consider carefully whether we're living out the values that we profess. We seek to let the winds of the wilderness sweep away the clutter, revealing what's at our very core.

At the very core is God-with-us, whether or not we're consciously aware of that truth. At the very core is God, who both goes with us into the wilderness and who meets us there. The wilderness that we're experiencing is real, but we're not alone in it. We may find ourselves in the wilderness for a very long time, but God will be revealed to us there. And through the presence, the love, the mercy, and the healing and transforming power of God, even the most hopeless of our human wilderness situations are never, ever without hope. Amen.