



“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”

Mark 1:12-13

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.

2 Corinthians 4:8-11

Mark's gospel tells us that there were wild beasts in the wilderness with Jesus. And I would say that our wilderness times probably come equipped with beasts too.

We're no stranger to fear as it crouches in the brush nearby, ready to pounce and strangle. We know temptation and how it slithers around waiting for the opportunity to strike. And then there is despair that seems to always be circling overhead, waiting to land and devour.

Yes, I would say wilderness times definitely have their wild beasts! And perhaps that's what makes them so challenging. We face real moments where our faith, our values, our trust in God, what we believe, seems to be on the line. We struggle with things like spirituality, loneliness, despair, fear, disappointment, low self-esteem, and bitterness.

Ever been there? Suddenly everything you've known and believed— all that you live by is up for grabs and it's a challenge to even hold fast to the values you hold dear? Not an easy journey; it's that constant ongoing battle between those things that we know to be right and those that lie in objection to them.

For example: the temptation in the wilderness may be to take shortcuts, to avoid struggle, to find the easy way through—while the challenge is to move through the struggle and take the hard way.

In the wilderness, the temptation is to listen to voices that would lead us away from God—the challenge is to listen to our living and life-giving God. Television, the news media, and the internet fill our ears with thousands of voices, representing many understandings of what is ultimately important, what gives meaning and purpose to life, and what principles guide life. With all the voices, it is increasingly difficult—especially for the young—to discern the good from the evil. So often the evil that tempts us and leads us to give allegiance to someone or something other than God is portrayed as ugly with a scary voice. In reality, the evil that presents itself in our lives doesn't come with pointy tails, horns, cloven hooves, or a menacing scowl. Rather, evil generally presents itself as something good and is generally the twisting of something good and life-giving into something evil and destructive of life. Money, power, influence, security, winning, fame—all are good and yet all can be twisted to become evil and destructive.

In the wilderness, the temptation is to substitute “stuff” in the place of God to make us feel better—the challenge is to live knowing that God is sufficient. One of the great temptations we face is the temptation always to have more. Happiness is just around the corner if only we have more things, or more wealth, or the finer things of life.

In the wilderness, the temptation is to give up—the challenge is to persevere. The life-giving way is to rise to meet the challenges head-on and persevere in doing what's right, in being faithful to God, in trusting God, in listening to God, and in loving others as God loves us. The good news is that God strengthens us to meet the challenges.

Paul wrote of his own experience, “We are pressed on every side by troubles, but not crushed and broken. We are perplexed because we don't know why things happen as they do, but we don't give up and quit. We are hunted down, but God never abandons us. We get knocked down, but we get up again and keep going”

Perseverance is so often the key to meeting the challenges of the wilderness. I think that is what James was getting at in the first chapter when he wrote: “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.”

“In the stories of the Desert Fathers (supposedly the earliest Christian monks in the desert land of the Middle East at the end of the 2nd century AD) there is one story concerning Abbot John the Dwarf. Abbot John prayed to the Lord that all passions be taken from him. His prayer was granted. He became one at peace and without struggle. So he went to one of the elders and said: “You see before you a man who is completely at rest and has no more temptations.”

The elder surprised him. Instead of praising him, the elder said: “Go and pray to the Lord to command some struggle to be stirred up in you, for the soul is matured only in battles.”

Abbot John did as he was instructed, and when the temptations started up again, he did not pray that the struggle be taken away from him. Instead, he met God daily and prayed: “Lord, give me strength to get through the fight.””

I pray that as we continue on our Lenten journey each and every one of us are provided with opportunities to meet God daily through time spent in prayer, reading, study, meditation, listening, and fasting. Knowing that our wilderness times will undoubtedly come and that we too will need to face them, let’s remember just how important it is to stay connected and to live in relationship with our heavenly Father.

Prayer:

Lord, give us the strength that we need to face all that comes our way.

Amen