

Into the Wild
Mark 1:9-16
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There is a 1996 book and 2007 movie by this title – Into the Wild -- about a young man rejecting his middle class life, burning his money, destroying his identity documents and going alone into the wild of Alaska, where he dies, just a couple of years after graduating from Emory University. But you know, it could be a lot worse, he could have, in his confusion and insecurity, bought assault weapons, and filled his mind and heart with hatred, and gone into a public place determined to prove to the world how angry and sad he was.

But when I chose this sermon title, I was not thinking about the book and movie, nor about Parkland's Douglas High School, because it was Tuesday. I was thinking about Jesus going into the wild, not knowing what his future held. I was in the early hours of my adjustment to news about Gia's departure, and wondering how you the congregation would respond to the news.

The wilderness experience is recounted in scripture several times but most notably these two: The Israelites in the wilderness for 40 years, trying to reach the Promised Land, and Jesus in the wilderness, following his baptism and prior to his engaging a life of ministry.

We have just jumped back in time from last week's story of the Transfiguration, where the voice from the cloud, "This is my beloved. Listen to him." Only when we read Mark, this year's Gospel, in the lectionary for first Sunday of Lent, do we get the baptism story with the temptation story. He does not give us any detail on the temptations, but he does make it clear that this dove that descended at Baptism is not some sweet heavenly dove. This Spirit drove Christ into the wilderness where the wild beasts were. Yet also there were angels to wait on him. So it is with us. We are constantly driven into places of wilderness, where we too have the opportunity to learn that we can put our trust in God's angels, or where we can sit in terror of the beasts and rage at the evil, the hunger, the fear.

Mark 1:9-16

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.

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¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." ¹² And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. ¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (NRS)

Though I am baptized and though I have the privilege of putting my hands in the Baptism waters every week to remind you and me that we are beloved children of God, I have been tempted this week to forget the magnitude of that truth. For if we are the beloved children of God, there is absolutely nothing that can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord. But there will be hardships – hardships with no explanation and hardships, which on the other side, we can see the hand of God teaching and strengthening us, through the pain.

I have been tempted this past week to try avoid sadness. To avoid sadness is to unleash the beast of cynicism, anger, and anxiety. Sadness is a painful emotion, and it is better to feel it and express it, than to pretend it isn't there. Angels have are around for sadness, and they can be seen if we are not caught up by the wild beasts.

I have been tempted to think it is all about me, letting stress distract me from seeing the bigger picture with God and lots of other people in it. Under stress, most of us begin to think that the world revolves around us, and we take the people around us for granted, using them to get our needs met, rather than working together for a mutual relationship of support and kindness. Part of this is to humbly recognize our own limitations and those of others.

I've been tempted at times in my life to numb anxiety and pain with the third glass of alcohol or the unneeded next serving of tasty food. Some people rush to comfort with food, others with alcohol, pot, drugs, porn, or loose relationships. Don't lie down with these beasts; they will consume you. Lie down with God's angels, resist the beasts, and find your healing.

I have been tempted this week to rage against those whom I'd like to blame for the tragedy in Parkland. We can blame Cruz's friends for not reporting his behavior. We can blame the FBI for ineffective follow-up on what was reported, but most of all, I'd like to blame NRA lobby and the Congress for being in their pockets. In my sadness and frustration over the frequency of these mass murders, I am tempted not to care what you think. I want to assert my simple answer – common sense gun control laws that restrict assault weapons and make the process of securing any gun much harder, especially for a troubled boy who cannot buy a beer. But the difficulty I have in listening to you, if you have a different opinion, is part of our problem. We've stopped listening and gone to our isolation corners, such that no helpful debate can even take place. The angels in this wilderness say to me that we must learn to talk to one another, even as we all rush speak to our representatives. Further, we can think of ways we can build a community of peace for teens in our area.

I have been tempted to speak poorly of my brothers and sisters, God's beloved, and that is my greatest temptation every day – not to offer people the dignity they deserve, both in their presence and in their absence. This is my personal Lenten challenge this year – that I banish all negative words and thoughts about any other human being. I've failed every day since Wednesday, but I am growing in my self-awareness as I work to confess my sin sincerely, each time.

Perhaps the worst temptation of all is to think change is not possible. Holding onto old patterns of thought, refusing to look at my own sin, never daring to believe that God can do a new thing. How can we expect to see change, if we ourselves are not prepared to be part of the change? Without the regular practice of self-examination, how can we hope to grow in Christian living?

I suppose you could say that taking on Lenten disciplines are like choosing to go into the wild – so that you are pushed to remember the message of your baptism and to cling to the security it provides. In the wild, to get in touch with your fears, your dependencies, and your need for God. Into the wild, just far enough to get out of your ruts and into new self-discipline with Christ. Into the wild, just far enough to get near the wild beasts and see the angels protecting you, so you can make good, faithful, calm decisions with the Spirit -- not succumb to the temptation to rush to comfort yourself, empower yourself, or secure yourself. We must embrace deeply God's love and power, made perfect in weakness.

Wilderness experiences will come our way, whether we seek them out or not, but if you think about it, you can hike through a thick forest better if you have practiced being in the woods. You can deal with temptation better if you have rehearsed your faith in Jesus Christ and recognize him to be the one who guides and strengthens you to push through, without giving in. You can survive having less creature comforts, if you have practiced giving up certain foods and drinks, and prayed to the Spirit for willpower. You can deal with your own grief in wilderness times, if you have already built a resilient faith in God, that can give you calm in the storm, because you know the One who made you and calls you beloved will never forsake you even in the valley of the shadow of death. Imagine if Nikolas Cruz had a resilient community of faith, who had surrounded him with love, after his mother died. Imagine Nikolas in pain, being tempted to hate the world, but having his heart softened by a congregation, who cared about his pain, and helped him to grow in compassion for others. Our teachers and our reading pals and our guardians ad litem and big brothers are helping children to know that they are valuable human beings who have a future filled with hope.

The world is often a scary wilderness. It is a place where we complain and worry, a place where we feel alone, a place of weariness and exhaustion, a place where we think all hopes are dashed. The wilderness is especially frightening if all of us are curled up in our own little caves of individualism, writing angry posts, and shooting at anything that moves.

But the wilderness can be a place of growing closer to God. It can be a place of learning to trust, despite our fear. It can be a place to learn for the first time that we are not in control. We do not know how our lives will unfold, but we know this: God loves us with an everlasting love, and we are never alone. The angels of Christ come to us in our dry deserts, in our scary nights in the wild, in our waves of fear and in our winds of change, saying “Calm to the waves, calm to the wind.” Jesus whispers, “Peace, be still.” Balm to our hearts. Fears at an end. In stillness, hear his voice.