

Which Side Are You On?

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC

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Text Mark 1:9-15

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And 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. ¹¹And 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. ¹³He was in the wilderness for 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, ¹⁵and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

Prayer

Sermon

The first Sunday of Lent, every year, we spend time in the wilderness, with Jesus, being tempted, which always makes me think of the devil.

Now, y'all have to remember I grew up in Nashville,
Which isn't the country,
But in the 80s was Country.

Country Music gives you a visceral sense of battles between good and evil. Grow up on Country and whether you believe in the Devil or not, you know what he sounds like:¹

There was a song about a fiddle player who got tested by the devil:

*The Devil went down to Georgia
He was lookin' for a soul to steal*

¹ <https://tasteofcountry.com/charlie-daniels-the-devil-went-down-to-georgia-behind-the-song/>

*...I'll bet a fiddle of gold against your soul
'Cause I think I'm better than you"²*

You know, Jesus was a country guy, according to Mark - he's out there on the edges of ancient Palestine, he's a rural guy from Galilee. Can anything good come from Nazareth, they asked? (John 1:46) This little town on the other side of nowhere, that's where Jesus is from.

Clarence Jordan, paraphrasing the Gospels to make more sense to the folks of rural Georgia and the Koinonia Farm - one of the earliest deliberately interracial Christian communities in the South - emphasized Jesus' connections to rural folks. "Jesus was taken by the spirit into the country to be given a test by the Confuser," Jordan put it.³

I'm adding on this country flare because Mark doesn't give us a tremendous amount to work with, in terms of the details of Jesus's time in the wilderness.

"The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."

Mark doesn't give us many details.

In a country song you'd know how the devil sounded and just what that wilderness was like - and the wild beasts, you could name them pretty quick. One of them would have been a copperhead, hiding under the one rock Jesus found to lay his head. In Bible study we were thinking the beasts could have been dangerous or they could have been a symbol of Jesus' connection to the original beauty of creation. I did a little poking afterward, and given that the same Greek word shows up in Revelation's description of the apocalypse 30 times...I'm going with the poisonous snake interpretation. Daniel in the lion's den, Jesus in the country with copperheads and cottonmouths watching him.

So you've got the tempter, the devil, the Confuser, Satan in his slick red suit.

And you've got the wilderness and the wild beasts, hissing.

And you've got Jesus, a holy man, God's beloved son, sent out into that wilderness.

Why would that be?

² <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=lyrics+devil+went+down+to+georgia>

³ Cotton Patch Gospel Matthew 4:1

What do we learn from this story?

Debie Thomas points out that we learn Jesus was human, and we learn something about our humanity, *and our wilderness moments*. “Jesus actually *struggled* in the wilderness. ...he hurt....he hungered...he wept, thirsted, wrestled, and suffered.”⁴ The result was not fore-ordained any more than it is when we are tempted, or when we face a critical decision. Jesus didn’t choose to go into the wilderness - the Spirit drove him there - and that’s a little bit of a quandary, too. Why would God test the one that God sent to draw humanity back into God’s love and God’s ways? Does God deliberately send us into the wilderness? I struggle with this question, but here’s where I’ve gotten to, this week. One of the most important things about Jesus was that he was an embodiment of God’s love who was fully human and experienced the full range of human reality. I don’t think God sends us wildernesses, tests, sufferings - but we all have them. Jesus had to experience the wilderness to know what we go through, had to experience temptation before he could ask us to pray, “Lead us not into temptation.”

When we are in the wilderness, we know the one we follow has gone there before us. Again , Debie Thomas: “God is ready to teach, shape, and redeem us even during the most barren periods of our lives... In the startling economy of God, even a dangerous desert can become holy. Even our wilderness wanderings can reveal the divine.”⁵

Something holy and divine, the Spirit, drives Jesus into the wilderness. Whatever drives us into the wilderness, it’s good to know Jesus has given us a trailmap. But the other piece we have to hold onto from this story is that Jesus is not alone in those forty days. Something holy and divine, God’s angels, minister to him and sustain him. In Mark’s gospel, the angels are there with the beasts. It’s easy to wonder where God is, when we are in the wilderness. Here is Jesus to remind us: God was with the Israelites, forty years in the desert; God was with Noah, forty days in the flood; God was there with Jesus; God is with us in our wildernesses even when we cannot see her.

And in fact, however terse Mark is, there’s something important about how quickly he moves from baptism to wilderness: Jesus is assured of his belovedness, driven to the wilderness, and ministered to by the angels in three verses. That blessing of belovedness passes along to us when we are in the wilderness, too. We are beloved. We are not alone. Angels minister to us, even there.

Now, in the wilderness, Jesus made some choices. Jesus chose to be on God’s side, not the devil’s. No temptation of the devil, no power or wealth, no fame or comfort, would cause Jesus to choose the devil’s way. It’s not just that Jesus chooses God’s

⁴ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2924-beasts-and-angels>

⁵ *ibid.*

side in this moment - Jesus is victorious over the forces of evil over and over again, right through to the empty tomb. And it seems to me, that we will not face our own choices just once either. We'll be asked again and again to follow Jesus, to be on the side of love and justice, to resist temptation. Our own choices and temptations continue over and over again.

About 15 years after Charlie Daniels' original song, the devil returned and Johnny Cash told the story that time -

"The devil's back in Georgia
will you stand up to the test
Or will you let the devil be the best?"⁶

The devil, it seems, just going to keep coming back again and again, to test and tempt...

The devil's dream is that he can win....
But Jesus was the best that's ever been.

Now, don't take this literally...the devil's not a slick fiddle player at the crossroads, and we can talk some other time about what metaphors the gospel writers are trying to make when they speak of Satan. But hear this:
Whatever temptation you face,
Whatever wilderness you find yourself in,
Like Jesus who went before you,
You are beloved,
You can resist temptation and make the right choices,
And there will be angels there, ministering to you.

Amen.

⁶ <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=lyrics+devil+comes+back+to+georgia>