

**Lent I B
Mark 1:9-15
March 1, 2009**

I am starting to feel as though I am rewinding the same movie scene over and over again. I mean, really. We have already heard some little snippet of today's Gospel reading three times on other Sundays. It's as though the lectionary has a remote control and it keeps zipping back and forth over these few images, seeking, looking for some instant in a scene to focus in on.

In December, it was John the Baptist, the forerunner. We had to take a good look at the wild man, the last of Israel's prophets, before we could see Jesus. In January, yes we did hear about Jesus' baptism, the voice, the spirit, the heavens tearing apart. A week or so later, as Jesus came out of the wilderness to start his ministry, we heard the words of his message, "the time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near."

Zip, zip, zip. Forward, back, pause. Take a minute, take a good look, then zip, zip zip, all over again.

Well today being the first Sunday in Lent, the lectionary has zipped back again to the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, a story that somehow we have missed, even with all this back and forth through the first few verses of Mark's first chapter.

So here's where the remote hits pause this week. Here's the big showdown between Jesus and Satan: "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."

That's it, then. That's the whole story of Jesus' temptation, according to Mark. There's no drama here. No arguing with Satan, no snappy comebacks like "man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

Now Matthew and Luke love this story, they develop it, really MAKE something of it. But Mark, in Mark's typical fashion, is in a big rush to move on to the next event. So he breaks Jesus' temptation down into a few images. Wilderness. Forty days. Tempted. Satan. Wild beasts. Angels.

So what are we to make of this brief, two-sentence story? How on earth can it provide insight or guidance for us as we begin our Lenten journey? Well, as a friend of mine likes to say, you have to read Mark with the throttle of your imagination wide open. So let's open up this tiny little image of Jesus' wilderness time. Let's see what might be here for us today.

What strikes me most forcibly is that word wilderness. We get it twice. The Spirit, the same Holy Spirit that just descended on Jesus like a sweet little dove, suddenly turns into a divine bar bouncer, tossing Jesus out into the wilderness to figure it out.

Into the wilderness. Where nothing is safe. Where everything is a potential threat. But that is where God wants him; that is where God drives him. Into the desert alone. Into the wild. God didn't send him straight from the moment of "that's my boy" at the baptism directly into preaching and healing and teaching. God sent Jesus out into the wild wasteland of Judea, to see what he was made of.

Into the wilderness. Where it is desolate. And lonely. And filled with things you might not want to meet. Satan. Wild beasts. Even angels are pretty terrifying. Tests happen in the wilderness, not simply temptations, but tests. The wilderness is where the people of Israel wandered for 40 long years after fleeing their slavery in Egypt. They were tested and failed, time and time again. Will Jesus live up to his promise?

And Jesus spends his time in a risk-filled confrontation with himself and his vocation. He wrestles with the adversary of all that is good. Faced with opposition, will he crack? He is with wild beasts. Do they frighten him? We don't know ... all we know is they are wild and they are with him.

And in the midst of risk and wrestling and trials and beasts, Jesus finds himself cared for, nurtured and sustained. Instead of abandoning Jesus, God cares for him most tenderly. So the forty days end with Jesus appearing in Galilee, proclaiming the good news. The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God is on its way.

Now *that* would be some kind of Lenten experience, wouldn't it? Have you ever, ever *ever* had a Lent that was like that?

I ask, because our tradition always gives us one of the gospel stories of Jesus' temptation on the first Sunday of Lent. It does so in an attempt, I think, to draw a parallel between our own Lenten journeys and Jesus' time in the wilderness. Lent lasts for 40 days after all. And we deny ourselves our little indulgences, our alleluias, our coffee or chocolate. We lay some burden on ourselves, to read the Bible every day, or to be nice to a co-worker. We suffer temptations ... to eat that leftover paczki, to sleep in when we promised we would get up early and pray.

But is our Lenten journey really wild? Is it dangerous? Is it risky? After all, what are the consequences, really, if we forget and eat that Hershey's kiss, or if the book sits unread by the bed side, or if we skip the midweek eucharist? What's at stake, for you and for me, in these next 40 days between now and Easter?

I think if we would really draw that parallel between Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, and our 40 days of Lent, then we must be honest. There is nothing wild or scary about giving up Facebook or caramel macchiatos. I mean, that's all fine to do, and Lord knows in our self-indulgent society, any act of self-discipline will help to strengthen us, spiritually.

But I am wondering who among us is brave enough to really go to the wilderness this Lent. To let themselves be tossed out of their comfort zones into a risky place where everything gets called into question. To go to the wild places with God, to get wild with God, for forty days and forty nights.

Lent is a time to be spiritually wild. I mean that. We are way too controlled and uptight and well-managed, all of us, me too. Lent is a time to let go the controls, let down the drawbridge, bust open the barriers enough to let God in – and see if he can make something of us for a change.

So what would happen if we thought of Lent as something less like *Robert's Rules of Order*, and something much more like Maurice Sendak's wonderful picture book, "Where the Wild Things Are"?

In that book, a little boy named Max sails away to the place where the wild things are. And when he arrives, they "roar their terrible roars and gnash their terrible teeth and roll their terrible eyes and show their terrible claws." And Max stares them all down until they decide to make him the king of all wild things.

And then comes the best line in the whole book, "And now," cried Max, "let the wild rumpus start!" And for six beautifully illustrated pages, Max and the wild things dance through the jungle, and through the night, until it's over, and Max sends the wild things off to bed and sails for home himself.

This Lent, what might start a wild rumpus in your own heart, in your own soul? Well here's a thought ... if you imagine saying to God "all that I am and all that I have is completely at your disposal. Use me as you will," what terrifies you about making that offer to God?

Are you afraid God will ask you to do something you're too timid to do? Then do it. Are you afraid God will show you something about yourself you'd rather not see? Then look at it. Are you afraid God will lead you someplace you are afraid to go? Then go there. Are you afraid God will ask you to speak to someone you'd rather avoid? Guess what ... you're going to have to speak.

This is what Lent is really for, to put us in touch with God in a way that is dangerous and daring. To help us take a risk, a chance, a leap of faith. To drive us into that wilderness, where we can get wild with God.

So ask God that question. See what terrifies you about the answer. Look closely at that fear, and you'll find a wild thing dying to show you its terrible claws, a wild thing willing to dance with you through the next 40 days.

And now, let the wild rumpus start!