

Lent 1, Yr B, February 18, 2018
Emmanuel Hastings
Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

I know I've talked before about the Godly Play stories that use the "desert box," and about the way the storyteller sits beside it, running her hands through the sand, piling it up along one side, then changing the shape again as she speaks:

"The desert is a strange and dangerous place. The wind blows the sand into changing hills and valleys and it is very easy to get lost.

There is little water and the extremes of heat and cold are great. No one goes into the desert unless they have to."

But (pause) many important stories in the Bible take place in the desert, and the one in today's gospel is no exception.

The first Sunday in January we celebrated the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord and the Renewal of our own Baptismal Covenant,

but today's gospel lesson takes us a step further. Mark, never one to mince words, describes Jesus' baptism in a unique way –

and remember, Mark's was the first Gospel to be written down, telling the Jesus story with an intensity that the other Gospels tone down a bit.

Mark says, at the baptism of Jesus, the heavens are *torn apart*, and the Spirit descends upon him,

with the Voice proclaiming him the Son, the Beloved, the source of God's good pleasure.

But then that same Spirit, in the very next verse, *immediately drives* him into the desert!

Mark draws a very tight connection between these two events: Jesus' baptism and his forty days of trial from wild beasts and the evil one.

But before we talk about the desert, first think with me about the torn open heavens. At the end of Mark, when Jesus dies, the great curtain in the Jerusalem temple,

the curtain that cordons off and separates the most holy part of the temple, where only the chief priest may go and only once a year to make atonement for all the people's sins,

that curtain is torn in two. It is the same verb and it has the same meaning: the separation between heaven and earth is undone forever.

One commentator writes, "...the protecting barriers are gone and God, unwilling to be confined to sacred spaces, is on the loose in our land."

Or with a slightly different slant, because sin is by definition separation from God, at the baptism of Jesus,

“...God crosses the impenetrable boundary between divine and human realms and acts as one who identifies fully with human sin, life and longing.

Jesus' coming shatters our assumptions and confounds our sense of what is expected.

His baptism not only identifies him as God's Son but also empowers him for ministry to all people.” It's a done deal, right?

So why does the Spirit *drive* him into the wilderness immediately? What is the significance of the wilderness? And why for forty days?

The number 40 appears in scripture in relation to times of challenge and testing: in the Noah story, it rained for forty days and forty nights, recalling the ancient chaos before creation;

at the Exodus, when the Israelites escape from Egypt, they spend forty years wandering in the wilderness as they are formed into a people of God,

at Mt Sinai, Moses spends forty days up on the mountain in God's presence, receiving the Torah;

the prophet Elijah hides for forty days on another mountain, from Ahab and Jezebel who want to kill him.

So is Jesus on some sort of vision quest, like a young Native American or African boy who must endure a series of ordeals in order to become a man and a warrior? It is a common archetype and one way that this story is often understood.

Is Jesus sent into the wilderness to come to terms with the meaning of his experience of baptism and to develop “a strategy for ministry?”

I don't like the boardroom language, but I think that the wilderness often *is* a place of paring down and clarifying what one is meant to do.

Is the wilderness, the desert, then, just a metaphor for personal development? No, I think there is much more to this process event.

More important than the length of time or the challenge of “a strange and dangerous place,” Jesus is driven from his baptism into the wilderness to confront evil.

And equally, in our baptisms we are impelled by the Spirit to engage with the danger and challenge of being a follower of Jesus and to stand up to and resist evil as well.

There are many kinds of wilderness, and evil appears in many guises. Certainly there is the evil of easy access to AR-15s that mow down innocent school children.

There is the wilderness of inner city food deserts, where the little bit of healthy food in grocery stores costs far beyond the means of the people in the neighborhood.

There is the wilderness of war zones and disaster areas in eastern Congo or Syria or Haiti.

There is the wilderness in which our country seems currently to be wandering, the wilderness of the lack of political will to create affordable health care, to fund research into healing for mental illness or to welcome the stranger.

There is the wilderness of rural poverty, and the lack of affordable housing in Barry County,

no place for homeless men, no place for those being released from jail on drug charges to go to other than the environments that make it all too easy to use or deal again.

There is the evil I learned about this week, a payday lender in Hastings who charged 320% interest on a loan.

And there are always the wild beasts of chaos, violence and fear.

Matthew and Luke offer more detailed descriptions of Jesus' time in the wilderness;

Mark just says he was tempted by Satan, he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him.

The word "tempted" unhelpfully suggests a rather superficial desire for something not good for us;

a particularly rich Swedish Christmas dish is called Jansson's Temptation, and we talk about being tempted by sinfully delicious chocolate desserts.

That is not what Jesus' time in the wilderness was about!

Sin of course has a personal component, but it also has a much broader context. In the words of John Shea,

"Satan is the inner, invisible energy of people, groups, and social and political structures that inflict suffering on people,

...ways of thinking and acting that...actively keep people alienated from God and divided among themselves."

And in the questions of our Baptismal Covenant,

"Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God,

...the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God, and ...the...desires that draw you [away from] the love of God?"

Being baptized as a Christian is not a light commitment! "The baptismal gift of the Spirit is not a personal privilege but the foundation for a struggle."

Yet it *is* the baptismal gift of the Spirit, and therein lies our power to resist evil, not by our own determination, not by our "strategies for ministry," not by our ideologies, and above all, not by violence, but by the power and freedom and love of the Spirit of God.

In Matthew and Luke's accounts, Jesus resisted Satan by trusting his Father, knowing the scriptures, and refusing to be moved or guided by fear.

The writer of 1 John says, "There is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear."

On my office windowsill in Cadillac I have a quote from Gandhi, "Be truthful, gentle and fearless."

The prophet and man of God Martin Luther King said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hatred cannot drive out hatred; only love can do that."

It is love that has the power to overcome evil and sustain in the wilderness.

We don't resist evil in our own strength; like Jesus, we too have been empowered in our baptisms by the very Spirit of God, who is love.

The heavens have been *torn apart*. There is good news for a tough world. The kingdom of God has come near. Ultimately "God is on the loose..." and our work is to follow.

In his confrontation with evil in the wilderness, Jesus was nourished and cared for by angels.

It is our work as a faith community to nourish and care for one another, spiritually, emotionally, and even sometimes physically as we engage with resisting evil in our various wildernesses.

It is our work to gather nourishment at this table, to receive the Sacrament of Christ's own Life,

and it is our work to use this holy season of Lent to practice, to train, to strengthen the fearlessness that comes from love.

Why? So that we can indeed go into the wilderness to face down evil in the power of the Spirit. Thanks be to God.