

*A sermon for St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Camden, Maine, preached by the bishop, the Right Reverend Thomas J. Brown, for the First Sunday in Lent, 21 February 2021. To God be the glory.*

I'd like to introduce you to my high school English teacher. Though I would never address her by her first name you certainly may. It's MJ, a diminutive for Maryjane. She commanded respect, and she worked 10x harder than her students—always returning our papers more promptly than we did turning them in, and continually helping us grasp grammar and style so that we developed a love for the language, not merely an ability. Most of my essays would be returned with B+'s and A-'s—across the top margin your new acquaintance, MJ, would use a red felt tip marker, and write "VERBOSE!"—in capital letters. She would have loved having St. Mark in her class because while St. Matthew and St. Luke have a version Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, it is only St. Mark, today's narrator, who puts things succinctly, in fact, into one sentence: "He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and angels ministered to him."

Before this wilderness time, there comes a pivotal moment in Jesus' life: his baptism in the river Jordan. And we heard again today what we heard back in January: there is that mystical moment as he comes out of the waters, and he hears these words: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Here is a life changing moment. Jesus receives information about his identity.

The word for this is revelation: when behind and beneath the everyday reality a greater truth is revealed. Can you imagine the power, the liberation, and the sense of clarity that would come to Jesus in such a moment: "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." That kind of clarity is what the heart longs for. And the world would have looked very different after this moment. But that moment does not last for long. The revelation occurs, and then this: "*Immediately, the Spirit drove him into the wilderness.*" Jesus is suddenly thrown from the clarity of a call into a wilderness of waiting. And what awaits him there? St. Mark, in his one sentence tells us much:

*He was in the wilderness; he was tempted by Satan; and there were wild beasts.*

The first century listeners to St. Mark would have known that wilderness and wild beasts represented those places untamed by civil order or all that sustains life. It was, in other words, a place which negated the very idea of God, let alone a God who would say, "In you I am well pleased." Here then is the great temptation: do you trust the revelation you received when you encounter an earthly reality that contradicts it? Jesus does not hear the voice of a loving parent. He does not see a heavenly dove. There is silence, and if there are voices, they are ones already calling into question whether he should believe what he experienced as John the Baptist plunged him into the waters.

Jesus is not alone in this experience. As Christians, we proclaim that the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ, whose name and nature is love, is the sovereign of the universe. That is the frame for the way we view the world. But oh, how much of the world seems to contradict that revelation, that truth. We see that contradiction wherever violence holds sway, and in every situation where innocents suffer. We see it in our lack of civility in discourse, and in the terrible gulfs between those who have and those who don't.

But you no doubt, heard one more detail that St. Mark added in that short telling of the story, and the detail is this:

*and angels ministered to him.*

We don't get a story of angels descending or ascending. We don't get a story of cherubim and seraphim singing heavenly choruses in the sky. Only a general suggestion, a hint, that the divine presence who brought him up from the Jordan and took him into the wilderness, was still with him. Which may help explain why, after 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus acts as he does. He comes out of that place, only to learn that John the Baptist has been arrested. Hearing this news, and considering it, Jesus goes to Galilee, and begins his ministry with these words:

*The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God is near; repent, and believe the Good News.*

What does Jesus see when he looks at the world after this time in the wilderness? Despite all the evidence that may suggest otherwise, Jesus sees a world in which the sovereign's name is not Herod, but rather Love. He sees the realm in which you and I are meant to dwell, whose reality is seen through the brokenness of this world.

And he invites us to turn to see it: for that is what repentance truly means: to turn our lives in such a way so that we can see that realm and that way and that truth. He invites us to turn from any doubt, any despair, and yes, to turn from all those smaller choices and decisions we make, to turn from the temptations that would bring harm to ourselves and others, and from those habits and patterns of seeing that keep us from acknowledging God's presence in our lives, and to believe.

My high school English teacher, besides writing "verbose" on my essays, often said, "you can choose to learn sooner, or later...it's always your choice."

This Lent, whether we're online or end up gathering in-person, we come again to St. Mark's way of getting to the point. We get to choose how this season will go...will it be a time to grow, or merely 40 days leading to Easter?

*The Kingdom of God is near; repent, and believe the Good News.*