First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

February 18, 2024

A Trip to the Desert

Mark 1:9-15

**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 upon him. **11**And a voice came from the heavens, “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, tested 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.”

When I lived in Palm Springs, one of the most fascinating aspects of life there, was the proximity to the desert. As any of you who’ve ever been there know, you don’t have to go too far out of town to encounter a landscape that, at first glance, seems barren, devoid of life, and utterly alien. Brown seems to be the most common color, and there’s very little vegetation, save for sagebrush, or maybe a few piñon trees. Combine that with a scarcity of food and water, along with an average summer temperature of roughly 110 degrees, as well as the scorpions, the snakes and all of the other creepy crawlies that make their homes in that environment, and it’s easy to understand why people find the desert inhospitable.

Yet, if you takes a closer look, there’s beauty in the desert, as well. Granted, it’s an austere beauty; not necessarily what some may think of when the word beauty comes to mind but beauty does exist, if one is willing to seek it out. For me, I found the patterns in the sand, left after a windstorm absolutely beautiful and fascinating. I also loved what happened to the desert after a huge rainstorm, when seeds which had remained buried for years, would all of a sudden burst into bloom. If you ever have the opportunity to visit the desert, I encourage you to look for beauty that may not be obvious at first glance.

In today’s Gospel reading, there’s no description of the desert; in fact, none of the three narratives of this event take time to describe what the desert was, which doesn’t surprise me. Folks reading the various accounts of this event, would have been very familiar with desert life; after all, their ancestors had spent 40 years wandering in the desert, and it was right on their doorstep, so there was no need to provide a physical description of this harsh, inhospitable place where Jesus spent time before he began his earthly ministry.

In characteristic fashion, the writer of Mark’s gospel gives us very little detail about this particular event and what Jesus experienced. Jesus is baptized, the spirit falls on him, God tells him that he’s the beloved son, and then the spirit drives him into the wilderness where he’s tempted by Satan and wild animals and angels waited on him; And that’s it, that’s the whole story in a nutshell, at least according to Mark.

Now, Matthew’s version goes into great detail about how Satan tempted Jesus and how Jesus resisted those efforts. And one of my favorite cartoons comes from the part in Matthew’s Gospel when Matthew recounts Satan tempting Jesus by telling him to turn these stones to bread. Jesus looks at Satan and says, “Really, stones to bread?” “In this day and age, don’t you think you ought to have a gluten free option?” By the way, if you look at Luke’s version, the temptations are recounted in a similar fashion, but without as much detail and this story is completely missing from John’s gospel.

When I was looking at Mark’s version of this story, verse 12 caught my eye. *“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.”* Mark’s use of the word, “Drove,” fascinates me, because of the harsh nature of that word in this particular context. Matthew and Luke use much different language to describe what’s going on here, when they both use the word, “Led.” To my way of thinking, that’s much easier to hear, don’t you think?

Rev. Brian Rajcok, pastor of St Matthew’s Lutheran Church in Avon, CT, writes, “*To me this is a big difference. Being led indicates a willingness to go. Being driven suggests less than a choice. In Greek, the word drove, means ‘to cast out’ – Jesus was cast out into the wilderness just as he later would cast out demons from the possessed. It indicates a strong force is involved. That seems to be the case here—Spirit’s power is so strong, that Jesus is compelled to go into the wilderness, and in the power of that same Spirit, bests Satan. Matthew and Luke emphasize Jesus’ cooperation and obedience to the will of God, but Mark brings out a very human dimension of Jesus: he found himself in a harsh place where he might not have gone otherwise.”*

As we enter the Lenten season; these forty days leading up to Easter, I’ve been giving quite a bit of thought to how we humans are often pushed into desert experiences of our own, whether we want to make that journey or not. I should note here, that it’s not a matter of *if* we will experience the harsh realities of life, but *when*. Every one of us have had to take trips to the desert, often on multiple occasions. Illness, loneliness, rejection, failure; all of these things and more, can lead us to places that seem barren and inhospitable.

And just as Jesus faced temptation, during those forty days, so too do we. It can be very easy to succumb to the despair, and hopelessness, that accompany times of illness, loneliness, rejection and failure. And, sadly, many people are unable to survive those temptations.

In both Matthew and Mark’s accounts of Jesus’ time in the wilderness, the writers note the presence of angels sent by God to attend, or wait, on Jesus. I imagine that the human Jesus, who was in the desert not by choice, must have been grateful for the comfort and support provided by these angels in a very difficult situation.

So, here’s a question for you: When we witness others in the midst of wilderness experiences, are we willing to be angels? Are we willing to comfort and support those who otherwise might succumb to despair and hopelessness? And if we flip that around, are we willing to seek the help of the angels around us when we run the risk of succumbing to those same temptations? Are we willing to let the strength of the spirit; that same spirit that compelled Jesus to go into the desert, work in us in such a way that we become open to offering and receiving help, when it’s needed?

It can be really easy to get so wrapped up in our own everyday life, that we ignore those who are in need. It can be really easy to succumb to the temptation to look the other way when others are hurting. It can be really easy to say to ourselves, “Oh, that’s too bad,” and walk away. We’ll happily offer prayers for those in pain, but too often that’s the sum total of our willingness to help.

Now church, we are very, very good at being angels to each other, and our community. It’s a hallmark of this congregation and it’s one of the many reasons I love being your pastor. I know for a fact that our efforts to help each other, as well as those in the larger community, do not go unnoticed and are greatly appreciated. That said, is there more we can do? Are we willing to continue to offer more than “thoughts and prayers,” to those who are in the middle of their own desert experience?

As we begin our journey towards the Cross, this Lenten season, I believe we have been given an opportunity to reexamine how we experience the wilderness. We can either succumb to the temptation to see desert experiences as lifeless, barren and hopeless, which may cause us to ignore opportunities to be angels to others, or we can embrace the beauty of offering comfort and support to those around us and show those who struggle with hopelessness and despair that there is life in the desert, after all. Which will you choose? AMEN