

Mark 1:9-15 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And 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. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." 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. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

+++

"The night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind and another, his mother called him "WILD THING," and Max said "I'LL EAT YOU UP," so he was sent to bed without eating anything. That very night in Max's room a forest grew and grew and grew until his ceiling hung with vines, and the walls became the world all around, and an ocean tumbled by with a private boat for Max. And he sailed off through night and day, and in and out of weeks and almost over a year, to where the wild things are. And when he came to the place where the wild things are they roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws till Max said "BE STILL!" and tamed with his magic trick of staring into all their yellow eyes without blinking once. And they were frightened and called him the most wild thing of all and made him king of all wild things. "And now," cried Max, "let the wild rumpus start!"

You may recognize this story. It's "Where The Wild Things Are," by Maurice Sendak. The little boy, Max, finds a place to go where the things are more wild than even he is, a place where he can wander free, just for a little while until he is ready to come back to himself, and back to the home and the mother he loves. In today's Gospel reading, Mark tells us that Jesus goes out to where wild things are. Each Gospel tells the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness differently, but only Mark mentions that while he was out there he was (quote) "with the wild beasts." Mark writes, "He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." Whenever I hear this I always wonder what's going on with the wild beasts?

Does Mark include this detail just to complete the picture of the wilderness? Like to remind the reader that being in the wilderness is not only lonely, but it's dangerous! Who knows what kind of beasts Jesus may have encountered out there looking for a bite? Or is Mark suggesting that he was in harmony with the wild beasts? That in Jesus' oneness with the Creator, he is at peace with all living creatures, no matter how wild? Sort of a personification of the lion lying down with the lamb from Isaiah 11... Or perhaps like with Max, maybe it was a wild rumpus situation!?

For whatever reason, Mark tells us that Jesus and Satan were not the only ones out in the wilderness during those 40 days. There were also the wild beasts and with the angels. Jesus goes out "immediately," Marks says, after being baptized, he's driven by the Spirit to go into the wilderness, to face Satan - the one he's been sent to overcome - head-on. He goes to fast, pray and wrestle with

temptation, to prepare himself for the task ahead: beginning his public ministry of healing, teaching, calling, sanctifying, dying and rising again.

Before all this, he was just a carpenter. Just living his life, minding his mother, helping his father, keeping his head down as he grew, as Luke writes, “in wisdom and in stature.” Before all this, he was just a guy, going about his business, in the nowhere-town of Nazareth. But that “just a nobody from nowhere” persona had to come to an end. His time had come, and once baptized by John in the Jordan, he was ready to fulfill his role as Rabbi, Healer, Redeemer, Messiah and Lord.

Of course, he was all of those things before all this, but his baptism marked the moment when the God’s plan in Jesus would unfold, in public, for all to see. But he couldn’t get started with the devil on his back. He couldn’t set forward to call disciples and to teach crowds and perform miracles worrying about when that darned old devil would pop up and try to distract him, to tempt him, to pull him away from his mission. And so, the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness maybe just to get that part over with - to face Satan head-on, once and for all. He gave Satan 40 days to do his worst. He gave himself 40 days to be tested, tempted, to wrestle, to wander. He allowed himself time to do this, up front, so he could get on with it, move forward in full and total obedience to his call and to his heavenly Father.

We often talk about wilderness times in life. Times when we may feel lost, or feel tempted, or feel aimless or like we’re wrestling with demons or temptation or defeat. For some of us, we can point to those spiritual deserts we’ve traversed in our own faith journeys. For some of us, we encounter those whenever the cycles of depression or anxiety creep up on us. We may identify what we’re in right now as a “wilderness” time. We’re moving kind of aimlessly, feeling downtrodden or even trapped with the demons that in normal times we can usually shake ourselves free from. But I don’t think that’s what we’re talking about here. I don’t think that’s the kind of wilderness Jesus spent these 40 days in. Because first of all, the SPIRIT drove him out there. And when we’re in those lost and aimless places of depression, loss or anxiety, I don’t believe God sends us there. I don’t believe the Spirit drives us into those wasted places.

That’s not saying God isn’t with us in those desert places, That the Spirit is not present with us, guiding us through. And I’m not saying that God can’t teach us some profound things while we’re there. But maybe when we’re in those times, the only real goal is to get through them as quickly as possible, gleaning whatever life lessons we can. But what we’re talking about today is different. The Spirit drove Jesus into that wilderness. She drove him there because he had work to do. Jesus had had a calling to fulfill - a calling made effective in his baptism - that he needed to prepare himself for. Confronting the devil (and winning) was something Jesus needed to do first. And it wasn’t about having to prove himself worthy. In fact the Father had *already* declared him worthy right before this, when at Jesus’ baptism, he proclaimed: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Maybe, as opposed to those other aimless wilderness times, this is what we’d call a “Baptismal Wilderness.” A time of wrestling and testing that we all undergo, not because we’re lost, but quite the opposite, because we’re called. Perhaps a Baptismal Wilderness happens when the time has come to confront head-on whatever is keeping you from fulfilling your mission, something that’s holding you back or threatening to distract you from your baptismal calling: to proclaim Christ in word and deed, to care for others and the world God made, and to work for justice and peace. Jesus’s Baptismal

Wilderness was the place the Spirit led him when he was ready to move on from just going about business as usual and move into fulfilling God's mission. This is the kind of place that the Spirit may drive his servants to enter to prepare them for the next step in the journey of faith.

A friend once told me about a time like this in his life. He had spent 20 years training for, starting out and advancing in his career. He was good at his job - definitely had the right skill set to succeed - and the way he was being promoted, he felt affirmed that he had found the right fit for him. In addition to all that, he was making good money. He was not only making enough money to take care of his family, the family he knew God had blessed him with, to give them everything they needed and wanted, but he also was able to become one of the most generous givers in his church. He knew everything he got was a gift from God and he had a strong sense of giving back to God and he felt good about that.

But something was bothering him. Something began nagging at him, something he was able to ignore at first, but that became more and more of a problem. The longer he was in his career, the more he learned about the injustices being perpetrated in the industry. The more he studied God's Word and grew in grace through his church, the more he understood the wrong that being perpetuated ... He was wrestling. He was struggling with the temptation to just look the other way and the weight of responsibility he felt towards his family and his church. The wrestling went on for a long time, he said. Every time he thought he'd rationalized it all away, it bubbled back up - how he knew that he had to make a decision, not to participate in a system that perpetuated and tolerated injustice.

And so, finally, he spoke with his wife about it. It broke his heart to even suggest taking away the financial stability she and the kids relied on. But he told her he felt like God was calling him to quit his job, and to make a major career shift, one that would come with a pay cut. With prayer and conversations with their pastor, together they made the decision they felt aligned best with their baptismal calling. When my friend tells this story, he always mentions the angels he encountered in his time of wilderness - his faithful Christian wife being the most prominent. And he can also name some wild beasts he had to go head-to-head with while he was facing the ugly realities of the industry as well.

Maybe you can remember times when you felt that same kind of angst. Times when you knew if you listened to that still, small voice, you'd be heading into a future of unknown fears. But if you go into those places following your baptismal calling, being led by the Spirit, seeking to do his will, You go with the knowledge that you are God's child, his beloved, and with you he is well pleased.

There are perils and blessings in the wilderness. We don't know what wild things await us there. But we know the promise of God that goes with us. As we enter into this 40-day journey of Lent, what temptations are you ready to confront head-on? What time of wrestling are you ready to enter into, not to prove yourself worthy but because God has already deemed you worthy through your baptism into Christ. This Lent, what journey will you let the Spirit send us on to more fully live into the promise and identity as God's beloved: loved, called and commissioned? It may be wild! We may encounter beasts, angels or demons. But we have the Spirit at our back and Christ by our side. So, "Let the wild rumpus start!"