

In Our Wildernesses
Mark 1:9-15
February 21, 2021
First Presbyterian Church, Luling

As we turn to the temptation of Jesus as Mark tells it, well, we don't get much information about anything except that it happened in the wilderness. In two short verses, Mark makes sure to mention the wilderness twice, which is a cue to us to pay attention—the wilderness setting is important. Jesus's temptation isn't in his hometown, nor Jerusalem, nor near Galilee where he begins preaching in the next verses. Jesus's temptation is out in the wilderness.

The wilderness had a long history with the Israelites, or maybe it's that the Israelites had a long history and experience with the wilderness. Elijah the prophet, who we talked about last week, Noah on the ark had a wet 40 day wilderness, and the experience that bound them all together—the Israelites 40 years of wandering in the wilderness.

Each of these people, in the wilderness, confront a deep doubt inside themselves, a doubt that God is really with them. But on the other hand, they also each find amazing evidence of God's presence and provision in the wilderness. Water from a rock, manna from heaven, a pillar of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night. From the ancient ones, we learn that wilderness is a place of profound challenges to faith, as well as a place of profound strengthening of faith.

When Mark tells us that the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, this is the kind of tradition he is drawing on. Just by saying that Jesus was in the wilderness forty days, Mark tells us much of what happened without having to say another word.

Like Noah, when Jesus was in the wilderness it seemed like a long time. A long time of days that seem a lot like yesterday and will be a lot like tomorrow. Days when he wondered if this wilderness time would ever end. Like Elijah, a time when he met God in unexpected ways. Like the Israelites, a time when his faith was challenged in ways he could not have anticipated, and his faith was strengthened in ways he couldn't have foreseen. The wilderness is not an easy place for anyone to be, even Jesus, but it is a place for a profound encounter with God.

I think we know, more clearly than we have before, what a wilderness experience is like. We've likely been through some before. The wilderness of a cancer diagnosis and treatment. The numbing wilderness of grief. Wildernesses of concern for family members. An addiction or a broken relationship can strand us in the wilderness. And we've been in the covid-19 wilderness for just about a year now. It's seemed like a long time. It's been a long time. Our faith has been challenged, and I believe has been

strengthened, though not every moment has been uplifting, to be certain. It's not an easy time for us.

And then this week has seemed like a wilderness for sure. A really cold wilderness. When we were already at our wit's end with quarantines and separations and precautions. We thought we were at our wit's end, but we found a little more line there. No power for days. No running water for days. Cold for days. Cloudy for days. It has felt like a wilderness, and so we understand a little more deeply what Jesus confronted there. We met our own wild beasts, of a sort.

It strikes me that in Mark's super short account of the temptation in the wilderness, he mentions that the angels "waited on" Jesus. The angels are there in Matthew's version, too, but not in Luke's. I have no idea what it might have looked like for angels to wait on Jesus. Did they bring him food and water? Did they rub his back comfortingly? I don't know.

What I am quite certain of is what it looks like when angels wait on us in our wildernesses. It looks like people bringing us jugs of water. It looks like people opening their warm homes to those who have no power, even though they are strangers in a pandemic. It looks like neighbors sharing from their own pantries with elderly folks in an apartment building who normally rely on Meals on Wheels. It looks like an HEB letting shoppers take their groceries for free when the store lost power. And it looks like people sticking money under the door of a convenience store, because they were taking the bottled water stacked outside. All of that from just this week.

The singer David LaMotte has a song called "We Are Each Other's Angels," and I think that's what we've learned again this week. We know that, and then we tend to forget it.

So I like to think that the angels waited on Jesus's material needs. But also, and equally importantly, their presence assured him that he was not alone in the wilderness.

The wilderness is not without comfort and reassurance and companionship. No matter how alone we might feel, in our wildernesses, we are not. We are lifted up by prayers. Angels are there to tend to us. No matter how far away we think God might be, God is right there with us. We know, because Jesus has been in the wilderness, too. In human form, all the fullness of God walked through the wilderness, for forty long days, tempted as we are.

This is the first Sunday in Lent, which is a time intended to be kind of a wilderness, a preparation for Easter. In lots of ways, it feels like we've been in Lent since last Lent. However we decide to observe Lent, in whatever wildernesses we find ourselves, let us always remember that we are not alone. That angels in the form of our neighbors wait on us. That Jesus knows the wilderness and is with us. That God never ever leaves us alone or gives up on us.