

In the name of God, Creator, Incarnate, and Renewing Spirit.

If this morning's reading from the Gospel of Mark seems fresh in your memory, it's because we just encountered part of it a few weeks ago on the first Sunday of Epiphany. Then, our focus was on Jesus' baptism; this week, as we enter the season of Lent, we instead focus on Jesus' sojourn in the wilderness.

Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark does not tell us the nature of the temptation that Jesus faced out in the desert wilderness. Matthew and Luke tell us of the temptation to use his anointing as the beloved Son of God to simply meet his own physical cravings; they tell us of the temptation to set himself up as an earthly power so that he can dominate the world, rather than being the beloved Son who submits his own will to God's; Matthew and Luke tell us of the temptation to make God prove that God has a plan and intention for him and him alone that makes his life so precious as to be protected by angels. Those are the temptations that Matthew and Luke tell us that Jesus faced; but what is Mark telling us about Jesus' time in the desert in his brief, concise version?

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus rises from the waters of baptism where God affirms his identity as the Beloved, the Son of God. He is immediately driven out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit, where temptation awaits him. That temptation, and Jesus' overcoming of it, will strengthen him for his work ahead, affirming him in his identity as the Anointed, and reinforcing his call to utterly surrender to the will of God. But what else does Jesus find in the desert? What else does Jesus need for the life task ahead of him that he can learn from this time when he is stripped bare of everything?

I think that in the wilderness, Jesus experiences the breadth of God's grace, the wideness of God's mercy. This thought comes to me in connection with Noah, who we encountered in today's reading from the Hebrew Bible. Mark has a single, small phrase in his telling of Jesus' time in the wilderness: "and he was with the wild beasts". Scholars have a lively debate about what this means. Some say that the wild beasts are a threat, as much of a threat as the Adversary who is tempting Jesus, and so the angels come to minister to him. But other scholars point back to the story of Noah, to a time when humankind lived in harmony with all of creation.

In the story of Noah, God makes a covenant of care, of lovingkindness with Noah and his descendants *and*, God says to Noah, “with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you.” God makes covenant with the whole of creation. In the creation story in Genesis, God gives the plants of the earth and the fruit of the trees for all creatures and humankind to eat; every living thing is, well, vegetarian until Noah comes out of the ark. That’s why the animals were able to live in the ark together for forty days and forty nights without anyone becoming a late-night snack. Things change when Noah comes out of the ark; God allows humankind to hunt the other creatures for food, and the other creatures can do the same. But it is the harmony of creation before that moment, when Noah and the wild beasts can live together in the ark, that some scholars think Mark is referring to in Jesus’ sojourn in the desert. Jesus, living in peaceful interdependence with the wild beasts is seeing, experiencing, and embodying the kind of wholesome coexistence God intended at creation. In living directly with the covenant God made with all of creation in the time of Noah, Jesus is seeing, experiencing, and embodying the wideness of God’s mercy, even in the midst of his temptation.

Jesus will need to know the breadth, the limitlessness of God's mercy as he goes about his ministry. He will learn it again and again: when he meets the Canaanite woman who begs him to heal her daughter; when the Roman centurion asks him to heal his servant; when the thief hanging on the cross beside him asks him to remember him when he comes into his kingdom. Jesus, for his disciples then and for us now, becomes the embodiment of God's mercy; and that mercy is unbounded. Our reading from First Peter even says that God's mercy reaches back through time and beyond death, touching Noah and all those who came before him, and touching us now.

In the wilderness, Jesus learned what temptations and pitfalls his call to ministry held for him; we learn the same about ourselves when we enter into this Lenten time of spiritual wilderness. We look inward with honesty and with love, and we begin to understand our own weaknesses. But we also need to take with us, as Jesus did, a deep sense of God's lovingkindness and mercy toward us and toward all of creation. This sense of God's unbounded love and mercy is healing to us, of course; it will sustain us in the spiritual wilderness we seek during this season; but it is

also what we need to embody for others throughout our lives and in whatever work God calls us to do.

God's lovingkindness is extended to all of creation; God's mercy reaches through time and even beyond death; let us spend time with this wondrous truth, that it may bring us healing even in the midst of difficulty. Then let us turn to the world with that same healing in our hearts and in our hands.

Amen.