

“This Doesn’t Mean God Is Your Chauffeur”

Mark 1:9-15 Dr. Kipp Wolfe

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Every year during the first Sunday of Lent, the lectionary reading is an account from one of the gospels of the baptism and temptation of Jesus. We can certainly think of other scriptures that would be more exciting; some of the miracles that Jesus performed, or the healings.

In Mark’s gospel, in typical Markan fashion he gets to the point as quickly as possible. He does not include many of the details that Matthew and Luke do in their accounts. There is something else that is different in Mark’s account of this scripture, different from Matthew and Luke that caught my attention as I prepared for this sermon. In Mark’s gospel, we read that immediately after Jesus’ baptism, the Holy Spirit *drove* Jesus into the wilderness. Matthew and Luke say that the Holy Spirit *led* Jesus into the wilderness. That’s a big difference isn’t it? We like to think of being *led* by God the way a shepherd leads sheep. Do we want to think that God *drives* us to places; especially places such as the wilderness, places where we might not want to go?

I know in today’s world of “easy” answers, especially in many corners of Christianity, that might not sound so bad, thinking about having God as some kind of chauffeur who will drive us around wherever we want to go. I heard an example of this kind of answer from the world. You remember a couple of weeks ago our friends from Woodward were here. Steve and Blake, the father and son, wanted to go out to the Bass Pro Shop and look at some things out there. You might be surprised to know that Woodward doesn’t have a Bass Pro Shop. Anyway, the Bass Pro Shop is kind of a guy thing, so that was okay with me. We were in the gun section. Steve and Blake were looking at a pouch kind of deal to put a pistol in. I was over by the counter, listening in to another conversation. The salesman behind the counter was showing a shotgun to a couple. Now remember a couple of weeks ago on Saturday was Valentine’s Day. As he handed the shotgun across the counter to this woman, he turned to the husband and said, “This would be the perfect Valentine’s Day gift.” Well

Do we want God as a chauffeur who will take us anywhere we want to go? Be careful about that because just about the time that you think you have God as your chauffeur and you say, “Home, James,” God says “We ain’t going home. We’re going to the wilderness.”

The wilderness. Les Hames, I thought about you as I was preparing

this sermon. Les and I visit from time to time and I knew this was something he would enjoy. The theologian, Karl Barth, said that for many people church can become the last hiding place from God. You like that, don't you Les? I knew you would. Church as a hiding place from God. Have you ever thought about that? We come here to church with all of the candles, the paraments on the pulpit, the songs we sing, the prayers that we pray. We act like good little boys and girls . . . and we hide from God in church. Maybe all along, if we would listen closely, God is saying "Wilderness, wilderness. The wilderness is where you need to be."

This past week I spent some time in the wilderness. Some of you know that I was fasting last week in preparation for Lent and also for the "Unbinding the Heart" book we are all reading. I intended to fast for seven days. I ended the fast after five days. Some day I'll give you the reasons for that. Fasting is an interesting experience. During the midst of that fast, as I was getting pretty hungry, one thing I thought about was "Now, wait a minute. I'm giving up a few meals here. Think about all that Christ gave up for us."

During that fast, angels ministered to me. They were some unlikely angels, people you might never think of as being angels. Jeremy, Tom Rorschach, and my son-in-law, Ryan, were angels to me this past week as they said, "You know, I think I'll try that too." I was especially encouraged by Tom. I received an e-mail from him one morning. He had sent it about 9:00 or 9:30 a.m. Wednesday was the day he was fasting. It was the fourth day of my fast. Tom said, "I've done without breakfast. So far I haven't had any headaches or experienced any other side effects from my fast." Just to know that he was trying, even for a day, was encouraging to me. To know that Ryan and Jeremy were trying was encouraging. Some of you mentioned that you were praying for me last week, and I sensed those prayers.

During fasting experiences we can also meet wild beasts. One time I was fasting while serving at another church. A woman came up to me and asked about it. I told her a doctor had told me I needed to drink some fruit juice. I had a glass of orange juice in the morning and a glass of grape juice in the afternoon. She said, "You know, that's not really a fast. If you are going to fast, you need to just drink water." I don't think I said anything to her, but what I wanted to say probably was "Lady, you try going for a week drinking orange juice in the morning and grape juice in the afternoon and see if you think it's a fast."

One of Jeremy's boys mentioned something to him. I had said to Jeremy it helped me to chew gum; just have something in your mouth to chew on. So Jeremy was chewing gum and one of his sons noticed it and said, "Now, come on, Dad. Do you really think Jesus had gum to chew back then?"

I can imagine that some folks might have said to Jesus, "Forty days? Our father, Moses, spent *40 years* in the wilderness. Forty days? That's no big deal." Let me say this. If you are going to go to a swim meet, before you criticize members of the swim team, be ready to jump in the pool yourself.

That's what I am asking you to do as you become involved in the "Unbinding Your Heart" book. I hope and pray that for the first time some of us will realize that we don't come to church mainly for ourselves. You know, most of us look around and say, "I did a pretty good job just to get here today. I can take some pride in that." That's not why we come to church. We come to church to be equipped, to be sent out, and to do God's work in the world, in the wilderness, so to speak.

The gifted preacher and author, Barbara Brown Taylor has written some words about the wilderness. She says,

"The hollowness we sometimes feel is not a sign of something gone wrong. It is the holy of holies inside of us, the uncluttered throne room of the Lord our God. Nothing on earth can fill it, but that does not stop us from trying. Whenever we start feeling too empty inside, we stick our pacifiers into our mouths and suck for all we are worth. They do not nourish us, but at least they plug the hole. To enter the wilderness is to leave our pacifiers behind, and nothing is too small to give up.

"Even a chocolate bar will do. For forty days simply pay attention to how often your mind travels in that direction. Ask yourself why it happens when it happens. What is going on when you start craving a Hershey bar more than you crave God? Are you hungry? Well, what is wrong with being hungry? Are you lonely? What happens when we become lonelier for other people than we are for God? What is so bad about being alone? Try sitting with the feeling instead of fixing it, and see what you find out."

The wilderness. The wilderness. We said in the Call to Worship to-

day that Lent is a time for repentance. That does not mean that we repent in order to avoid hell. It means that we repent so that we might be closer to God. One of my favorite Bible stories is the confession of Peter. Do you remember that story? “Who do men say that I am?” “Some say Elijah, or Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.” “But who do you say I am?” Simon Peter says, “You’re the Christ, the Son of God.” Jesus says to Peter, “Blessed are you Simon Bar Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my father who is in heaven.” Immediately after that, Jesus says, “But I must go to Jerusalem and in Jerusalem I will be killed.”

Do you remember that Peter physically takes Jesus and rebukes him? “This can’t be so!” Peter said. And Jesus says to Peter, “Get thee behind me, Satan!” It didn’t mean that Peter was Satan. It means that Satan is anything that is more on the side of man than the side of God. Satan is anything that gets between us and God. Satan is anything that causes us to worship false gods.

If you look at those words in our Call to Worship we hear again Jesus’ words, “Repent and believe in the Good News of God.” That is all I am asking you to do. *All* I’m asking you to do is believe in God. Sometimes in the church, we forget about God. We think it’s just up to us and our efforts. We don’t believe truly that God will help us. Believing in God doesn’t mean that there is a God; believing in God means believing that God believes in us. Believing in God means believing the *promises* of God.

Jesus understood this. It has been said that a part of the human condition, just what it is to be human, means being estranged from God. That is what sin is, being alienated from God. If that’s true, think about this. If being human means being estranged from God and we believe that Jesus was fully human, that he emptied himself of his divinity, does it mean that Jesus was estranged from God? In the wilderness, Jesus showed each of us that we are not estranged from God. Jesus understood that, perhaps in a way no one else ever has. We’re not estranged from God. We are children of God called to do God’s work in the world. The Good News of Lent is this: Just as Jesus was not alone in the wilderness, so neither are we alone.

Amen.