

BEYOND WILDERNESS

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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Psalm 25:1-10

Mark 1:9-15

When it comes to the way the Gospels tell the story of the testing of Jesus, I like Mark's bare-bones approach the best. Luke and Matthew use a lot of ink describing the details of the temptations that Satan sets before Jesus. And thus preachers use a lot of pulpit time analyzing those temptations: turn the stone into bread; throw yourself off the pinnacle of the temple; worship me, and I will give you all the kingdoms of the earth. None of that is in Mark, who takes the stark approach. No extended debate. No rumbling sounds from a stomach, empty 40 days. There is just Jesus and the devil. Well, there are those wild beasts and angels; we will return to them in a moment.

First, let's go to the beginning. Jesus, the carpenter's son from Nazareth, has grown up and is ready to fulfill his purpose in life. When he leaves home, he is baptized by John. John's purpose in life was to prepare the way for Jesus, who would possess the power to baptize people not only with water, but with Holy Spirit. No one else had ever done that before. As Jesus comes up out of the waters of his own baptism, he himself is baptized by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God, represented by the dove, descends. Then comes that heavenly announcement, "This is my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased." Imagine Almighty God saying to you, "You are mine, and I am so proud of you." That is exactly what God says to each of us on the day of our baptism. Is there anything better than that?

But how ironic that after this glorious high point, the Spirit, the same Spirit of God, whisks Jesus off into the wilderness, where everything that has just happened is put at risk—Jesus' identity, his God consciousness, his character, his mission in life. His hair is still wet from the water of the River Jordan, but already it's wilderness time. Please note, the Spirit just a minute before, had covered him all over, up and down, inside and out with divine approval. That same Spirit is throwing him to the wolves. Why? Perhaps God had to know whether Jesus would hold up through all he would have to go through. In the oddest partnership ever devised, the Spirit of God puts Jesus into the ring with the devil, the enemy of God, and it is that enemy who administers the test of endurance.

The wilderness, that place where the struggle took place, does not have to be an actual, geographical spot on the map. Neither does the tempter have to have arms and legs and a pitchfork in his hand. That is not to say there is no force of evil, no place of God-forsakenness. Human life has wilderness as a part of its basic reality. We will all sojourn there several times before our days on earth are done. The wilderness is real—that experience of being on your own, not knowing what will happen in the struggle for your identity, in the struggle for your character. The wilderness is real. Satan is real. The

word Satan, a Hebrew word, means “God’s adversary.” Whether you buy the idea that Lucifer is a fallen angel or the prince of demons, to use two Biblical images, you cannot be in your right mind in this world and deny the existence of forces that struggle against God. One of the most difficult aspects of evil is that it rarely if ever presents itself as evil. It masquerades as something that’s very appealing and very justifiable.

Craig Barnes, the President of Princeton Seminary, wrote an article about how the devil puts ministers to the test. “We pastors have lofty goals,” Dr. Barnes writes. “We went to seminary to proclaim the Good News. We’ve learned how to speak holy words; we offer compassion; we serve the church. So the devil is never going to tempt us by saying, ‘Why don’t you just forget the ministry and start running numbers for the mob?’”¹ No, the devil is craftier than that. Can you imagine what the devil might whisper in a pastor’s ear? That the kingdom of God depends on us and our hard work, our sermons, our pastoral care, rather than on God, and on God’s sovereign work of salvation.

I imagine that Jesus’ trials in the wilderness were of a similar nature—that you have only one place to look for strength, and that is inside yourself. There is no other power available. The Greek word for wilderness is *hermanos*. It means a place filled with danger, where temptation stalks. Jesus was driven into the *hermanos* to be tempted. Have you ever found yourself in a place where you knew in your bones that everything depended on how you handled yourself?

In the legend of the search for the Holy Grail, each knight began his search for the chalice of the blood of Christ by entering into the forest at the point where it was the darkest, and there was no path. As one has put it, “Everyone enters the labyrinth of life alone. We walk through the valley alone. We stand before the judgment seat alone.”² Jesus was alone in the wilderness, as the demons gathered. No crutches, no accoutrements, just him and the devil, a fearful place. Remember the children’s book *Where the Wild Things Are*, about the little boy who was afraid of the dark and is confronted by the scariest, ugliest, wild creatures you can imagine? In the end, he finds the courage to stand up to them.

Eleanor Roosevelt once wrote, “I gain strength and confidence by every experience in which I must stop and look fear in the face. I say to myself, ‘I have lived through this and now I know I can take the next thing that comes along.’ We must do the things that we think we cannot do.”

I wonder if God knew how the wilderness trials would turn out for Jesus. I am sure that Jesus didn’t know, just as in another wilderness moment, the Garden of Gethsemane, where he prayed that the cup of suffering and death be removed from him. He could not imagine how he could handle the next thing that was coming along. That would be the crucifixion, preceded by the mocking and scourging. But he did handle it; he handled it all, and in the process, he lifted the whole world up out of the wilderness and into the eternal realm of God. But in Gethsemane, God was silent. At Golgotha, God was silent. In the wilderness, God was silent, no doves descending either. Just Jesus taking on our humanity, sinking into the realities of our condition and showing us how to overcome and how to live up to our own identities as children of God, baptized into

¹ Craig Barnes, *Best Advice* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 19.

² Leonard Sweet, *The Three Hardest Words* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2006), 79.

Jesus' life, death and resurrection. For we too are beloved, adopted into the Son's relationship with the Father.

No, Mark does not give us a blow-by-blow of the contest between Satan and Jesus, but there can be no doubt that what Satan wanted to do was to strip Jesus of his newly named identity, wanted him to forget where he came from, to forsake the One to whom he belonged. But Jesus did not forget. He did not flounder. He did not forsake. He conquered, and he went on to do what he had been put on this earth to do, and he did it for our sakes. His conquering power is now ours through God's love and our own baptisms.

We worry a lot these days about identity theft. Many of us have friends or acquaintances who have had to deal with that in recent years. But there is another way your identity gets stolen. Identity theft takes place when people define themselves by what they have rather than who they are. Too many in recent years have listened to that devilish little voice that says, "Shouldn't what you have be better and bigger than what other people have?" Here is another thing the devil might say, "Listen, if you don't think about yourself, who will? The first person you need to think about is yourself."

When we forget that it is God who is to be glorified, when we start acting as if we are the center of everything, that is when we get into deep trouble. There is an old story about a great, spiritual teacher who died and ascended into heaven. He knocked at the gates of paradise. God came to the door and asked, "Who's there?"

The answer came back, "It is I."

"Sorry," God said, "no room. Come back another day."

The good man went away puzzled. Several years passed, as he pondered his dilemma. He returned. He knocked on the gate of paradise again. Same question, *Who's there? It is I. Go away.* The third time he came back. He knocked. God asked, *Who's there?*

This time the man answered, "You are there. You are God and to you belongs the glory."

The gate opened wide as God said, "Come in." When we assume everything is about us and allow our "I" to take up all the room, we betray our real identity. Our most basic identity is that of being a child of God. If we take up all the room, that's a real spiritual problem. The meaning to life is not found in the question: What's in it for me? The meaning of life is found in this question: How can my life glorify God?

What was at risk in the wilderness was Jesus' God consciousness. If he lost his God consciousness, he never would have been able to drink from that cup of suffering. He never would have been able to preach with conviction the good news of God. He would never have found that in giving his life away, he would obtain life eternal for himself and for all who look to him for salvation.

In Andrew Lloyd Webber's rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*, it is Judas Iscariot who sings the signature song, "Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ, who are you? What have you sacrificed? Every time I look at you, I don't understand why you let the things you did get out of hand." Jesus chose not to be a superstar but rather the servant of the living God.

The devil wanted him to get all into himself, to be high and mighty as any decent Son of God ought to be.

“If you’re the Son of God, why don’t you live a life that is full of fun and fame?”

Here’s the counterpoint to Judas’s song, the song from Paul’s Letter to the Philippians. *Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be exploited. He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant. He became obedient to death, even death on the cross.* In other words, he did it God’s way.

The wild beasts, I promised a word about them. They are loose in the world. They represent the mysterious forces of sin and death. If they were after Jesus, those wild beasts, you can be sure they’re going to be after us. Jesus never let them do him in; even though they lay in wait for him every single step along his journey, every time he beat them back. When they take off after us, he has promised to help us beat them back.

If I’d written this script, God would have intervened and slain them all right then and there. But that didn’t happen, and so there are bad things to deal with. By faith, we know that all that separates us from God and God’s truth is on its last leg. Then there is this wonderful thought—that for every beast that is after us, there is an angel, too. The beasts might wrestle with you all night, but the angel will be there to provide what you need to make it to the end.

Welcome their help in the name of the Son, who conquered everything, and lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.