

February 21, 2021
The First Sunday in Lent
Year B
Genesis 9:8-17
Mark 1:9-15
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship during the Coronavirus Pandemic
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Stuck, But Not Alone

Today is the first Sunday in Lent and every year on the first Sunday in Lent we get the same story, the story of Jesus, alone in the wilderness, fasting and being tempted by Satan. But the gospel of Mark makes it almost impossible to tell the story. If we just read the usually assigned story for this Sunday in the church year, our gospel reading would have been a fraction of what I just read. Two verses of scripture, three lines of typed text, 33 words:

And the Spirit immediately drove [Jesus] 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. (Mark 1:12-13)

Mark doesn't tell much of a story. He gives us a snapshot, a picture, for us to imagine what it would have been like for Jesus in the wilderness, alone, spiritually assaulted by Satan, but also, possibly comforted by the presence of angels, spiritual beings sent to support him. One can't be sure, from the picture Marks gives, whether the wild beasts were there as a comfort to Jesus, as a blessing to him, as animals so often are to human beings, or as a threat to him, in a world fallen so far from the Eden peace of creation, where the harmony between human being and the rest of the created world is so

fractured. We don't know, because Mark doesn't spend much time with Jesus in the wilderness.

There are plenty of details to imagine, plenty of details to fill in, and our minds might fill in those details with the way that the gospels of Matthew and Luke tell the story of Jesus' time in the wilderness. In fact, in an earlier draft of this sermon, I did just that, talking about Jesus' hunger and long time of fasting in the wilderness, until I re-read the 33 words, which I had just typed, of Mark's version of this story, which does not mention fasting or hunger at all. Matthew and Luke tell us about the nature of Satan's temptations of Jesus. Mark says nothing, just that Satan tempted or tested him. In 33 words, Mark paints a picture, but he doesn't give many details.

Typical of Mark, he's in a hurry. In a hurry to get to what comes next. Mark is the shortest gospel, hurrying Jesus to Jerusalem. Mark never describes Jesus as staying in one place for very long, and even when he says an event took 40 days, he doesn't tell us much about what those 40 days were like.

Rush, rush, rush, Mark moves on with the story. Moves on to what is for Mark, the center of his story, the heartbeat of Jesus' ministry; Jesus' proclamation, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Good news of the kingdom of God drawing near. That is the heart of Mark's story, that is the heart of his message, in inbreaking of the kingdom of God into a tired and hurting world of sin, with hope, with power, with the invitation to transformation.

We don't get to spend very long with Jesus in the wilderness in Mark's gospel, regardless of how long Jesus actually spent there, but I think for us, right now, that might feel like exactly where we are. Stuck, in a wilderness,

where we are tested, where we are harried by outside forces, where we are surrounded by bad news on every side, and where the symbolic meaning of the biblical number forty, which is, “a very long time” feels like it is truly in force.

We have been in the wilderness of this pandemic, of this time of trouble for “a very long time” for 345 days to be more precise, tempted, tested, not driven here by the Spirit for a time of formation, but sent here by the sin-filled brokenness of the world in which disease thrives, but more importantly and more dangerously, in which human beings act against their own interests and fail to seek the good of their neighbors and of the creation. As much as we might want to move on to the good news that Jesus proclaims about a new life, about good news, about a new kingdom, it might feel like we are stuck in a place where bad news prevails.

Today’s Old Testament reading also meets us where we are not. It meets us at the end of the crisis, at the time of restored relationship and renewed covenant between God and God’s people. What we have as our reading for today is the story after the forty days and forty nights are completed, the long time of struggle and suffering and breaking down is finished and the time of hope and promise had come. It’s a story about a time when God’s goodness, and mercy, and love was easy to spot, easy to identify.

In our Old Testament reading for today we find Noah and his sons being addressed by God, being given a promise by God, a promise made visible in God’s bow hung in the sky.

We tend to think of this as a rainbow, beautiful, even, at times, stunning. Colors hanging in the sky that we love to see. And, of course, it makes sense for the rainbow, a natural phenomenon that sometimes follows

a storm, to be a sign of the promise that God will never unleash the powers of a storm to bring utter destruction on the earth.

But the same word that we understand to be the word for rainbow in this reading is the Hebrew word for a “bow”, as in a bow that shoots arrows, a weapon of war. The hanging of God’s bow in the sky tells us that God is going to seek peace with creation, that God has promised not to act for creation’s destruction, that God will preserve what God has made and will find some way, even as a holy God, to be in relationship with a sinful and broken creation. Today’s reading is a reading of hope and promise, a promise of peace and reconciliation.

But that’s not where we’re living right now. We’re still living in the storm. As a church, as a community, as individuals, as a nation, as a world. We’re stuck.

Our gospel reading tries to hurry us past wilderness wandering, testing, struggle. Our Old Testament reading sends us straight to the end of the story and doesn’t tell us about the rising waters, the pouring rain, being alone in an ark while the waters of uncreation poured in on you from every side.

But I’m not sure if we’re ready to relate to happy endings right now. Because that’s not where we are. We’re not at the happy ending of the story. We’re still in the messy middle. And even with a vaccine available and more and more of our friends and neighbors, more and more of our family members, sharing the good news that they’ve been able to access the vaccine, have received one shot, two shots, we still know that we have a long way to go before things start to seem normal again. And we know that even when the disease of Covid-19 has been restrained, we still have to contend with the dis-ease of sinfulness which has made so much of this challenging year worse

than it had to be, the dis-ease of selfishness that escalates almost every natural disaster.

So, what do our readings for today have to say to people who are still in the wilderness, still in high waters, still stuck in the middle of the crisis?

It's important to make sure we see what our readings really say. In both of them, one time of crisis ends, but life in a sin shattered world continues, with all of its complexity, all of its challenges, all of the ways that it can break your heart, all of ways that it can wear away at your spirit.

In the story of the covenant and the rainbow after the flood, that is what Noah and his family have. The knowledge that God is not their enemy. They have the promise that God is going to work for creation and not against it, to redeem it, rather than to destroy it, that God is not a scientist, disappointed with the outcome of a failed experiment, but that God is a loving creator, who will tend and try to shape the creation that has gone astray, but who will not discard it.

And that promise, the promise of a bow in the sky, the promise made between God and all of creation, has sustained generations of people when life has become challenging, when the waters have risen around them, when they have faced struggles and turmoil, when they have faced storms, actual or metaphorical. The promise of the rainbow, can help us to remember that God is for us, and not against us.

In the gospel of Mark, Jesus is rushed out of the wilderness, because his message is so important. The Kingdom of God has come near! What that means is that, while we still live in a world of sin, in a world of challenges, in a world that is not functioning in the way that God intended it to, in a world where we struggle with our own sin, the ways in which we disappoint

ourselves and each other, we do not live here alone. The kingdom of God has come near. God is not far away on a throne, judging us, and finding us wanting. In Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God has come near, walking with us, knowing our struggles, teaching us new ways of being in the world, new ways of loving one another, new ways of embracing the abundance of creation, that are not selfish or exploitative, but that see earth's abundance as something to be celebrated and treasured and shared.

And what is especially good news for us, is that the nearness of the Kingdom of God is not dependent on us being out of the wilderness. Jesus left his own wilderness place so that he could find us in ours. Jesus knows what it's like to struggle, Jesus knows what it's like to suffer, and Jesus knows, far better than we do, what it is to confront the brokenness of the world. And yet, Jesus still comes to us in our struggles, Jesus is with us in our suffering, Jesus is with us in our brokenness, bringing healing, bringing hope; sometimes as a still small voice that brings comfort, sometimes as a voice calling us to change, calling for us to repent, to take a new way forward.

But the vital thing for us to remember, especially now, in our own wilderness time, is that Jesus knows what it's like to be in the wilderness and Jesus is with us in the wilderness. In Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God has come near to us, in all of the challenges and complexities of our lives, in all of the griefs and the struggles that we face, in all of the ways that we disappoint ourselves, in all of the ways that we find ourselves harmed by the sin that infects the world and our relationships. It's hard to be in the wilderness, it's hard to feel like stuck here. But God is with us, with a promise to heal and not to harm. We are not alone. The kingdom of God has come near. Amen.