



“Into the Woods”

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Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California***

***First Sunday in Lent
March 1, 2009
Mark 1:9-15 (NRSV)***

ENTERING THE SCRIPTURE

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

This past week, on Ash Wednesday, we joined Christians around the world on the journey into Lent.

Lent is the 40-day season (not including Sundays) commemorating Jesus’ wilderness experience, leading through and up to his passion and resurrection.

Today’s reading comes from the gospel of Mark and is the Biblical authors’ first salvo on what we know as the Lenten journey. It begins with Jesus’ call to ministry, baptism, and temptations.

Mark is what you might call the *Reader’s Digest* version of the gospels. It is the shortest of the four gospels, and is thought to be the earliest committed to a written format.

Today’s gospel reading is illustrative of Mark’s brevity. In Mark, Jesus’ call, baptism, and temptations are described in a very economical six verses; whereas John offers a lengthy version on Jesus’ baptism, and Matthew and Luke spend several paragraphs describing Jesus’ temptations.

Mindful that the season of Lent was a literal experience of the wilderness for Jesus and that it can be at least a metaphorical one for us, we enter this season and approach these stories seeking God’s guidance by singing “Guide Me, O My Great Redeemer.”

MUSICAL MEDITATION “Guide Me, O My Great Redeemer”¹ (v. 1)

No 18

***Guide me, O my great Re-deem-er, pil-grim through this
bar-ren land; I am weak, but you are might-y;
hold me with your power-ful hand. Bread of heav-en, bread of heav-en,
Feed me till I want no more, feed me till I want no more.***

¹ Text: John Huges. Public domain.

SCRIPTURE READING

Michael Foster

Mark 1:9-15 “Jesus’ Baptism and Temptations”

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him 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. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

SERMON

“Into the Woods” The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

The Rev. Dr. Daniel Novotny was senior pastor at Plymouth Church in Belmont, Massachusetts, in the 1970s and a faculty member at Andover Newton Theological Seminary in the 1980s. He was known by his parishioners and students as a man who offered wise counsel.

I knew Dan more by reputation than by direct experience of his ministry, having served on the pastoral staff at Plymouth after he left to teach at the seminary, and I never took any courses with him, but did dine with several of Dan’s advisees during my three years of master’s studies at Andover Newton.

More than one parishioner and fellow student repeated to me the advice that Dan had given them when they were in the midst of vocational discernment process. Dan’s counsel went something like this:

If you begin to sense a call to ministry, ignore it. If you continue to hear the call, plug your ears and try to drown out the message. If you hear it a third time, run for your life. If in the end, the call persists, and you can’t get away from it, embrace it with all your might.

On several occasions over the years, I have counseled prospective seminarians through their vocational discernment processes, and more often than not, I have found myself repeating Dan’s advice.

II

I wondered this week as I meditated on Mark’s gospel whether there was a wise mentor like Dan Novotny in Jesus’ life. If so, I wondered whether Jesus received and rejected earlier callings, and whether he relented like Jonah or accepted the call enthusiastically—like the sixth player on a Division I basketball team whose coach taps her on the knee and says, “Check into the game.”

We'll never know the answer to these questions about Jesus' discernment process—about whether he was reluctant or enthusiastic in accepting the call—because these questions are ours and not Mark's or his audience's. But we do learn from Mark that once Jesus accepted the call, he was baptized by John in the Jordan River, and the heavens opened and God said, "This is my Beloved with whom I am well pleased."

Regardless of whether Jesus accepted the call to ministry quickly or hesitantly, the implications of his decision unfolded from an idyllic baptismal scene to a foreboding wilderness landscape where he was tempted and tormented by Satan for forty days.

Mark doesn't offer much more insight into Jesus' temptations than he does into his call. (Remember, Mark is the *Reader's Digest* version of the gospels.) For "the rest of the story," to borrow a line from Paul Harvey, we must rely on the other three gospels—particularly Matthew and Luke.

III

Jesus' wilderness experience, no doubt, seems peculiar to us. But odd as it may seem, such experiences were not unique to Jesus' life. They were and are common in many different cultures, and they are often associated with cultural heroes.

Wilderness experiences were and still are part of the normative path from youth to adulthood in many Native American and Inuit cultures on this continent, and in some indigenous cultures in southern Africa. Practices vary across cultures, but the steps associated with these rites of passages include the following:

1. Separation of maturing persons from normal life
2. Existence for a certain period of time in a liminal state of being betwixt and between youth and adulthood, and
3. Reincorporation into the larger society after the separation, bearing a new, more sophisticated status

At the end of these experiences, both the participant and the community view the person as fundamentally changed and ready for an adult and/or a leadership role in society.

Wilderness experiences are also part of Western fairytales. For example, Stephen Sondheim's musical, "Into the Woods," (1986) intertwines several fairytales, including four from the Brothers Grimm, and follows the main characters in order to further explore the consequences of their respective wishes and quests. The four Brothers Grimm's fairy tales include Little Red Riding Hood, Jack and the Beanstalk, Rapunzel, and Cinderella—each a sort of coming of age story.

Sondheim's plot comes to a climax when several characters, who had worked together to slay the giantess who threatened them all, return to the stage to describe the lessons that they have learned from their respective quests.

One was the Baker's Wife, who wished for and was granted a child, and who returns (in the form of a spirit) to give her husband one last lesson. She instructs him to tell their child about the woods, and to explain that actions have consequences, even for future generations.²

In a similar spirit to Sondheim's finale, the gospel writers beg for Jesus' wilderness experience to be passed on to future generations so that others will know that life is filled with temptations, and that how we respond to them has consequences for us and our posterity.

IV

While Sondheim spells out the quest associated with each of his characters, part of the beauty of Mark's gospel is its simplicity. Mark does not enumerate or explain the nature of Jesus' quest. Instead, Mark leaves room for the imagination. But oh, there's the rub. The imagination—particularly in association with Jesus' temptations—is an uncharted “wilderness” where many Christians fear to go.

I recall, for example, when musicals like “Godspell” (1970) and “Jesus Christ Superstar” (1973), and films like “The Last Temptation of Christ” (1988) opened in cities across our nation some Christians condemned these shows for depicting the humanness of Jesus. Opponents strove to affirm Jesus' divinity while minimizing his humanity, and by doing so denied and dismissed much of the power and potential of the temptations' accounts, which would otherwise instruct and inspire both Christians and general audiences.³

I don't know what people's reactions were in the Bay Area when these shows first opened, but I recall that when the drama department at my school proposed to put on “Godspell,” the pastors in our community were given a preview and asked to comment on the show. Some modifications were made to the script and costumes, but in the end the show went on.

“Jesus Christ Superstar” was another story. When a traveling theater troupe offered to perform this musical in our town, most of the local religious leaders protested, and the show never opened. It wasn't until “Jesus Christ Superstar” made a comeback in Boston in the 1980s that I first saw it. (So much for the First Amendment!)

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Into_the_Woods

³ Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Halladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year B* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993) 141.

Lest I leave you with the impression that only small towns try to put the kybosh on First Amendment rights, consider the reactions to Martin Scorsese's film, "The Last Temptation of Christ," when it opened in 1988.

I recall, for example, that in Boston conservative Christians worked overtime picketing the box offices of theaters that dared to show this film. I remember, too, being particularly proud of one man from our congregation who picketed the picketers in Copley Square, in support of the First Amendment and in support of more biblically authentic interpretations of Christ's passion.

Scorsese's film, as you may know, was based on Nikos Kazantzakis's novel by the same name, which was first published in 1951. Kazantzakis' book, and ultimately Scorsese's film, depicted the temptations from Jesus' perspective, and they advanced the view that while Jesus resisted sin, he faced every form of temptation known to human beings, and he overcame fear, doubt, depression, reluctance, and lust.⁴ By facing and conquering his temptation, Scorsese and Kazantzakis argued, Christ became the ideal model for humans to follow.

New Testament scholar Fred Craddock makes a similar argument in his biblical commentary on Mark's rendering of the temptations, and argues that Jesus was uniquely worthy of emulation—not because he was never tempted—but because he grappled with *and* resisted profound temptations.⁵

V

So in the final analysis, maybe it doesn't matter that Mark only offers us the *Reader's Digest* version of the temptations, and that we do not know from his gospel exactly what the nature of Christ's temptations were.

Maybe Kazantzakis and Craddock are right. Maybe it's more important for us to simply know that Jesus' struggles were very human, very real; that what tempts us tempted Jesus; and that he knows all about our struggles. Maybe it's more important for us to realize that Christ can show us the way through the wilderness—not because the path was easy for him—but precisely because it was hard.

In this season of Lent, in our walk with God, let us dare to name and face our temptations in whatever wildernesses we find ourselves. Let us dare to live out our callings, and draw strength in the struggle from Jesus. Amen.

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Last_Temptation_of_Christ

⁵ Ibid.