

*Based on Mark 1:12*

*And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness.*

Many years ago, when I first moved to Tucson, Arizona, I was warned about the prevalence of what they call *The Tucson Headache*.

The air is so dry and the humidity is so low that water near the surface of the human body evaporates almost immediately. I would joke that my hair would dry *before* I got out of the shower! My eyelids would crack. Bridges would cross rivers with no water in them.

All of which leads to a sort of perpetual dehydration, which leads to the Tucson headache, which leads, at least for me, to a chronic inability to think and perceive and make the most rational of decisions in any kind of systematic way.

Life as you and I know it *here* is radically different *there*, including the capacity to comprehend clearly. In the desert, our minds must literally transform in order to survive, as must our spirits, and most certainly our bodies. In the desert, we must become a new creation.

When Jesus moves from Galilee into the wilderness of the Jordan, he, too, must radically transform in mind, spirit, and body. Even today, Galilee is lush and green, a fertile and temperate climate, in stark contrast to the arid south around the Jordan. Two thousand years ago it was much more so. *Home* for Jesus is not nearly as harsh as the wilderness into which the Spirit drives him on the other side of his baptism. Jesus, just like the rest of us, must become a new creation as he walks among the wild animals and wonders from where any soothing comfort might come.

In writing on today's Lesson, biblical scholar Ched Myers describes this sojourn of Jesus through the wilderness as a *great apocalyptic struggle* between Satan and the Spirit, between the Adversary and the Advocate, between corrupt power and contemplative possibility, between all that seeks to dehumanize and all that seeks to heal.

Unlike the versions in Matthew and Luke, Mark's gospel gives us no narrative between Satan and Jesus, no set number of temptations to compare with our own. Mark simply says Jesus is driven, compelled, the Greek could even be translated to say he is *banished* against his will to this desert place so far from home where his soul will learn the hard way how to thirst in a dry and weary land where there might as well not be any water.

This is not the first time the Spirit of God has done such a thing, nor will it be the last. Throughout biblical history, whether the people are seeking liberation from oppression or redemption from wrong-doing, the Spirit drives both individuals and the collective into the wilderness for the total mind/body/spirit transformation that is required for either outcome. As the spiritual author David Douglas reminds us, *the significance of desert ... is ... what we ourselves have left behind in coming*.

Mark does not tell us much of what Jesus leaves behind as he comes to the wilderness. Artists of all kinds have imagined various scenarios: home and family, economic stability, professional advancement. But the truth is, we have no idea what Jesus leaves behind in order to become who he becomes. We just know he does it.

If the rest of the Gospel is any indication, Jesus has been and will continue to be tempted to compromise his core values, just like we are. Here in the wilderness those inner demons must rear their ugly heads, as the Tucson headache expands, and his will-to-power, also known as his *ego* shrinks.

In fact, the common thread among all of desert spirituality is the conviction that the desert is the place where the ego goes to die.

And yet grace comes, as Jesus befriends the animals: the coyote and the javelina, the jackrabbit and even the scorpion, who somehow find a way to make a way where it seems as if there is no way. As the ego dies and grace grows, it is as if the Garden of Eden has been restored. Grace comes as one, two, three drops of water squeeze their way through the atmosphere. As the ego dies and grace grows, it is as if the river of the water of life has been replenished. Grace comes as Oneness with God and God's creatures supplants fear and resentment and greed. As the ego dies and grace grows, the will of God and the will of Jesus become one.

For Jesus, as our Lesson concludes today, the desert has done its work. The ministry is ready to manifest. And it does.

We, too, must find ourselves driven to the wilderness once in a while, in order for our ministry to manifest in its fullest, making friends with the wild beasts that roar within us. As the theologian Belden Lane reminds us, *Grace rarely comes as a gentle invitation to change. More often than not it appears in the form of an assault to the senses, something we first are tempted to flee.*

Although I am not one who says everything happens for a reason, I am compelled by faith to insist that God works overtime through all time to work all things together for good, even and perhaps especially whatever wilderness journey we may find ourselves in at the moment.

It is hard to be vulnerable in a society that values only competence, but the desert demands it. It is hard to confront our limitations in a society that insists there is nothing that can hold us back, but the desert insists upon it. It is hard to confess our compromised values in a society that calls itself exceptional, but the desert will not let us get away with it. It is hard to admit our mortality in a society that clamors for endless youth, but the desert throws it right in our face and makes us deal with it.

If there is any common thread through the wilderness journey, it is, as Belden Lane reminds us, *the sense of naked inadequacy* that is forced into our face, which then turns us around in trust to the compassionate heart of God.

What remains on the other side of the Tucson Headache, on the other side of the apocalyptic struggle for our very souls, is a gratitude for those small mercies that have tended us throughout our time of testing: the jackrabbits and the javelinas, the gift of the essential that carries us through, the sense of renewed purpose, and ultimately a mystical union with God and creation that can never be shaken again. And isn't that what we all want in the first place?

As for me, in my desert journey, I found Sabino Canyon. The one location in Tucson filled with a small stream of natural running water. I used to plop myself down literally in the middle of the stream as the water soothed my soul. My mother memorialized Sabino Canyon in a stole, using my grandfather's ties to represent the water. You may notice that I wear this stole on Baptism Sunday and throughout the season that follows.

For me, Sabino Canyon, my mother, the memory of my grandmother, were angels of the Spirit, who tended me through my wilderness time, so that I may now, in my own fallible way, tend you through yours.

This is what we do for each other in the church, after all. Tending one another through our desert journeys, stripping down our egos in order to grow in grace. Rooting ourselves every more deeply in the compassionate heart of God. This is why we gather, Sunday after Sunday, around a font and a story and a table: to remind ourselves and one another, that no matter what, there *is* still grace in the wilderness!