

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

Lent 1B

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Decompressing St. Mark

Texts: Mark 1:9-15

Life getting too fast for you? Then recall today's Gospel reading. St. Mark, in his wonderful just-give-us-the-facts style, has Jesus baptized by John the Baptist, Jesus tempted and, then John now out of action and headed for death, Jesus out preaching. All in the space of seven verses. Pret--ty fast!

But there is more to it. A whole lot more is packed in those spare verses. As Jesus comes up out of that watery grave of baptism in the river, the heavens don't just open, they are "torn apart" to reveal his identity from God, "You are my beloved own."

And then Jesus doesn't just go into the wilderness, he is "driven," forced, pushed, rushed into the wilderness by that same Spirit that tore open the heavens. You cannot escape the gifted writer that Mark is in portraying electrifying the extraordinary life of God he met in Jesus, the guy from Nazareth.

Next, it's forty days in a wilderness wrestling with temptation. And why? Traditionally, the holy, the obsessed and the crazed went to the deserts, because in the deserts there are no distractions. No bright lights, no other people, you are all alone with yourself. You talk with yourself.

But there is more. Jesus has gained his indelible *identity* as a beloved child of God in his baptism and now he enters the wilderness to find his *calling* in life. By the next verse Mark has that accomplished too! Jesus is in Galilee proclaiming the right moment has arrived. God is very near in a new way, calling us to reorient our lives to this new reality, this new exciting reality.

But let's step back and decompress some more. We do not baptize ourselves, not even Jesus did. Baptism is not a private act. It is the communal act of the people of God through whom the Spirit works -- such as those gathered around John as he baptizes Jesus. Your pastors do not really baptize you either. The Spirit uses all human agency, such as pastors, to do her work of implanting a vision of God's love.

But wilderness temptations are a different kettle of fish. Do you remember what it was like to be 23? For most people that's a difficult age. One of my daughters made it through and now the other is right in the middle of it. Sometimes I worry about her loneliness. In finding who you are, whose you are, you can point to your being baptized in the presence of some sort of family. But when it comes to finding what you are going to do with your life -- that is often so difficult and so lonely. I remember it keenly.

It was especially difficult for Jesus in the wilderness as he tries to sort out the difference between being the chosen one of God at the ripe time -- to sort that out from madness. After all, when someone comes to us claiming to be Messiah, we think of their mental health -schizophrenic and delusional are two clinical terms that come to mind.

Do not dismiss lightly this temptation struggle Jesus had alone in the wilderness, because some of the excellent clergy of his day will soon say precisely that --that he was possessed with devils, even Beelzebub, the prince of devils. Before Freud, this was language for madness, the kinds of mental illness we meet on the streets -- the true legacy of Ronald Reagan's de-institutionalized trimmer state and federal budgets.

I have decompressed Mark's earnest brevity to reveal Jesus' real humanity in his struggle to get clear on what his vocation in life is and, more so, whether he was mad or not. A rough place to be, usually a very lonely one, not only for Jesus, but also for the genuinely insane un-shepherded souls left on our streets.

The presence of wild beasts only raises our anxiety level. You may be engrossed in thought as you think yourself out, but you are also a perfectly pre-occupied target for a meal. But enough, enough of the anxieties in this story of Jesus.

Let us also note that he wasn't alone -- angels ministered to him. Did you know we all have angels? Sometimes we just don't know it. Angels calmed Jesus from slipping over the edge, keeping him focused both on his vocational struggle and of the dangers to which he was exposed in the desert. Angels do watch over us.

When I was in college, working two and sometimes three part-time jobs at 75 cents an hour, I was falling further and further into debt. One morning I had only a nickel left in my pocket, so I didn't eat. Living in West Texas, compared to Melbourne and San Francisco, was like living in a wilderness. It was a culture shock, but now I also had to fend off the wild beasts of hunger, desperation and deep self-doubt.

God sent an angel to look over me. When I went to my mailbox I found a letter from someone who thought I could probably, probably use this check for \$25. I had a big

breakfast that morning and from then on I never went hungry. Yes, there are angels caring for us when we are in our wildernesses.

Some of us received an email last night from a young member of St. Francis who was so excited that she had been admitted to the career training program she really wanted. She shared her joy with us. Now, like the rush of St. Mark, she's clear what her path in life is. Her baptism years ago gave her identity as a child of God, an identity that brought her here to be ministered by the angels at St. Francis long before I arrived on the scene. After her lonely period in her wilderness she has found her way, her vocation, her calling in life.

Who among us has not known angels in a family member, or friend, or pastor, or church member who were steady forces in those shaky times of our lives when we do not know what we wanted or even could possibly do? These are the angels that quickly come to mind. There are many others.

You have been baptized. You too are God's chosen daughters and sons. You too have found your vocation in life -- perhaps more than once, after a wilderness struggle with your wild beasts and those surprising angels.

Jesus now comes preaching to us all -- God is really near now and we have to let God turn us on our heels to see how blessed we really are and yet what great needs there are in the world around us.

Repentance means more than a pietistic self-absorption over horrible sins, repentance means wholeheartedly turning to God and lifting up not only our sins but also our struggles --and letting them go -- in the confidence that, like Jesus, we are baptized so we are God's forever; that in our wildernesses angels still care for us; and that we truly are finding God so near -- in the strangers we meet on life's way. Thanks for the angels, God, on our Lenten journey. That's decompressing this wonderful Gospel of Mark.

Amen

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