

INTO THE WILDERNESS
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February 21, 2021
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church
First Sunday in Lent

Based on Mark 1:9, 12-13. Jesus in the Wilderness, with the animals and the angels

Many of you know I lived two years, five months, and eight days in the desert of Tucson, Arizona (but who's counting!). Tucson, in the Sonoran Desert, is a beautiful place. Many people love it there, and with good reason. But for me, the Sonoran desert became "a dry and weary land where there is no water" (Psalm 63:1).

The sun is so bright, it scorched my sensitive skin. Southern Arizona is, after all, the global leader in cases of skin cancer. The sun is so bright that my pupils shriveled almost to the point of non-existence. The air was so dry that moisture evaporated from my joints and ligaments. I could literally feel my bones scraping against one another. My hair would dry while I was still *in* the shower. Even my sweat was dry, as Brad Toole so beautifully described in his reading from *The Wasteland* by T. S. Eliot:

"If there were only *water* amongst the rock."

Tucson does receive ten inches of rain per year. There is a monsoon season in the summer and flash floods are a thing, which sure did surprise me. But imagine, even with that, all of the precipitation you and I have experienced just since January here in the eastern panhandle ... and then *nothing* for the rest of the year.

We would be desperate for water.

It just so happens that John the Baptist – whom we meet in this first chapter of Mark's Gospel – is the patron saint of water. Everyone who lives in Tucson knows this, even if they are not Catholic, because the feast day of John the Baptist just so happens to coincide with the beginning of the summer monsoon season. Indigenous communities that have been Christianized have incorporated the feast day of John the Baptist into their rituals. Dancing and singing and chanting in prayer for heavy summer rains so that the crops will grow and the people can receive some relief from the oppressive heat.

As one whose body and soul literally thirsted and whose flesh was literally fainting, I joined the festivities. Dancing and chanting and praying, Please, dear God, let there be water!

And it worked!

Within days, as I crossed the bridge over the Gila River – a river that did not have any actual water in it – I felt three whole luscious drops of water splash right here on the crown of my head! Father, Son, Holy Spirit. My own special trinity. Mother, Child, Love. Font, Source, Stream.

Oh, my! The grace of those precious drops of water! The gentle yet firm undercurrent that carries us when we are desperate for help and cannot carry ourselves.

Oh, my! The grace of those precious drops of water! Raising us to life at the exact moment we have concluded that we and the world around us are too far beyond redemption.

Oh, my! The grace of those precious drops of water! Essential for any one of us to thrive in this harsh desert landscape we call life.

This is the grace Jesus carries with him, as the Spirit drives him into the desert of Judea. And yes, the language of the Greek implies compulsion. This is not a feel-good desert retreat initiated by Jesus himself.

Do you really mean it? the Spirit seems to be saying, as Jesus commits his life to the reign of God. Or will you crumble at the first sign of conflict. The desert is a test. *Do you really want to live the reign of God on earth as it is in heaven?*

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke speak of specific temptations throughout this desert time. Matthew and Luke go into great detail about how Jesus responds to those temptations. But Mark simply says, depending on the translation, "Satan tried to tempt Jesus in the wilderness."

When you and I hear the word, "Satan," of course, two thousand years later, we think of a little red devil with horns and a pitchfork. We either laugh or we run away, repulsed by such language. In Hebrew, however, the word is *HA-Sat-AN*. Which simply means "The Adversary."

By the time of Jesus, *Ha Satan* has become the mythical embodiment of destructive human power gone amok: that fear-fueled way of life that perpetuates the lie that there will never be enough, that some of us get to hoard the gifts of abundant life and lord it over others instead of spreading manna and mercy among all of creation.

In the time of Jesus and now, *Ha Satan* – all of that destructive human power gone amok that leads you and me and far too many human institutions, including the church, to become too greedy, too racist, too nationalistic, too full of human-caused pollution, too afraid to leave behind "the devil we know" and turn toward the new creation God intended us to be all along – in the time of Jesus and now, all of that destructive human power gone amok becomes extremely seductive. So seductive, in fact, we do not even know we have succumbed to it.

Like, for example, cultivating traits like perfectionism and productivity in order to succeed in White supremacy culture, without even knowing how those traits damage cultures of color. Like, for example, our national desperation to "get back to normal" literally depriving people in countries we call "poor" from the COVID vaccines we are hoarding for ourselves.

Destructive human power gone amok is *incredibly* seductive. Which is why the Spirit of God drives Jesus to the desert. To find out whether or not he really means it, when he says he will live – in his very body – the new creation God intended us to be all along.

Ha-Satan does, indeed, *try* to tempt Jesus in the wilderness. So what does Jesus do? We find out in two short verses of Mark's Gospel. Carried by grace from the waters of his baptism, Jesus then clings to "the wild beasts," the Scripture says. The "friendly beasts," as you and I would call them in our Christmas Eve carol. [Yes, there are even butterflies in the desert of Judea, I looked it up!] When destructive human power gone amok tries to lure Jesus back into the way of life he has pledged to leave behind, Jesus turns to *the rest* of creation: the non-human animals, who remain unencumbered by systems that perpetuate injustice. Jesus reclaims what it really means to be human: formed from the earth itself, mixed with the water of grace, enlivened by the very breath of God, and placed in a garden to live in peace with the rest of creation.

And when Jesus does this, the Scripture says, "angels of mercy minister to him."

This is our invitation, as we journey through the wilderness of Lent. If we are choosing to imagine it, as "Puppet Jesus" encouraged our children, or if we have been driven there by forces beyond our control. We, too, join Jesus on this journey of relinquishing all that no longer serves us – and perhaps never did. We, too, join Jesus in renouncing the seduction of destructive human power gone amok. We, too, join Jesus in

communing with the *rest* of creation, discovering once again what it *really* means to be human, tended by angels along the journey.

The good news, my friends, is that Jesus is not alone in the wilderness of Judea. You and I are not alone in whatever wilderness we find ourselves this Season of Lent 2021. Whether it is the wilderness caused by COVID, or the wilderness caused by fractured relationships, or the wilderness caused by our congregation's increasing awareness of and repentance for our heritage of white supremacy, *we are not alone* in the wilderness of Lent.

Three precious, luscious, grace-filled drops of water come with us. The refining Spirit of God encourages us to abandon the way of human power gone amok. To cling to the rest of God's beautiful beloved creation: those non-human animals that teach us how to live as Beloved Community. So that we may walk the way of Jesus to the cross if we must. Transforming destructive human power gone amok wherever we confront it. And rise on the other side as the new creation God intended all along.

Into the wilderness, we go!

Amen.