

Sunday, February 26, 2012: Mark 1:9-15

## **What can we possibly find in Mark's terse temptation account to help us in our wilderness wanderings?**

by [Phyllis Kersten](#) in the [February 22, 2012](#) issue

I've been trying to imagine how Jesus felt right after his baptism. The heavens were torn open, the Spirit of God alighted on him in the form of a dove, and that voice from heaven declared, "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Whatever Jesus was feeling, he didn't have long to enjoy it. "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness," Mark says. The Spirit didn't drive him in an SUV, we suspect, or even in a Prius. Matthew and Luke soften the verb; they say the Spirit of God "led" Jesus into the wilderness. There is no such gentleness in Mark. Jesus is expelled into the wilderness—so much for being God's beloved son.

While Matthew and Luke tell us about three tempting offers that Satan dangles before Jesus' eyes, Mark sums up Jesus' entire experience in one sentence: "He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." What can we possibly find in Mark's terse temptation account to help us in our wilderness wanderings, those times we have trouble hearing or trusting that baptismal voice that calls us God's "beloved"?

First, we can take some comfort in Mark's honesty about how Jesus ended up in the wilderness. We don't generally enter the wilderness on our own volition either. Nor do we feel gently led there by God's Holy Spirit. We are thrown into the wilderness. Most of us know that experience at some point in our lives. A shattering of a relationship, the sudden loss of job or health or home, a fault line opening up in our ground of being—any of those things can land us in a desolate place, or land a desolate place within us. Mark does not tell us much about Jesus' inner struggles until we get to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus agonizes over his impending

death and over the inability of his closest disciples to share his struggle. Instead, Mark's Gospel primarily focuses on an external conflict: Jesus' ongoing battle royal with Satan and the forces of evil. In the wilderness, the bell rings for round one of this cosmic bout.

In the Old Testament, Abraham was tested with what seems like too much to ask of anyone: the sacrifice of his son Isaac. For 40 years in the wilderness God provided daily bread for the children of Israel, but they still came up short in their struggle to trust their future to God.

In Mark, we are given the impression that Jesus' testing by Satan is ongoing throughout the 40-day period. Like the cell phone technician in the TV ad who keeps going into remote and secluded areas to test reception, God kept asking Jesus, "Can you hear me now? Can you hear me say that you are my beloved son *now*, when you see that this struggle with Satan isn't a one-time event, but of long duration? Can you hear me now that you know that unlike Isaac you will not be spared, that you will be offered up for the sin of the world? Can you hear me in the angels I send to wait on you? Can you see and hear in them the assurance that I will sustain you?"

"Can you hear me now?" God also asks us. Can we hear that the one who was with Jesus is also with us for the long haul, even when we're in the wilderness? Can we recognize the "angels" God sends to "wait table" for us? Can we hear God's call to us to be the angels who accompany others in their lonely and desolate places, including illegal immigrants who are afraid they'll be arrested, children dying from famine in Africa or homeless families living in their cars in our towns?

What are we to make of the wild beasts that were with Jesus in the wilderness? They represented the real dangers of survival in that setting, with their beady eyes staring at Jesus out of the darkness as he warmed himself by the fire. There's another possibility. Theologian Eduard Schweizer says that in "Jewish tradition the battle with the wild animals began with the Fall . . . but, unlike Adam, Jesus withstood his temptations and thereby restored paradise" (*The Good News According to Mark*). In his faithfulness, Jesus is already seen as the one who ushers in the "peaceable kingdom" that Isaiah foretold as a sign of the Messianic age.

God's Spirit drove Jesus to continued encounters with Satan that finally culminated on the cross. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus utters only one word from the cross, a cry born out of complete desolation. "My God, my God," Jesus asks, "why have you forsaken

me?" His words come from Psalm 22, where the psalmist twice speaks of being encircled by wild animals. Jesus enters the worst wilderness of them all, a sense of abandonment by God. We sometimes know that feeling too. "Can you hear me now?" God the Father asks. For a moment Jesus can't. He bears the silence of God as he bears our sins, so that for us forsakenness and abandonment will not be the last word.

Jesus' first stop after his resurrection is revealed in 1 Peter: he descends to hell's gates and rips them open. It is his victory speech over Satan and sin and death, proclaiming release to the captives held prisoner there from days of old and release to us as well.

"Beloved, can you hear me now?" Jesus asks us, sounding just like his father. Yes, we can!