



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Shoved Into The Wilderness

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 18, 2018
The First Sunday of Lent—Based on Mark 1: 9-15

Jesus is not easy to comprehend. Not easy to comprehend at all. I mean, on the one hand he's human, made of flesh and bone and blood just as I am, just as you are. A human being, just like one of us. Remember the Joan Osborne song from 1995?

What if God was one of us?
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Tryin' to make his way home?"

We try to imagine what that would be like. What would a *closer* God be like? And, of course, the Christian faith places God in human form in the person and identity of Jesus Christ. Close, very close.

Yet on the other hand, Jesus doesn't seem to be completely human. The Jesus we find in the Bible doesn't seem anything like us. We can't relate to his perfection. His perfect love. We don't comprehend his miraculous acts. We don't even understand his humble, sacrificial nature or his servant leadership.

But there are aspects of his life to which we can relate, aspects that make the vast distance between us and the Holy almost traversable. In the first chapter of the Gospel according to Mark—after the dramatic vision of the heavens being “torn apart”—a Divine voice speaks words similar to those that described Isaiah's Suffering Servant: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” These are words of divine endorsement and the Holy Spirit falls upon Jesus like a dove, a very gentle image reminiscent of the image of the “nurturing and overseeing Spirit of God that hovered over the waters of creation.”ⁱⁱ Jesus is loved and tenderly cared for in this moment.

And then “Immediately” (a favorite word for Mark—he uses *euthys*, the Greek word for immediately, 41 times over the course of this short gospel.) Mark says, “And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.” Mark transmits a sense of immediacy and

obligation not found in any of the other Synoptic gospels. This is no gentle push. This is a shove and Jesus complies.

Now this, this I get. To be forced into, shoved into the wilderness. Ahhhh. Now that's something to which we can relate. We can understand that because some of us have logged some serious time in the wilderness. It can come about in the blink of the eye, in the ring of a phone or in an email marked "confidential." Things are going just great in your life. Your work has never been better. Your primary relationships are hitting on all cylinders. Your computer is working without a hitch. For some insane, inexplicable reason, all your children are doing well. You're feeling good. Strong. It's as if the wind is at your back, you are beginning to feel you're getting a handle on this thing we call "life," and then, wham. Immediately. Immediately you're driven into the wilderness.

It's an aspect of Jesus we totally get because no one, not one of us, can escape the wilderness. I must admit, this was a realization that came to me a little later in life. For a long time, I really believed there were other people who had managed to escape their wilderness time. They're people who seemed shiny and happy and good. They fooled me for a while, those folks, because I was completely buying what they were selling. "Yes," I said to myself. "I'm having a really hard time here and so are several of my close friends, but they seem like they're doing just great. And then, you realize, they're selling it just a little too hard. The smiles start to look less secure. There are cracks in the façade, and you realize that the people who look like they've got it all together are on the very edge of having it all fall apart. And we should have a great deal of empathy for this kind of posturing because we've been here, too. Trying so hard to make sure everyone knows how well everything is going for us when, behind the scenes, we're not completely sure how we are going to make it through this day.

Like so many of you, I've been thinking this week about the families and loved ones of the students who were murdered at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida on Ash Wednesday. In addition to all the victims, we mourn Carmen Schentrup, a 16-year-old student at the school who was a leader in the youth group at St. Mary Magdalene Episcopal Church in Coral Springs, Florida. She was a Merit Scholarship Finalist and she died for absolutely no reason at all. Don't you think that family knows what the wilderness is? Don't you think that we, as a country, know what it is to be lost, deep in the wilderness?

The Bishops United Against Gun Violence, a group of 70 Episcopal bishops, put out a statement from which I quote: "The phrase 'thoughts and prayers' has been devalued by politicians whose prayers seem never to move them to act against their self-interests or the interests of the National Rifle Association. Yet, as Christians, we believe deeply in the power of prayer to console, to sustain and to heal, but also to make evident the work that

God is calling us to do. We pray that all who have been touched by this violent act receive God's healing and solace."

When you lose a child or a parent, or a spouse, you never really stop losing them. You lose them over and over and over again at every holiday or birthday or family occasion. So how can we survive these frightening and forbidding wildernesses?

1. *We lean into our faith.* We come to church and huddle together in the light of Christ for warmth. We remember the wisdom of our forebears who may not have had a fraction of the material wealth we possess, but who leaned on, stood on the solid ground of faith.
2. *We recognize our tendency to cling to God when things are at their worst.* The Old Testament is a long collection of stories that basically reveal the faithlessness of the Israelites when times were good. When there was no enemy at the gate, when there was food and drink enough, the Israelites could find no time for God. And when things were going badly? When the enemy was near, when the food was running out, when the people were at death's door? That is precisely when the Old Testament reveals the epic faithfulness of the Israelites. The wilderness pushes us towards faith.
3. *We remember the wilderness can be a place of revelation.* Throughout Jewish history, the Hebrew people have always been aware of the power of the wilderness. "It is in the wilderness that they not only escaped the tyranny of Pharaoh, but also, as a people, first met the Lord God. The wilderness is a place of eye-opening disclosure. It's in the desert that the Israelites came to know God's power and love even though they would swing like yo-yos between faithfulness and apostasy." But it was in the desert, the wilderness, where they came to be transformed over the years "from a rag-tag group of slaves into the people of God."
4. *We survive the wilderness by looking to help those who are more lost in the wilderness than we are.* Sometimes we find our way by helping someone else find theirs. We don't leave anyone behind. When we see people lost in wildernesses of poverty and addiction, we go back for them. When we see people lost in the wildernesses of depression and grief, we go back to get them. We comfort them. We stay close. When we see people lost in the darkness of hunger or despair, we gather whatever light we can muster, and we go back for them. Not because we are foolish. Not because we think we're immortal. But because this is what our God keeps calling us to do, and this is how we know we will make it through ourselves!

Now it should be said that a few find a strange comfort in the wilderness. It's as if some of us don't ever want to leave. The darkness and desolation, it seems, suit a few of us just

fine. It reminds me of the story of a young Fifth Avenue store clerk who ended each transaction by saying, “Have a nice day.” To which a crusty customer replied, “Thank you, but I have other plans.”

Most of us want to go in a different direction. Today is the first Sunday of Lent: a season set aside by the Church for prayer, self-denial, and meditation on the spiritual life. The 40 days of Lent mirror the time Jesus spent in the wilderness. It offers the faithful an opportunity to reflect upon our lives. Lent provides us an annual occasion to confess we’re not where we want to be. Now, Lent can be presented as if it were a form of Christian hazing. And it should be said, some Christians are deeply, deeply drawn to the austere observances and the deeply penitential exercises of this season. I don’t judge. Everyone needs to find the path that works for them.

But I think it’s preferable to think of Lent as something more like a surprising opportunity to become more intentional, more introspective, more grounded in our life. This season gives us a clear moment to ask where we are in the lifelong process of becoming. We’re invited in this moment to ask if we are becoming our very truest selves. C.S. Lewis wrote, “No one knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good.” We are clearly “works in progress” and thankfully God is not finished with us yet.

We’ve been given this time in which to reflect more deeply on our most important responsibility: the conduct of our own lives. Where is that deep wilderness in your life—the broken part of you, the deep woods through which you would rather not run? Where is the wilderness you’ve been, like Jesus, shoved into?

They are our worst nightmares and who wouldn’t rather run away? But Lent is an intentional turning into the heart of the wound. This is the opportunity to look at all of the frightening apparitions in the face and say, “Be gone!” We are beloved of God, and in the end, God will bring us safely home.

Amen.

ⁱ *One of Us* Written by Eric Bazilion, Sung by Joan Osborne, from the album, *Relish*, Polygram Records, 1995

ⁱⁱ Synthesis, Year B, March 1, 2009