

Today I want to **explore the wilderness**, as Jesus did in our gospel lesson. But first I need to acknowledge a confusing thing about that lesson: Our lectionary today warps time, circles back on itself today as we begin Lent. Just last Sunday we were with Jesus up on Transfiguration Mountain during the half-time show of his ministry. And yet today here is Jesus being baptized AGAIN before his public ministry had even begun, before he had even called his disciples, as we heard about just seven weeks ago on the First Sunday after the Epiphany.



*Stanley Spencer,
Jesus in the Wilderness*

Well, Jesus wasn't baptized twice. Those who appointed the Church's Sunday scripture lessons wanted us to understand back in January that baptism shifts our spiritual life into a new dimension, so we need to begin there, with baptism. Today, though, as we start the 40-day season of Lent, we are meant to place ourselves in the footsteps of Jesus by replicating his 40-days of testing in the wilderness.

Our gospel lesson today says that, immediately after Jesus' baptism, the very same Spirit that had descended on Jesus "like a dove" drove him out into the wilderness. I know... I know. We modern-day Christians don't like to think that GOD is the one who drives us into the wilderness, especially when the forces of evil are waiting there to test us. At the very least we want God to explain himself, give an account of his actions, and EXPLAIN how he can be the God of love if he tests us with desolate places and hard times.

NOT going to happen. God is always silent in response to thoughts like these. Maybe Lent is a time when our main task is to recognize that God is God and we are not.

God doesn't ever explain why he sends us into the wilderness. But, knowing that God DOES send us into the wilderness, don't think that God causes evil to happen to us. No, God ALLOWS evil to happen; our best explanation is that this is a consequence of giving us the freedom to choose or reject God. We want that freedom, that free will, and yet we also want God to shield us from the consequences of our bad choices. But the wilderness is a consequence of our freedom that we must live with.

So, let's **explore the wilderness**. Wilderness is where we meet ourselves face-to-face. What do I mean by that? A literal wilderness is where we are stripped of our usual means of coping: no food, no water, no tobacco or alcohol or other drugs (not even caffeine). Just us. No family, no community, no church. No noise, no phone, no Internet, no TV, no books. No shelter. Reputation, income, power, possessions, assets—all meaningless.

The same is true of the kind of wilderness where we are tested. All those THINGS might be available, just meaningless to help us solve whatever problem is confronting us. For example, there's a wilderness in Parkland, Florida, this week. There are a lot of parents there dealing with the murder of their children and all the things they have probably aren't helping them much in coping with their grief and anger and loss.

Did God create this situation? NO! I suspect that each of you think you know the "solution." Those who are anti-gun think that tighter gun controls will "solve" the problem of mass homicide in our schools. Those who are pro-gun think that arming every person will "solve" the problem. And isn't THAT where the real wilderness lies for each of us—in that "no person's land" between us? How will we choose our responses; how will we escape this wilderness?

There are wild beasts in the wilderness, our lesson says, but whether those beasts are a help or a threat is left up to our imagination. I'd guess threats, because wilderness is where we must choose between the forces of life and the forces of death, between God and Satan to use ancient language. Because wilderness is where forces thrive that are hostile to God, where primeval chaos lingers whose goal is to undo creation. THAT chaos ALWAYS points us in the wrong direction, pits us against each other, and tries to alienate us from God, and from each other.

Chaos accomplishes that alienation, when chaos is successful, by offering us anxiety, panic, terror, anger, hardness of heart, a fixation on revenge, and a false certainty about who God is and what God wants. Maybe Lent is when we should identify the forces hostile to God that we have allowed to inhabit our lives.

Or perhaps "with the beasts" isn't actual animals. Perhaps "beasts," in this case, is a metaphor for the untamed parts within us, those parts of our human nature that we might be afraid of: our animal nature, our lusts, our rages, our fears, our depressions, our scary imaginations. If so, maybe Lent is a time to acknowledge and ask for God's help to tame the wild beasts within us.

Our lesson today tells us, using very spare language, another reality about wilderness that I don't want us to miss: **We are not alone in the wilderness**, even though we think we are. Did you notice that, when Jesus was in the wilderness, "angels waited on him?" That's the reality of our lives: We are not alone; God is always with us, always near at hand, even when we think we are alone. God ensures that we are attended and is patiently waiting for us to choose him anew.

Maybe Jesus' wilderness experience helped him to realize our need for the Holy Spirit, the Advocate he sent to help us through the wildernesses of this life.

Maybe this is our task this Lent: To observe how we are tempted and consoled in the wilderness, recognizing at last—as the Israelites did—that the wilderness is where we can get closest to God, if we but choose wisely and trust the Holy Spirit to guide us.

All of this reminds me of the methodology recommended by St. Ignatius: observe each day our spiritual successes and failures. Over time we will begin to notice two things: First, how we are most susceptible to the chaos of life, and second, how we have been attended by angels.

I have wondered this week, as I have explored this wilderness, that perhaps God drives US out into the wilderness for another reason, a reason other than testing. Perhaps God wants us in the wilderness at specific times and places to BE that ministering angel to someone else in the wilderness. And we CAN be that presence of help and hope, if we don't let chaos divert us in the wilderness along the way.