

Sermon Prepared by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes for Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia  
First Sunday in Lent, February 21, 2021

(Mark 1:9-15)

For me, there's a stark dichotomy found in this passage. It's a noticeable tension between two different portrayals of time. I'm looking particularly at verses 12 and 13: "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."<sup>1</sup>

It brings to mind the old phrase I learned years ago and that here seems somewhat applicable: *hurry up and wait*.

We move from immediacy to waiting ... a swift jump from one spectacular moment into a slow, excruciating period of stress and turmoil. There's that word again: *immediacy*. As we know, Mark is a fast-paced narrative – and yet here, in transitioning between these two particular verses, we find the brakes applied.

The almost urgent feel of this passage is strongly reflected in the use of a very particular word relating to Jesus' journey deeper into the wilderness: *drove*. Unlike the post-baptism narrative in Matthew in which Jesus is led by the Spirit, here the Spirit *drove* him. It's a translation of a form of the Greek word *ekballo*,<sup>2</sup> found elsewhere in Mark particularly in passages related to Jesus driving out or casting out demons. So in the moments just after his baptism, Jesus is essentially cast out into the wilderness by the Spirit.

Then the pacing changes and we find ourselves wandering with Jesus through the long slog of 40 days. There's a special imagery in the use of wilderness and the number 40, reflecting back on the time of Exodus of the Israelites and their 40 years of travel through the wilderness outside of Egypt. You of course also recognize the 40 days that Jesus wanders reflected in the 40 days of Lent through which we are currently traveling.

As with everything described in the Bible, we have the advantage of knowing how these episodes end. For Jesus, though, there wouldn't have been a date on the calendar that he could look forward to in which this time would end. We don't know for certain, but I would wager that when the Spirit drove him deeper into the wilderness it was without any sort of indication as to when his exile would end. Imagine moving through a single day, a day filled with Satan constantly throwing temptation up in the path you're walking, and being exhausted by the effort. Then that day melts into another one with the same cycle repeating ... and then into another one, and another one, and another one.

I sometimes wonder what's worse: the struggle of going through a period you know will end and with that end seeming as if it will never arrive, or the struggle of going through a period that you're not sure will *ever* end. I'm not sure there's a right answer, for both bring with them their own version of an emotional and mental hell.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 1:12-13 (NRSV).

<sup>2</sup> Definition and uses of "ekballo." BibleHub Greek Interlinear Concordance, <https://biblehub.com/greek/1544.htm>.

There's hope, though, and there's good news ... for Jesus as his story unfolds, certainly, but also each one of us going through our own wilderness journeys. The temptations of Satan weren't the totality of either presence or experience; there was a balance: the ministrations of angels. As mighty as the temptations likely were (and we don't know what they were because in this passage there's no specificity on them) that beat him down, I'm certain the ministry and care of the angels were just as mighty in healing and sustaining him.

I appreciate the fact that the temptations faced here by Jesus are not named or numbered, and I think that serves a very important purpose. It reminds us that there's nothing we can encounter, no obstacle that can be thrown in our path, which Jesus has not already faced. We also can take comfort that we too receive the ministry of angels. These angels may be readily visible to you, the friends or neighbors who are there offering comfort, aid or encouragement during your times of need. But there also are angels we *don't* see, those supporting us behind the scenes in ways we may never be aware of or ever comprehend.

Like Jesus entering the wilderness, the start of our own periods of difficulty or temptation have no certain end date. We can't look at a desk calendar and see for instance that March 22 is the day that things will get better ... the day that the pull to the negative ends ... the day that Satan gives up and life returns to normal. That has certainly been the case for all of us as a community during our time in the wilderness away from communal worship. But also like Jesus in the wilderness, we are receiving the ministrations of angels.

I invite you to take time to reflect on the gifts you've received to compensate for the temptations you may feel. Take time to allow the blessings to pull your attention away from the things that you may see as curses. Consider where angels have been at work in your life ... and along those lines, reflect on where you've been an angel in the life of someone else.

The wilderness time for Jesus came to an end. The temptations were defeated. The angels restored him. And he walked out of those 40 days and into Galilee, strengthened and prepared for his ministry. May God do likewise for each one of you in the time ahead.

Amen.