

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

What is Lent about? Is it about giving up chocolate or beer for the season? Is it about depressing hymns and no mention of the “A” word, no joy?

Or is it about something else? Is it about transformation? We talked about that last week, on Transfiguration Sunday, didn't we? We talked about how we can be changed, how we can become more ourselves, and more deeply children of God.

And now that we are in Lent, it may well be that this is less a time of what we are giving up and more of a time of what we are becoming.

That is clearly what this gospel is about.

We have an incredibly compact version of the beginning of Jesus' story. As the scholar Marilyn McCord Adams reminds us, this is a familiar story pattern in the Bible: “a candidate is singled out, then taken for a proverbial length of time into a [special space somewhere between earth and heaven] where old identities dissolve and new ones are forged, before being thrust back into society to occupy new roles.”¹

And this is exactly what happens to Jesus here, isn't it? The selected one has to go through something akin to a hazing before he is officially in his new role.

It is a violent transformation, this first series of events. It is not a warm and relaxed bath in the Jordan that Jesus experiences when John baptizes him. It is something that causes the heavens to rend open so that the Spirit, in the form of a dove, can come down upon him.

Perhaps we would feel the drama of the moment more if the Spirit came down like a hawk, intensely focused, single-minded on the task at hand, affirming Jesus' unique mission as God's Son. Certainly that is not a sweet little gray dove that pokes and prods at Jesus so that he will go out into the desert, that creature that “drove him out into the wilderness.” It is a creature with the intensity of a raptor, bringing Jesus to a place that is uncivilized, not outfitted with the comforts of home, without a 7-11 on the corner to pick up a snack.

No, Jesus is sent to that in-between space where nothing is familiar and everything seems vaguely threatening. He is sent into the wilderness for this preparatory event, a hazing by Satan, to see if he is really made of the right stuff to be who God intends him to be. He is to be tested. Now, Mark's version of the story simply mentions who does the hazing, without specifying what this weird initiation rite might be. Jesus is there in this strange place, attended by angels and living with wild beasts. He is tempted, but he does not succumb to the temptation, and we don't hear about Satan again for quite a while. And then it's over and Jesus is on to the next part of the story.

When you go away for a period of time in the wilderness, in the wild places, you come back changed.

Mark gets that. What does he tell us? Jesus is baptized, and the heavens are torn asunder in that moment. Jesus goes into the wilderness, and Satan is dismissed. John the Baptizer is arrested, his reform movement stopped in its tracks, and Jesus, that guy who used to help out his dad in the carpenter's shop, who would bring firewood for his mother to cook with, this changed Jesus takes up his new role as the one who brings God's word, and proclaims that he has brought good news.

The heavens torn asunder, the hero challenged and transformed, a new message cried out in the land.

All in six verses.

¹ Brown and Taylor, Editors. Feasting on the Word, Year B Volume 2. Louisville: Westminster Knox Press, 2008, pp. 44-46.

But in six brief verses, there is more that goes on underneath the surface. It is always so when one moves through the end of one's old life and into a new one.

Part of the change is about what happens in the baptism. When John the Baptizer came out of the wilderness and took Jesus into that water, I doubt that anyone there expected the dramatic thing that happened. But something did happen. We do not know if the onlookers heard the voice, saw the sky rent asunder, watched the dove descending. But we do know that Jesus certainly saw and heard and felt that he was being brought from his old world with all its comfortable normalcy, into a new wilderness, akin to the wilderness that his baptizer had resided in during John's ministry. He was now in a place where little doves had the power to shove him into the wilderness and where God spoke out loud, tearing apart the clouds of heaven to make room for his voice. This was a traumatic event, not a gentle one, and perhaps it didn't take all that much of a shove from the Spirit to send this shocked Jesus out into that space of wilderness, an empty space but for wild animals and the overshadowing presence of temptation and evil.

And so the next part of the change is about what happens in the wilderness. Mark gives us only the barest statement of what happened there: Jesus was in the wilderness with the wild animals, and Satan tempted him and the angels waited on him. So much left unsaid! But the image that remains in my mind is of Jesus sitting and thinking about what had happened in the baptism, with a couple of wild animals sitting there with him, and he's thinking, "right now I feel like I have more in common with these wild animals than with my family back home. God has affirmed me, I'm out here alone. I'm something different now than when I started."

Doesn't wilderness always make us feel isolated, unlike any other, without the conventional touchpoints that make us feel safe? This was a dangerous place. If the wild animals weren't going to eat you, the devil was going to try and get you to do something stupid. And yet, forty days later, Jesus walks out of the wilderness to assume his new role, and in doing so, he brings more of the wild animal with him and less of the domesticated pet religious leader...this is the man who will consort with lepers and Samaritan women, who will eat with tax collectors and sinners, who will heal on the Sabbath, and who will decry a lukewarm tame faith. In some ways, the wild animals have transformed Jesus more than Satan ever could, since he is now an untamable power.

And if we forget what that time in the wilderness did to Jesus, we will have a reminder a few chapters later when Peter rebukes Jesus for predicting his own demise, and Jesus rebukes Peter: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." It is Satan who would have us worry about what the everyday world thinks of what we do when we follow our Lord...it is this wild animal Jesus who reminds us who we are following, and what is expected of us as a result, something very different from that everyday world and its cares.

Time in the wilderness is transforming.

As I was meditating on this passage this week in preparation for this sermon, I found myself recalling the story of Aron Ralston, the young rock-climber whose story was made into the movie "127 Hours." Ralston went alone into the wilderness of Canyonlands National Park for a day of solo mountaineering. This was, of course, the height of idiocy – smart people do not do these things alone, they go with a partner in case of emergencies.

And what an emergency Aron Ralston had! As he was climbing in one of the canyons, one of the boulders came loose, and pinned Ralston's right arm, trapping him. He tried to call for help, but there was no one there. He would have to find a way to survive on his own. During this time, he recorded what was happening, and what he was thinking about, in a video diary on his little camera. As he weakened, he had visions of his family, and after five days had a vision of his future child. He found the wherewithal to make a

tourniquet, break the bone in his arm, and hack off his pinned arm with the dull knife in his backpack, and then he walked out of the desert, covered in blood, to find people who could take him to the hospital.

The same pattern that Dr. McCord Adams described: a hero identified and separated out from the rest of the world, tested in a wilderness experience, and returned to the world transformed. Ralston, now with one arm, was physically transformed by what happened to him, but he also seems to have been transformed in other ways.

In an interview with National Geographic Magazine, Ralston was asked about the video diary, and his response may help us in understanding our gospel today: "It gave me a sense of completion. Not only did the camera let me tell my family and friends what had happened, but also it gave me the opportunity to tell them how I was feeling and that I loved them. I liked the thought that I wasn't going to leave an unexplained mess."²

Ralston came out physically transformed, but the process of getting through his time in the wilderness demanded that he speak of it, that he connect with those who were part of his other world. And perhaps this is what happened to Jesus as well.

He spent his time with the wild animals, with the temptation of the Evil One, and he came out the other side. When he got back into the world, he found out that John was gone, locked away in prison. And he had to speak. He had to talk, not so much about what had happened when he walked into the Jordan or when he sat for forty days in that wilderness, but about the outcome of what happened: he had God's good news to share with people in strange new ways, and they had better pay attention, repent and believe.

So what does this mean for us? Most of us don't get prodded into the wilderness by a bird, or get our arms pinned under a boulder in a canyon.

But don't we all have our own wildernesses that transform us as well, for good and for ill? Wildernesses of loneliness, of illness or loss or spiritual dryness, that leave us shaken and hollowed out like an old termite-ridden tree?

Lent is the time in the wilderness. It is the reminder that until the day we are with God at the heavenly banquet, we are all in the wilderness, being shaken, being changed. And our only right response to the time in the wilderness is to do what Aron Ralston attempted in that video diary, to do what Jesus did when he came back from the wilderness: tell people what it meant to us, what it continues to mean to us, that we have come through the time in the wilderness to a new understanding of who we are and who God is.

Take it as fact that you will be changed by your time in the wilderness. So what will you tell others about it, about what it did to you and what it continues to do to you, as you meditate on your life this Lenten season?

Amen.

² http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/08/0830_040830_aronralston_2.html