

*The Wilderness Within* (Mk. 1.9-15)  
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I usually begin the sermon with a story. I suppose it goes without saying that I know what the story is. The stories told from this lectern are stories that I have a working knowledge of, either through study or experience, and one of my favorite times of the week is the moment that I walk to the front of the sanctuary, set my manuscript down, look out at all of you, and begin to tell a story that I know. And so it is with a distinctly strange feeling that I begin this particular sermon. Because the story that I'd like us to consider this morning is not a story that I know. It is not a story I can tell. It is not a story with which I am intimately familiar in the way that you are. For the story called forth by this morning's narrative is your own story. Since I do not know your story the way that you know it, the best this sermon can hope to do is help you to revisit your story. If you're like me at all, then your story, or elements of it, may not be entirely clear to you. I don't mean that it's not clear on the surface. On the surface, things are straightforward enough. I mean the muddling just beneath the surface in the shadowy place, in the secret thought, in the wilderness that lies not so much outside the walls of this sanctuary but within our very souls. This wilderness within remains all too often unexplored, but Lent invites us to stray from the conventional path and spend some time in the places we don't normally go. So, as we begin, I invite you to let your mind wander through the most difficult places in your story. Consider what it is that challenges you, what it is that you are working on, what it is that you really struggle with. Hold this struggle in your mind and listen with it as we look into Jesus' story for a moment.

We need look no further than this morning's scripture lesson to find our rabbi himself modeling a season of contemplation, a time in the wilderness. The reading we heard from the Book of Mark was brief, moving in characteristically quick Markan fashion through three major events in the life of Jesus – his baptism, his sojourn in the wilderness, and his entrance into public ministry. And while each of these events is of critical importance, the one upon which we'll focus today is the middle of the three, the centerpiece, as it were, to our short reading. That centerpiece is exactly two sentences long. "At once the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness, and there he remained for forty days tempted by Satan. He was among the wild beasts; and angels attended to his needs."<sup>1</sup> The description is spare and curious, not fleshed out in the lengthier sort of temptation narratives we find in Matthew or Luke. No, Mark only troubles to tell us that Jesus needed to spend a symbolic period of time in the wilderness before he was ready to begin his public ministry. The reference to angels may have been meant to link Jesus to the legacy of the prophet Elijah, who was also said to have been cared for by such heavenly emissaries.<sup>2</sup> But Mark doesn't belabor that point either. We are just left with the story of a time away, a time of testing and perhaps refinement, a necessary time in the wilderness where Jesus met a certain oppositional character.

When Jesus went into the wilderness, the one he met there was an adversary. That character is given a name in the narrative, Satan, but the name is little more than the Hebrew word for adversary given a capital letter at the front. This may be a bit confusing

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 1.12-13 (Revised English Version).

<sup>2</sup> Marcus Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 122.

to modern readers for the way that Satan has popularly been portrayed as a sort of embodiment of evil, the arch enemy of all things good and kind, that devilish malevolent who sows only the seeds of suffering and does only the work of creating chaos. But such an understanding of Satan doesn't have much to do with the Hebrew conception of the adversarial character who was to be met in life's struggles. The old Hebrew notion had a lot more to do with the adversary who might block your path for a time in order to help you grapple with something of great importance. Satan was an opponent who brought a knowledge of your weaknesses to the game, forcing you to engage the parts of yourself that you'd prefer to resist or avoid or hide. So far from being an easy sort of enemy, this adversary may have been the most difficult kind of friend, the kind that brings to the surface all of your issues, causing you great anguish and leaving you to limp away a bit the wiser for it, if not quite happier. And there is a reason that I have referred to the Satan character in such friendly terms. In her study of it, Professor Elaine Pagels writes that this character "did not originate, as one might expect, as an outsider, an alien, or a stranger. Satan is not the distant enemy but the *intimate* enemy—one's trusted colleague, close associate, brother."<sup>3</sup> This adversary is so near that he is often difficult to see until it's already too late and the struggle has begun.

Now we're almost to the point in the sermon where the story gets good, which means we're almost to the point where I don't know the story any more, where the story becomes yours, the questions the ones that have emerged in your experience, the invitation that you travel deeply into the wilderness within yourself. The only encouragement I can offer is that, according to Mark, this is something Jesus that

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<sup>3</sup> Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan* (New York: Random House, 1995), 49.

modeled for us. And here it will help us to move from a kind of literal to a more figurative engagement. The gospel seems to affirm that, whoever or whatever the adversary was that Jesus met in the wilderness, it was necessary that he meet that adversary and contend with certain questions before he could ever come out again. And when Jesus did emerge, the message he began to preach was so radical that it might make us turn our heads back to that desert and ask what happened there. What happened in that wilderness place that was so transformative that afterwards Jesus began to preach repentance, a complete turning of the way of our lives? What happened in that place that was so profound that Jesus began to preach that the Kingdom of Heaven was spread out upon Earth and that it valued the poor and the outcast above all others? What happened in that place that was so deep that Jesus began to preach the primary importance of forgiveness and the necessity of reconciliation among people? These are some of the most important questions we can ask during the season of Lent. But they are not questions that we are meant to ask simply of Jesus.

Lent's invitation to us is that we take some of the questions from the Jesus story and ask them of our own lives. If Jesus went to the wilderness and met there an adversary who helped him to understand more deeply who he was and more tangibly what his work was to be, then what of us? If I, if you, were to go into the metaphorical wilderness, who or what would be the adversaries we would need to meet, the ones close enough that we might have difficulty recognizing them? In short, what is keeping us from emerging, as the rabbi once did, from a season of contemplation with a radical word on our tongues and a completely different way of being in the world? And so we have arrived in this sermon's particular wilderness—the story I do not know. All I can do now is suggest

some possibilities and invite you to let your mind wander among them for a moment. If you were to listen deeply to your own story, what adversary would you find close at hand?

Perhaps you would find that you have been holding on to something too tightly, unable to forgive someone for something that you feel they have done to you. The grudge you have held now begins to hold you, preventing you from realizing the fullness of your ability to make peace. Perhaps you would find that you are afraid of your mortality, that greatest of human anxieties for which there is no cure. Your worry about that which you cannot control overshadows the beauty of this day and the choices that are still yours to make. Perhaps you keep within yourself the fire of anger caused by an offense or an injustice. Your bottled feelings may cause you to feel worse and worse, affecting your emotional, spiritual, and physical health. Perhaps you bear the wound of some grief, cut to the bone by losses unhealed and untended. Your attention to the wound may keep you from naming the person or thing for which you grieve and telling the more sacred story of the love that you shared. Perhaps you are absorbed in a particular identity or a profession that has come to define you. Your affinity for a single role may prevent you from seeing your true complexity and finding your unused gifts. Or perhaps your adversary is simply one of dozens more. Perhaps you must grapple with the expectations of others, the plan that has gone awry, the unnamed regret, the secret addiction. The list goes on and on. No two stories the same. And so the story that I cannot tell is your own. Yet the season of Lent asks me to ask you to consider telling it to yourself differently.

Consider during these weeks of Lent, if you might walk through the wilderness within your own story, attempting not to avoid the adversaries you find there, but to sit with them, to listen to what they ask of you, and to struggle with the questions they pose. Consider what prevents you from becoming the person that you mean to be, living the life you aspire to live, and even practicing the faith that you hope to practice. Consider yourself a sister or a brother of Jesus, who himself went away to ask the deepest questions of all in order to walk freely out of that season with a renewed sense of who he was and what he was to do. For Jesus, that meant a radical message of turning our lives, remembering the poor, forgiving each other, and making peace. And the same might be so for us this Lenten season if we will dare to walk into the wilderness with open minds and open hearts.

The 13<sup>th</sup> Century poet Jalalu'ddin Rumi wrote:

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent

as a guide from beyond.<sup>4</sup>

This Lent may it be so with us.

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<sup>4</sup> Jalalu-ddin Rumi, *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 109.