

Wilderness, Growth and Transformation

Mark 1:13, Matthew 4:1-2

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Jesus was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Mark 1:13

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

Matthew 4:1-2

We begin the journey through the season of Lent in the wilderness. In both Mark and Matthew, Jesus is still wet from his baptism on the Jordan River. In the gospel of Mark, the story of Jesus does not begin in Bethlehem or a babe in the manger, but right at Jesus' baptism. According to biblical scholars, the gospel of Mark was written down the earliest, around 70 AD and Matthew around 85 AD.

As far as the Gospel of Mark cares, the life of Jesus begins when his head is covered with water. That's when there were signs that God was up to something. Maybe nobody else noticed, but Jesus had a powerful experience. As he came up out of the water, he saw the sky rip open, he saw the Spirit come down on him like a dove. He heard the Voice from heaven: "You belong to me. You are my beloved, and I am delighted in you."

These were not new words. They are lifted from the treasury of Israel and inscribed in the Psalms. Both Mark and Matthew record these words. Those words matter to all of us - God says, "You belong to me. You are beloved. I am delighted in you."

And then, in both gospels, immediately Jesus has to make his way forward after that spiritually rich moment. He has to live after the water dries off. We know it is going to be a bumpy road.

Not everybody wants to believe that. They think if they belong to God, if they respond to God's holy claim on their lives, that everything else will go well, that the road ahead is easy street. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we say, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

We say it because evil is real and temptation is all around us. I don't need to tell you that; you already know it. And I don't need to offer any illustrations; they would only make the sermon longer.

So just as soon as Jesus is baptized, he is tempted. It goes on for "forty days." That's a biblical euphemism for "a good long time." It happens in "the wilderness." That's not a specific area,

so much as a “desolate place.” It’s the lonely spot, the isolated location, the abandoned land where you have to work out the struggle. For us, wilderness could be desert, mountains, forests.

Satan is there, not with a pitchfork and red pajamas, but maybe in a business suit or casual Friday clothing, looking respectable and sounding helpful, because that is how temptation always comes.

And if that weren’t trouble enough, the Gospel of Mark says, “Jesus was with the wild beasts.” Interesting. Wild beasts as in lions and tigers and bears?? A threat? Yes, but also maybe a symbol of forces that make us be people of courage and strength, relying on the Holy One. I am going to come back to this image of wild beast so hold onto that image.

The temptation story in Mark, Matthew and Luke is a rich story of Jesus being tempted. Temptation is a test. In Matthew’s story, the angels stay off stage. Jesus, in all his humanity, in all his divinity, is given three ominous examinations. Each one seems like the right thing to do. He is not tempted to do anything that seems wrong. No, he is tempted to do things that, on the surface, seem exactly right.

- Since you are God’s Son, use your heavenly power to feed yourself and the hungry. The world has a lot of hungry people.
- Since you are God’s Son, use your miraculous power to impress the crowds. The world needs something spectacular to believe.
- Since you are God’s Son, hand your authority to me and I will give you everything. Skip the cross and resurrection and get it all now. Use your power over people. Sell your soul to me.

The first temptation, to turn stones into bread, is the temptation to be relevant & immediate and the center of attention. To push God out and make ourselves relevant and central rarely turns out well.

The second temptation is to be spectacular, to be impressive, to be so amazing that you can sway other people. “Take a swan dive from the top of the Temple,” says the Devil to Jesus.

The third temptation is the temptation to exert power over people and authority rather than servant leadership and empowering others. Guarding one’s soul and integrity.

Through this experience, Jesus defines his calling and ministry and moves out into the world offering healing, hope and a vision of the Beloved Community, the kin-dom of God.

How did Henri Matisse discover his calling and life’s work as an artist? What can his journey teach us about how to see the world and the ways the Spirit invites us to live deeply, not on the surface of life?

Henri Matisse was born in 1869 in a small town in northern France, the eldest son of a successful grain merchant in a Roman Catholic household. He initially studies law in Paris – but at age 19, convalescing at home after an illness, he receives a box of paints from his mother, to help him pass the time. Henri never looks back. He returns to Paris, but this time – much to his father’s chagrin – his aim is to study art.

After seven years of study and practice, Matisse visits John Russell, an Australian painter living on an island off the coast of France. Russell introduces him to Impressionism, color theory, and the work of Russell’s old friend, Vincent Van Gogh. Enthralled, Matisse overhauls his style, including a striking move toward bright, dazzling colors.

The 40-day Season of Lent is a journey through color: from ashen gray to purple, to deep crimson to the rainbow of color in a springtime garden. The word “Lent” refers to the “lengthening” sunlight each day down and drawing out the colors from the earth: the immersive, annual Easter poetry of creation.

Matisse might have been tempted to copy other artists, but his spiritual life called him to a deeper connection to his own style of beauty. He once said he liked to pray with a pencil: “At the moment I go every morning to say my prayers, pencil in hand; I stand in front of a pomegranate tree covered in blossom, each flower at a different stage, and I watch their transformation... filled with admiration for the work of God. Is this not a way of praying?”

During the 40 days of Lent, we are invited by the Spirit into the “wilderness,” a place where we can clear our heads, challenge ourselves, and reflect on how we want to continue to grow. But make no mistake, any wilderness journey requires some boldness, ferocity, and creativity. Just ask the animals, the “wild beasts” who call the wilderness home!

Here is a surprise. Henri Matisse is considered one of the founders of fauvism (pronounced “FO-vizum”). He was called a fauve (which is French for “wild beast”) because of his use of bold, bright colors and fierce brushwork. Russell had introduced Matisse to the Impressionists, and Matisse took away a new sense of liberty to experiment with color and composition.

An artist as a wild beast? One who goes beyond expectation, who is bold. Not destructive but a bit wild, not predictable, living on the margins. He started with grays but eventually evolved to use very bright colors.

An example is *Roofs of Collioure*

The driving idea was to move away from the longstanding convention of mimicking or reproducing the colors and forms of the world as they appear to the eye alone (after all, the new technology of photography was doing that quite well). And instead, the “fauves” sought to create paintings pervaded by the painter’s emotional response to the world. This wasn’t so

much a shift away from “realism” as a shift in what the painter was being “realistic” about: the fauvists sought to present not merely a realistic image of a given scene, but rather a realistic image of the painter’s emotional interaction with that scene. In other words, for Matisse, a work of art is an act of communication, at once expressing and evoking an emotional, thoughtful reaction.

“From the moment I held the box of colors in my hands, I knew this was my life. I threw myself into it like a beast that plunges towards the thing it loves.” + Henri Matisse

In Matthew’s story, Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness all come down to fear and trust, and the scriptures Jesus cites in response all point to the ancient Israelites trusting God in their wilderness wanderings. So, take an inventory: What fears have you in their grips today? What temptations, what distrust do they provoke? And how might living with bigger, bolder strokes and brighter colors help us learn to trust, take courage, and express our emotions?

Let’s take this openness to color and boldness into the week. This week’s color is bright green: the green of wilderness, of growth, of new leaves, of new life. Where are the greens in your life these days? Where do you find them most beautiful, most promising? Which greens (actual or figurative) do you hope will soon come into being? As you see and reflect, send photos or reflections to church office and we will share them in enews each week.

Close with a prayer. God of the wilderness, help us to learn and grow, always trusting in you for nourishment and care. Give us the bright boldness of ‘wild beasts,’ the courage to move in new directions, and the insight to attend to the emotional dimensions of life. Strengthen and open and humble our hearts. Amen.

Resource for this sermon

SALT Project – Henri Matisse and the Colors of Lent Devotional 2023

<https://www.saltproject.org/matisse-and-lent/matisse-devotional-for-lent>