

Mark 1:9-13

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Walking with Jesus 1: God's Love Is in the Air

Christians of course recognize Jesus as the Savior of the world, and to many, past and present, that is an absurd claim. In Jesus' own day, among Jesus' own people there was an expectation of a Savior coming who was more in the mold of King David, the Giant Slayer. The expectation was that this Savior, or Messiah, would reestablish the Davidic dynasty forever. John the Baptist preached that God was coming soon, and people were taking him seriously, going to him to be baptized and repent and turn their lives around, abandoning their sinful ways in anticipation of God's imminent return. How could this mild-mannered son-of-a-carpenter be the one who would save Israel, let alone the rest of the world?

Today we also have our notion of what a Savior-of-the-world might look like. Marvel and DC Comics depict such folks as having super-human powers, able to leap tall buildings at a single bound, more powerful than a locomotive. And even those that are not endowed with superhuman powers at least have high-tech gadgetry to overcome everything diabolical in this world. So how could anyone take this guy Jesus seriously? I'm reminded of Star Wars episode 5, the Empire Strikes Back, where Luke Skywalker lands on this very swampy planet looking for the great Jedi master Yoda, and soon upon landing he is harassed by this annoying little muppet only to discover that this is Yoda, the Jedi Master. BUT JESUS DOESN'T EVEN HAVE ANY FENCING OR MARTIAL ARTS SKILLS THAT WE KNOW ABOUT. Some folks may point out his ability to perform miracles, but all his miracles did not seem to change the world around him all that much. At the end of the day, when the dust settled, even after his resurrection, we still have a corrupt priesthood in Jerusalem, we still have an oppressive Roman regime asserting that might makes right, we still have the poor and the hungry and the downtrodden. By all objective measures, nothing has really changed since Jesus came and died and resurrected.

YET HERE WE ARE, WEEK AFTER WEEK, DAY AFTER DAY, DECLARING HIM SAVIOR AND LORD. This is the first Sunday in the season of Lent, a season when many of us spend fasting, abstaining, or spending more time praying or ministering, and my prayer is that you **would** observe Lent in a special way, and the result would be that you would know Jesus in a better way than you ever have before, so that, like Thomas the doubter, you can declare Jesus as your Lord and your God with an exclamation point afterwards.

We begin the walk not with Jesus trekking into the wilderness, but with his baptism. A whole lot of people were coming to John the Baptist to get baptized. There was tension in the air, the feeling that something was going to change very soon. I already mentioned the Jewish expectation of a messiah and with his coming would be a new ruler not only in Jerusalem but to the ends of the earth he would rule. And so I imagine that the folks lining up to be baptized by John were a rather solemn bunch of guys, folks who wanted to be on the right team when God's anointed came back to take control of things. From now on they would go to church every Sunday, they would fast and pray, wear sackcloth and ashes as they waited for this new King David to overthrow the sinful, corrupt, idolatrous folks who held the power in the world. I think that today there are still plenty of good Christians who come to the faith for the same reason so many good Jews were coming to John to be baptized.

They see how corrupt the world is, and they believe that God is ready to take some drastic measures to fix it, and they want to be on God's good side when that happens. That's a good reason to come to the Christian faith, but don't be surprised if God comes in a way that you hadn't expected: Don't be surprised if he comes to you in a far gentler manner than you had thought. Don't be surprised if God comes to you the same way he came to Jesus at his baptism.

Jesus' baptism is something unique in scripture; nowhere else in the Bible does God speak in such a personal and loving way to an individual than he does to Jesus. The Old Testament talks about God's love for Israel, for strangers, for a few individuals, but only with Jesus does God speak in such loving terms to an individual: "You are my beloved. I am so pleased with you." Most of us don't remember our baptisms, but if we did, I hope that we might have heard something like this from all those who surrounded us on that special day. I hope that we would have interpreted all those smiling faces surrounding us as saying, in so many words, "I love you, and I am so pleased with you." Because there is no better way to begin our lives as Christians than feeling the love and warmth of God and the people surrounding us. And feeling that intense love of God is how Jesus begins his ministry. And it may be precisely BECAUSE he experiences God's love in such a profound way that he is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness for forty days.

Sometime in your career as a pastor you are asked how you heard your calling into the ministry. And a common feature that I find among those who have heard such calling is a wilderness experience. IT'S NOT A TIME WHEN WE FEEL WE ARE IN A DESERT, ALONE AND AWAY FROM GOD; RATHER WE ARE ALONE WITH GOD AND APART FROM OTHER PEOPLE. A friend of mine got clarity of his calling while he was at work one day, and ended up locking himself into a storage closet, sitting on the floor, crying. WHY? When you finally hear God you want to filter out everything else. Jesus goes into the wilderness not to get away from God but to be alone with God. The God who he has heard with his own ears say, "I love you, and I'm pleased with you. And this is what I pray that you would do above all else this Lent; I pray that you would make time to be alone with God. I swear to you that you will hear him tell you that he loves you and that he is well-pleased with you.

You might say, "You don't know me, Pastor. God is not well-pleased with me." But I tell you that the moment you make the effort to come into God's presence, at that moment, God is well-pleased with you, And at that moment you will realize that, to God, the past does not matter to him. As one of my pastor friends said, "God cares about where you're going, not where you been." And at that moment you will realize that God has loved you all along, even when you were messing up big time.

Our wilderness experience is not a time to impress God by fasting or avoiding some food or drink. It's a time to bask in the warmth of God's presence, in the knowledge of his love, in the knowledge that you please him. And during that time you come to realize that nothing matters more than God. When you fast, fast with a heart of love that says, "God, food means nothing to me when compared to the joy of your friendship." It was the joy of the knowledge of God's love and God's approval that enabled Jesus to not only endure hardship and suffering in the wilderness, but endure the hardship and suffering of the cross.

We can't always choose when to eat and when not to. Sometimes we find ourselves in situations where we have nothing to eat. Hardships and suffering are as certain anything in this life, But the one certainty that can carry us through any storm or any drought is the knowledge of the love of God.