

Into the Wilderness

In this Season of Lent, each week I will be exploring in these mediations the readings for the Sunday we are celebrating. I will do that through Easter Sunday. Today, we will look at the temptation of Jesus as Saint Mark tells it.

Mark's short passage of the temptation immediately follows the Baptism of Jesus by John. By being baptized, "Jesus allows himself to be numbered among sinners." Let me repeat that, "Jesus allows himself to be numbered among sinners." Those are not my words but the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

After Jesus' baptism he must do battle as we all must. He must battle the insecurities and temptations that all of us must deal with because of original sin. This is so beautifully expressed by Mark. He says, "The Spirit drives him into the desert. He was among the wild beasts. The angels ministered to him."

Let us look at each of these through the lens of our own human condition.

"The Spirit drove him into the desert."

Many years ago, I was called to the hospital to anoint a man who was suddenly dying. The next day I visited his wife who was appropriately struggling in her grief. She had just lost her husband of 38 years. As I sat in her kitchen she kept asking how God could do this to her and her family. She went to church every week and prayed every day. They were kind and compassionate people. Because of this, she kept asking why God would allow her to suffer. At the human level, of course, it made perfect sense and I simply let her talk. But at a religious level I could not help noting that there was a fallacy in her thinking. It is a fallacy common to many – If I am a good person – if I am faithful in my faith – then I should not suffer.

There is no correlation. The Holy Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, a place of struggle. To be baptized does not eliminate the human condition. Indeed, the desert experience might even be more pronounced.

A few years ago, Saint Mother Teresa's spiritual director published her journals, and many were surprised that she often found herself in a spiritual desert. Those who do not understand spirituality were very skeptical, but the truth is that even the saints experienced what John of the Cross calls "the dark night." Jesus was not spared and neither are we.

This past year many good people have suffered greatly because of illness, isolation, and lack of social contact. Families have wrestled with new challenges in educating their children and keeping them active. Many wonderful events and sporting activities that form our young people have been suspended. I have had many people ask me where God is in this mess. Rest assured, He is present. The cross is as much a sign of God's presence as the empty tomb.

“He was among the wild beasts.”

The image of beasts is meant to convey struggle. The wild beasts are dangerous, and Jesus would need to be on his guard.

I would suggest that in our own lives we also must live in a world of struggle. Each of us struggles with his or her personal demons. Some of these we recognize and some are cunning indeed. Some of these are not sinful yet they can damage our enthusiasm and our joy. These can be struggles with money, physical or mental health, or worries about a loved one. They can be the messages of bullying that can rob a young person of his or her dignity. The beasts we face can be found in cultural messages that trivialize intimacy or put a premium on the acquisition of things.

One of the privileges of being in ministry is meeting people who bravely wrestle with the beasts they encounter. They are found in those who work for peace and justice. They are found in those who struggle bravely with challenging family situations, serious illness, or even addictive behaviors. They are leaders in church and society who stand with integrity for what they believe.

It seems to me the reading asks us to reflect on our personal and communal struggles. What are our personal demons? What dangers to our relationship with Christ do we face?

Finally, Mark tells us, “The angels ministered to him.”

Jesus was not alone, and neither are we!

One of the greatest gifts in the last few years has been the growth of support groups. People who struggle with all sorts of issues from drug or alcohol addiction, bereavement, loss of employment, or divorce, sexual struggles and so much more, often find support in others who share the struggle. They find they are not alone.

As Christians we are not alone. We belong to a family of Christians nearly two billion strong. We have the saints who pray for us and with us. We have the grace of Christ in every sacrament we celebrate.

However, we may still feel alone. The scriptures speak of the pain of Jesus in the Garden. He certainly felt alone as his disciples slept. It was his cross to bear and his alone. Yet even there his Father was with him.

We must at times live in the desert. We must as human beings struggle with sin and temptation. Yet we are not alone. We have many who carry us. We have the saints who love us. Most importantly, we have the love of God, with arms extended on a cross, barring the way to hell.