

Fr. Jim Willig Gospel Study - *Lent, A Time for the Desert*

Gospel - Mark 1:12-15

The Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert,
and he remained in the desert for forty days,
tempted by Satan.

He was among wild beasts,
and the angels ministered to him.

After John had been arrested,
Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God:
"This is the time of fulfillment.
The kingdom of God is at hand.
Repent, and believe in the gospel."

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As we begin this season of Lent, I suspect we all have the question, "Now what can I do? What can I do this season that will really be good for me; good for some kind of spiritual renewal?"

In my family growing up, we customarily gave up desserts—and that's a good thing—but what I suggest, in our study of today's Gospel, is that we do more than just give up desserts; instead we go into the desert. The desert—as we see Jesus now being led into the desert where he is tempted by Satan—is the place of conversion. It's interesting to compare Mark's account of this temptation scene with the other Synoptic Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Mark, as you might now suspect, is the earliest of the Gospels to be written. Scholars suggest it was written around the year 70 AD. For that reason, it's probably the simplest and the briefest of the Gospels—for that reason it may be your favorite, I don't know...

We have in Mark's Gospel, more or less, the bare bones of what happens in Jesus's life. We see that same simple record in this temptation scene. This is different from the other Synoptic Gospels. Mark has no detail about the nature of the temptation. Remember, in the other Gospels, Satan tempts Jesus to turn the stone into bread. We don't hear that in Mark. There also is no mention that Jesus was victorious over Satan, that he overcame the temptation. We'll get into this later, but it's part of Mark's theology that Jesus' entire ministry was a continual battle against Satan. This is just the beginning and the preview of coming attractions.

We do see that Mark's temptation scene is deliberately and intimately connected to the baptismal scene of Jesus. We need to see that as soon as the Spirit came upon Jesus in the water, the same Spirit then immediately moved Jesus out into the dry desert. The Spirit also moves this way in our life; the ebb and flow. As soon as the Spirit comes into us, the Spirit will also challenge us and move us out of ourselves, where it will ultimately be a test; a test of the Holy Spirit against the evil spirit.

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This is what we see as Jesus is escorted by the Holy Spirit, but tested by the spirit of Satan. He is led into the desert. The desert is a place of testing in the Bible. In the desert one is vulnerable to hunger and thirst; where water and food is scarce. The desert is a place where you are vulnerable to the elements of the weather; vulnerable to the hot heat of the scorching sun and the bitter cold and wind of the night. In the desert you are vulnerable to the wild animals and the wild criminals who often pillaged people during the night. In the desert one is vulnerable to being lost since there are no signs and the land itself is almost trackless. Not to mention, in the desert you are vulnerable to mirages or illusions and everything seems the same. It's easy to get lost in the desert as did Israel who wandered around for 40 some years. In the desert one is vulnerable to a loneliness and total silence. There is an extreme isolation in the desert. There are no comforts and no conveniences. Life is difficult.

Paradoxically, it's also in the desert that there is a sacred space. In that silence, one can begin to hear the voice of the Spirit speak. One can begin to discern the evil force at work, as well as the Holy Spirit moving us and directing us. It was in the desert that God called Israel to become His chosen people. It was in the desert that He formed them and taught them. It was in the desert that He made a covenant with them. It was in the desert that God exposed their sins and their idols and turned them away back to Himself. So it is in the desert that Jesus, like Israel of old, faces the test of Satan.

We're told that he stayed in the wasteland for 40 days. The desert seems like a wasteland where you're not getting anywhere. It seems like a waste of time; put there to the test by Satan. These 40 days is a biblical phrase—a Hebrew expression—and is not to be taken literally but intended to mean a considerable amount of time. As I alluded to earlier, Israel spent 40 years in the desert, Moses spent 40 days and 40 nights on Mount Sinai, Elijah climbed Mount Horeb (as it's called, synonymous to Sinai) for 40 days and 40 nights. Now we see Jesus spending 40 days and 40 nights—a length of critical time—where he faced his demons that tried to lure him.

During this entire period, Mark implies that Jesus is tempted. This is unlike the other Synoptics where Jesus fasts and prays for 40 days and was then tempted. Mark indicates to us that the desert teaches Jesus about the struggle against evil that he will face all throughout his life. One more interesting point that's distinct in Mark from the other Gospels is the fact that Mark alone mentions that Jesus is with the wild beasts. Of course there are these wild beasts, untamed in the desert, that represent or symbolize the evil enemy in our life. We're also told too that angels waited on him; that there is the presence of the Holy.

I'd like to just briefly share an experience that I had in the desert. Previous to my Israel experience, where we were able to spend four days and four nights in the Sinai desert and the Negev desert (near the Judean desert where Jesus would have retreated for these 40 days—what we now know as Lent), my only encounter with the desert was in Palm Springs, California and Scottsdale, Arizona. Naturally, I loved the desert! But obviously, this resort desert is a whole lot different than the wilderness and wasteland desert that's described in the Scriptures. The desert I immediately saw is so symbolic of those faces and places in our lives that are most difficult.

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As our class went off to spend these four nights and four days in the desert, I was immediately struck by why this is a natural setting for what we come to know as a place of hardship—that place where we are naturally tested and tempted. We can, perhaps, identify that desert quickly in our life. We can get out of the desert but the desert never leaves us. There is inherent in our life ever present desert time and we are emotionally hungry for love and thirsting for an inner peace. How many of us in our marriages can identify those times when it is so difficult and it feels like nothing's working and you feel the scorching heat of the burden that's on you or the cold shoulder of the night? One of the things I experienced in the desert is how cold it gets. It's like the extreme. How do we experience that in our own relationships—the extremes? It's almost like we're on a roller coaster ride with the ups and the downs; the ins and outs. How difficult those times are that leave us feeling emotionally lonely or distressed or discouraged or even despairing?

These are desert times and we don't have to go out in search of that desert. It will find us. We experience the desert relationally when we feel that we are coming in touch with the wild beasts who criticize us or condemn us and give us such a hard time. They attack us and are unfair to us. We experience that beast within ourselves; that part of us that's so hard to deal with. We cannot escape that beast within us. There is, as the story goes, the beauty in us too, but it doesn't want to have anything to do with that other side or part of us. Those two parts are forced to relate as we try to integrate the two "shadow selves," as Karl Jung would say. Spiritually, I'm sure, we have been in that time of Lent where God is silent and distant; where our prayer, no matter how sincere, is so dry, so desolate. It appears as though our spiritual life is a complete wasteland. Nothing's happening and we're certainly not growing. That's the terrain of the desert.

It seems like we're not getting anywhere. In the desert we feel lost and confused in life. These are the desert times. They're awful. And one of the experiences I felt of being in the desert is that, "How am I going to survive?" How are you going to survive and just get through these desert times? You see, as I begin to explain what the desert represents, you can begin to see that Lent isn't so much a time to give up dessert, it's a time to get into the desert. We don't have to go out in search of any sacrifice, it will find us. We don't have to go making any cross for ourselves. The cross will be laid upon us; be sure of it. We don't have to go thinking and fabricating any kind of sacrifice; it will find us. All we need to do, is to accept it and deal with it and believe that in this difficult time of the desert, it will be, as it was for Israel, and as it was for Jesus, a time of tremendous growth; even though we can't see it or feel it. We just have to trust in the desert that the desert is there to form us, to teach us, to convert us.

The desert, paradoxically, is time of great growth as we face these tests, as any teacher will tell you, that's why a teacher gives tests so you can learn and grow. That is why God allows these tests to happen. In the desert we learn our weakness and our total reliance on God. True? When you really face your problems, when you're down and out, the only way out is to look up for the helping hand of God.

The desert reminds us too of our dependence on one another. We can't do it alone. No one goes out to the desert alone. No one should go out alone without the help of God and the help of

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others. The desert forces us back to the basics. When we're caught in a trap of troubles, it forces us to ask the question, "Now wait a minute, what really matters here? What is my purpose in life?" These are the ultimate spiritual, existential questions. The desert forces us, in a time of aloneness, to be silent, to listen for the Lord. What I'm suggesting is the desert is *holy* ground. It's a place we naturally try to avoid—if we can ever help it—but it's inevitable and totally unavoidable. Lent allows the Spirit to lead you into those difficult trials and troubles, and to allow yourself to take the test.

I'm often reminded of Scott Peck, who many of you know, is a psychiatrist. After years of psychotherapy with his patient's wrote this wonderful book called *The Road Less Traveled*. I recently read it has sold 5 million copies and was translated into 20 languages and has made publishing history by being 10 years on the New York Times' bestseller list. In that book, he begins by saying, "Life is difficult." He then goes on to say, "It takes us a long while to learn that life is a series of problems. We keep saying to ourselves, 'Oh thank God if I could just get over this, then I'll be happy.'" But then, sure enough, another problem arises, have you noticed? And then, we come to realize, life is a series of problems. Scott Peck's observation, as a therapist, is that most of us, however, are not so wise to realize that it's only because of our problems that we ever really spiritually grow. Most of us try to avoid them; skirt them, deny them, get around them; few of us learn to deal with them and learn from them and grow from them. He said this is not only the way to psychological well-being, but to spiritual wholeness too.

Scott Peck has written a sequel to *The Road Less Traveled* entitled, *Further Along The Road Less Traveled: The Unending Journey Towards Spiritual Growth*. I'd like to just read an excerpt of this book, it's a fascinating continuation where he himself speaks of the desert. He says, "To proceed very far through the desert, you must be willing to meet suffering and to work through it. In order to do that, you need to change your attitude toward pain. And the quickest way to change your attitude toward pain is to accept the fact that everything that happens to us in life has been for our spiritual growth."

"Everything that happens to us in life has been for our spiritual growth." I suggest that is the attitude we need to assume to lead us into Lent. Lent is that place in which we face our difficulties in life; that place in which we proceed to deal with our pain and our problems and that we ask the question, "What is there for me to learn?" How is it I'm being challenged to grow and where is the real temptation for me?

I'd like to just tell a story I read and heard about someone who exemplifies this movement through Lent and through Easter into new life. It's reported by a physician who had a young man as his patient. He was 24 years old and had bone cancer that required that his entire leg, up to his hip, be amputated to save his life. 24 years old and left without a leg to stand on. He became a very angry man and this particular physician and psychologist helped him to work through his terrible hatred toward all his peers who seemed to be so healthy and happy. He encouraged him to work through that pain by having him write and draw. Over the year or two that followed, he saw the young man make tremendous growth. In a certain time, the young man came to see that maybe he could help other people through their pain and problems.

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At one time he decided to work with other patients in the hospital. One day he happened to be in his shorts where his artificial leg was completely exposed. He came into the room of a woman about his same young age (in her young 20s), who had just suffered from a double, radical mastectomy. With both her breasts removed, and feeling her womanhood torn from her, she was into the depths of depression. The nurses didn't know how to care for and help her. They evidently had left the radio on, hoping to cheer her up when this young man, hobbling along, came into her room. The woman didn't even take notice of him and in an extreme effort to reach out to her, he decided to dismantle/disconnect his artificial leg and then stood up and jumped around on one leg and started dancing and snapping his finger to the music. The woman was so startled by this crazy man hobbling and dancing on one foot to the wild rock 'n roll, that she began to laugh out loud and said to herself, "Man, if you can dance, then I can sing." It tremendously helped her in her own recovery.

Later this man came back to the physician and reported on this event. The physician took out an old file of some of the paintings that he had drawn when he was working through his psychotherapy and showed him this one picture. The man had drawn this vase to try to illustrate the particular pain he felt of his amputation. He drew a very dark, black crack through the vase and with several painful efforts, with anguish and grinding his teeth he recalls, he went over and over and over that crack until it was obvious, the crack became more prominent than the vase itself. The vase could now, as he said, not hold water for anyone. It represented his life that he now felt was so useless.

The man looked at that and said, "That picture is not yet done." He took the drawing, took out his yellow magic marker and highlighted the crack so it completely filled the vase and handed it back to the doctor and said, "That crack has become where the light of the Lord now shines through my life." That man understands the meaning of Lent, which is a journey of carrying our cross and ultimately discovering what Jesus ultimately discovered in his resurrection, that our cross leads to the crown. This penance and the problems and pain that we deal with, can lead us ultimately—if we are faithful to dealing with it and carrying it and learning from it and growing through it—to a whole new life that can give life to others.

What do I suggest? I suggest that you don't be too quick to pick up any cross or make a cross other than to deal with what's right immediately before you. On this Ash Wednesday, we're marked with the Sign of the Cross on our forehead to say we're all blessed with the shadow of the cross casting its shadow on ourselves. In some way, all we have to do is deal with that difficulty in our family; accept that problem in pain or suffering and enduring in our body; in our relationships; in our work. And that we ask our selves, "What is it the Lord is trying to teach us? How is it that Satan is trying to tempt us? Where is it that I can find relief? What is it I need to do to bring me new life?"

Those are the questions. That's the challenge. Remember when Jesus finished this desert time, he went into his ministry with tremendous power, discovering how to overcome Satan by calling on the higher power of His Father. That's what we need to do, have our sight on Easter; otherwise Lent is a disaster. With eyes on Easter, with hope of new life, we want to plunge into the season,

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and so I would encourage us to take a moment now. Where is our cross that we need to pick up; where's the challenge we need to face; where's the difficulty that we need to learn from and allow it to, as Scott Peck said, "teach us and help us really grow?"

Let us end with a prayer: Lord Jesus, may your Spirit lead us into this season to show us and teach us what we need to learn; how we need to grow, and how we might help one another with their cross. We make this our prayer this day and through this season of Lent. We pray, through Christ our Lord. Amen.