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The Drive into the Wilderness

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ABSTRACT

This study offers an example of ‘standing theology’, as distinguished from sitting theology and kneeling theology. It was prepared as an online sermon during the Covid 19 ‘lockdown’ for the congregation of St Margaret of Antioch, Durham, for Lent 1, 2021. The Gospel reading was Mark 1: 9–15.

KEYWORDS



Standing theology; preaching; rural; wilderness; temptations; Lent

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. (Mark 1: 12)

In Saint Mark’s Gospel, everything seems to happen in a hurry. He uses the Greek adverb, *euthus*, over forty times, including twice in today’s short reading. It means ‘at once’, ‘directly’, or ‘immediately’; in the Authorised Version it was often translated ‘straightway’. This verbal tic certainly drives the story along, giving it real urgency. But the reference to forty days is likely to slow us down a bit. ‘Forty’ is a favourite round number in Scripture; Moses, for example, stayed forty days on Mount Sinai. Although the Church has computed Lent, its season of penitence, simplicity, and learning, on the basis of this number, we shouldn’t get too fussed about counting the days. Not least because some commentators have argued that, for Mark, Jesus’ wilderness period is not exhausted or ended after forty days (and forty *nights*, as the hymn is so keen to remind us). In fact, according to William Lane, for Jesus these forty days ‘sound the dominant note of his entire ministry’.

It is going to be a confrontation, indeed a battle. A battle against the forces of evil. In this time of testing, temptation, and trial, ‘Jesus confronts the horror, the loneliness and the danger with which the wilderness is fraught’, while being sustained and nourished and *strengthened* by the ministers of God. This is the period that forges his character, his spirit, in the furnace of the red-hot desert.

If we are to permit ourselves to sit light to the Lenten arithmetic, we might also want to see beyond the mythological language in this text about Satan and God’s angels. I call these references ‘mythological’, not in the sense that what they refer to is not real or true, but rather because the supernatural characters of this drama are symbolic of greater, deeper truths, beyond-the-everyday truths. Satan is, after all, the personification of evil, and evil is certainly real; and while angels are just messengers, they are messengers that create a link across the deep gulf that lies between God and ourselves – and therefore

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symbolise the word and the touch that we hope may come from contact with the divine. Like the dove and voice at Jesus' baptism, and his vision of the heavens 'torn apart', this is picture-language: something to draw in Sunday School jotters or paint on canvases and the walls of churches; imagery that stands for and points to truths and powers that are beyond pictures, beyond words even, and beyond our everyday experiences.

Unlike them, however, the *wilderness* is physically, mundanely, *literally real*. We can feel it and touch it; and if we are not careful, we may die in it. In Mark's galloping Gospel, in which Jesus' temptations come hard on the heels of his baptism, Jesus receives God's breath, God's Spirit, and it 'immediately' blows him away: drives him out, forces him into the hot, bare, lifeless, stony wasteland of the desert.

I visited the Judean desert once, in the back of an elderly Bethlehem taxi whose passenger doors, I noted with some anxiety, could only be opened from the outside. The place was certainly hot and dry and dead. Apart from us, it was, naturally, deserted; for that is what a 'desert' is – a 'deserted place'. Even in the company of others, it was easy to feel the aloneness of the place. Decanting from our decrepit transport, we stared around us in silence.

Holier and braver people than I had deliberately chosen such locations, moving freely into the desert to deal with their own demons, and to be tempered and honed so as to become spiritually tougher and sharper, and to draw closer to God. But even Jesus had to be *driven* into such a place. For he knew better than anyone, and would come to know even more clearly as his ministry progressed, how dangerous these deserts are. These places where the wild beasts have at last to be confronted, and tamed.

And where, in human terms anyway, we have to face them *alone*. As the late, great Harry Williams once put it in *The True Wilderness*, 'the wilderness belongs to us'; but for most people it is 'inside them, not outside', 'an absence of contact ... a sense of being alone'.

Now, human beings are social animals, although some are much more sociable than others. We were created and evolved to belong together. 'It is not good that the man should be alone', the scripture insists, early on (Genesis 2: 18a). Alone we can be helpless, and are often hopeless. But sometimes being alone is inevitable. There are some events in life which we can only engage in on our own, for ourselves – by which I really mean that only *we* can do them and, mostly, no one can do them for us. They are moments when we are truly alone, even though we may be surrounded by others, hopefully, by those who love and want us. But even they cannot take over these tasks.

There is one example of this that hardly anyone can remember. We are born alone. Even if there was a twin to compete with, we came into this world on our own. And no one will be able to do our dying for us, either. They may very much wish that they could, but they can't. At our end, as at our beginning, we shall be, once more, *on our own*.

And in between these two great, solitary life-events, there are likely to be many times, many other occasions and, indeed, seasons, when we shall find ourselves alone, once again. Alone with a key decision or an action. A commitment or a confrontation. Even a battle, perhaps. It is at such times that we may feel so very alone.

But what Jesus is and does, he is and does *for us*. Including this. When Jesus began to teach and heal other people, he did it for their sakes. And when he came, eventually, in his life of self-giving, to suffer and to die, he did that for others also: for all our sakes. And so, too, now, Jesus goes into the desert, this harsher and more physical symbol of our own lonesomeness, in order to face – to meet and oppose – evil, humankind's greatest adversary and wildest of beasts. And to do it for *us*.

During Lent, we are asked to follow Jesus into the wilderness, in order to learn from him. To learn what he learned there. And what he learned above all, I believe, was *strength*, including the strength of *faith*. On his own, in a barren landscape, without the comforts of shelter, friends, family, or even food, and beset with the temptation to seek an easier life and a less rocky way, he learned to rely on God. He had to learn to look beyond all the props and supports of this passing world, and to sense what lies beyond it, sustaining it all, in love. To see below and beneath his solitary suffering, and this lonely, empty, and hostile world, the everlasting arms of God. And to trust in their strength and their constancy. To trust that when all else fails and all other comforts flee, we shall still be securely held.

The strength that Jesus learned in the desert was not learned as a piece of theology, a 'learning about' God. It was a learning-by-experience: a form of perception, a learning by seeing and feeling, by embracing and becoming. In this way, Jesus learned to take on something of the strength of God's character: God's steadfastness, resilience, and reliability. And the strength of God's unceasing love, which exceeds all other loving. Here, Jesus learned the strength that he needed for his life and ministry from the strong God who undergirds all life, who holds it in being and who never lets go.

This learning was to continue. It had to, for Jesus, as it must do for us. And if Jesus' life offers any clue to when and where this further learning will come, I think it is that it will be in those wilderness experiences when we feel most alone, most *desert-ed*. For this sort of learning can only happen in the dry days of doubt and on the rough terrain of our uphill paths. Because there are some kinds of strength that can only be given to us when we really need them, and there are some visions that we can only see clearly when our world is at its darkest. When we are utterly alone, then, and weak and powerless, and wholly surrounded by the wild beasts.

It is in just such Lenten days that – stripped naked of all pretence and all protection – we must kneel before God, on our own. And there, at last, we may trust, receive God's grace.

And then? Then, maybe, in Harry Williams's arresting words, 'Lent, we discover, is Easter in disguise'. And then, too, in St Mark's more vivid imagery, perhaps *we* shall also find ourselves waited on, by the angels of the Most High God.

May it be so. Amen.

Disclosure statement

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