

## Being Prepared

Mark 1:9-15

A pastor colleague – and for simplicity sake I’ll just call her Ann – Ann once asked an interesting question: How much luggage do you need for an overnight trip? She went on to answer her own question, as she related an interesting adventure.

Not much, she said she thought, as she put a few essentials into a 20-inch suitcase. Ann and a friend of hers had heard about a new resort hotel modeled after a Bavarian castle, and decided to splurge by driving three hours to check it out.

A dress to wear to the hotel restaurant, some nightclothes and the essential toiletries, and her packing was finished. So Ann said she was stunned when they reached their destination, and her friend began emptying the trunk of her car. She had two full-size suitcases and several carry-on bags, plus a large picnic basket in the back seat.

Ann said, “Good grief! I didn’t pack that much for a year overseas!” Undaunted, her friend replied, “Hey, I just want to be ready for anything.” Her “anything” seemed to include famine, prohibition, power outage, a strike by the garment-makers union, and the cessation of all magazine publishing.

Ann shook her head at her friend’s determination to be prepared for anything and everything they might encounter on the road or at the hotel itself. Her friend had taken to heart popular culture’s warning about what can happen to those who do not anticipate every eventuality.

You know, economic pundits berate Americans for not saving enough money. Investment brokers warn us against relying on Social Security alone to provide sufficient income for retirement. Several times a month I receive junk mail from companies wanting to sell me term and whole life insurance. And I’m sure all of you receive stuff in the mail as well.

Playing on our fears and our desire for security, we are promised, “You’re in good hands with Allstate,” “Nationwide is on your side,” a little green gecko touts the benefits of insuring with Geico, and you know all the other slogans we are bombarded with.

The smart thing is to protect yourself against hardship and calamity and to invest wisely. People who do that are admired in uncertain times, even when they are not emulated.

But popular culture would not know what to say about today’s reading from Mark’s Gospel. It utterly contradicts actuarial tables and the recommendations of financial planners.

The Gospel does talk about preparation. It hints at what was packed and what was left behind. It suggests what is promised to those who are prepared. But it bears little resemblance to the way most of our world functions.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. Jesus is almost ready to begin his public ministry, but first He must go through some things as final preparation. He had to identify himself with sinful humanity at the outset of His ministry, and He did this by submitting to baptism. Then He had to face temptation.

This is a preparation story: Jesus getting ready for public ministry. There are elements of preparation throughout this first section of Mark. To get the full picture, we need to look back at some verses we considered a few weeks ago, beginning with the quotation in Mark 1:3: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

You will recall that we talked about John the Baptist attempting to get people ready for the promised kingdom by preaching a baptism of repentance. He advised people of what was to come: "I have baptized you with water; but he [the Messiah] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mk 1:8).

John exhorted his listeners to get ready for the promised one by turning away from their sins, being baptized into new life by him, and by waiting for the messianic kingdom to come.

Now, if this sort of preparation is difficult for us to comprehend, let's consider another aspect of getting ready in the story. After Jesus himself was baptized and a voice from heaven said, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased," he went away from his home.

He journeyed not to a resort hotel, but to a wilderness. Rather than a car full of food, clothing, and entertainment, the gospels indicate that Jesus had nothing but the clothes on his back. There were no golden arches in the desert.

Matthew and Luke give a few more details than does Mark about this wilderness experience. Mark's gospel doesn't list any specific temptations such as you will find in the gospel of Matthew or Luke. Maybe that's because each of us faces slightly different temptations.

But Matthew and Luke record that Jesus fasted 40 days and 40 nights, and afterward he was hungry. We might conclude that Jesus was ready for nothing except a good meal, bath, and bed, but his preparation was of a different sort.

He was tempted by Satan, tormented by hunger, alone except for wild beasts. And yet this was preparation. Our Lord was given a preview of the many struggles that would challenge him during his ministry. Jesus' purpose and allegiance were tested.

The angels who ministered to him came on the scene after his trials. Their presence further confirmed his unique identity and destiny in history.

The time in the wilderness may be likened not to a vacation but to boot camp, which I know some of you can identify with. But this was a boot camp equipping God's servant for the ultimate battle against sin and death.

Just as in the story of Noah we find obedience and faithfulness tested in building the ark, so also Jesus' fidelity to his messianic purpose was tried and strengthened by the wilderness before his public ministry began.

So, bringing it home, what can we learn from the wilderness? What does the experience of Jesus have to teach us.

Mark does not describe how Jesus felt about all this, but Jesus was going from a very positive experience to an undesirable wilderness.

A wilderness is any place we don't want to be. This wilderness was a place where He found himself alone. His friends were not there. He had no support team to encourage him. Maybe He felt the aloneness intensely--maybe He wandered around for awhile thinking, "What do I do next? Where do I go? How do I handle this?"

Mark is the only writer who says He was alone except for the wild animals. As He was in this environment, He was surrounded by danger. We can easily understand that a person out there alone at night could have been torn apart by the wild animals.

There are many thoughts we can apply to our own lives from this experience of Jesus. We also have wilderness experiences where we feel alone, feel we are wandering around without knowing what to do or where to turn.

We are surrounded by many dangers and temptations that are every bit as threatening to us, or more so, than the wild animals that Jesus faced. Scripture even uses that analogy. I Peter 5:8 says that "your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour"

Now, we may not believe in a creature with horns and a tail and a pitchfork running around, but I think we can all identify with that force that seems to always want to pull us in the wrong direction.

The devil wanted to tempt Jesus there in His wilderness in order to destroy his work and cancel His mission on earth. Satan did not want Jesus to accomplish the mission he set out to do. He wanted to sidetrack him and he had a perfect opportunity to do so when he was alone in the wilderness.

Satan, the force of evil, especially wants to sidetrack all of us from accomplishing our calling for God. He can sidetrack us very subtly and easily. We live in a world of many dangers--danger not only of crime and violence and physical dangers to us but even more so the subtle attacks on our faith.

Many people are succumbing to these dangers--first of all by being led away from their spiritual roots, away, from the teachings of the scriptures and by a greater tolerance for things that clearly do not conform to the teachings of Christ.

We begin to compromise--the wild beasts of indifference and apathy toward spiritual things devour us. People more and more will say, "I believe in God and I am a Christian but I really don't spend much time studying the Word." Yeah, I go to church services, but I really don't take time for many of the spiritual growth opportunities there.

This is a trick of the devil because church is the place where we are to be built up and nourished in our faith, not just socialize.

Many Christians like to sing the hymn, "Amazing Grace." How closely do we pay attention to all of the stanzas of that hymn. I'm thinking of the one that begins, "Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come."

Jesus needed to go through a different kind of wilderness experience in order to identify with us today. Although the things he experienced were different from what we face in our 21st century technological age--there was the same pull of temptation for him to go ahead and give in to sin. Jesus needed to experience the invitation to sin because scripture tells us that He was "in all points tempted like as we are."

A man got tired of people telling him "Have a good day! He didn't think it was sincere but just a routine saying. So he began answering, "No thank you. I've got other plans for today."

Jesus had the invitation to sin. He said, "No thank you. I've got other plans."

Jesus was alone in the wilderness--he had no support group, and no one to give him advice. When things began to hit him adversely, he could have wondered, "Has God abandoned me? Is God not pleased with me? Does God not love me any more?" These are things Satan uses on us to make us doubt and feel discouraged.

Bill Jones' wife told her husband one day, "You never tell me that you love me. Why don't you? Why are you not like other men to let me KNOW that you love me?"

He said, "Martha, I told you once that I loved you when we got married. If it ever changes I will tell you."

When God spoke at Jesus' baptism, Jesus had to rely on that Word, "You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." He was not hearing repeated confirmations of His Father's love and concern while out there in the wilderness. God had spoken and He had to believe that Word. In the wilderness there was not the constant reassurance of God's love.

We, too, need to believe God's Word to us because sometimes there are periods of SILENCE when we don't feel God's presence and we don't hear His Voice reassuring us of his love and concern. We need to HOLD FAST to His promises and scriptures and not allow Satan to tempt us into believing that God has abandoned us or that He does not love us.

We need to know what is in Scripture so that it is second nature to us and there when we need it. When God gives you a promise at least once, hang on to that promise. You don't need to be reassured all of the time. Psalm 119:89 says, "your word, O Lord is eternal; it stands firm in heaven."

We face situations in our everyday life all the time of one sort or another. We are not the strong person we think we are. The wild animals of temptation sometimes devour us. But they didn't devour Jesus. Why?

He could have given in. He had choices to make just like we do. He had constant conflicts throughout his future ministry, not just during the wilderness experience. We do too. Don't be surprised when things hit you hard at times. Don't be surprised when your faith seems to be almost devoured. How do we tame the wild beasts that try to devour us in our daily life at work, at home, or any place else that we go?

That's really what the preparation of Lent is all about. When Pastor Ann and her friend went on their overnight trip, the friend's "ready for anything" precautions shielded them from various adversities that could have befallen them – but didn't.

But obedience and commitment to God's purpose clearly do not guarantee protection from trouble. And in Lent, when Christians are tempted to play "Let's Make a Deal" with their Lord, as though a bit of self-discipline buys them divine approval and blessing, we would do well to remember what getting "ready for anything" really means.

Getting ready means repenting: being sorry for our sin, turning away from it, and with God's help, amending our way. This is difficult for people in our day, when dogmatic relativism proclaims that nothing is absolutely wrong except absolutes.

So often we come before God like recalcitrant children, protesting that "she hit me first!" as though that cancels our own culpability. Repentance involves a letting go of ego-serving excuses, or protesting that we're only human, or that "the devil made me do it."

For us, receiving Christ is committing ourselves and our love to him: acknowledging him as king of heaven and promised Messiah. The one with whom the Father "was well pleased" becomes our joy as well. His presence is our chief desire. Through the waters of baptism, we become heirs to the kingdom inaugurated by Christ.

And getting ready means relying on Jesus alone to lead us through the wilderness. Physical hunger was part of human experience during those 40 days; it was not a trial sent by Satan. Our circumstances – grief, loneliness, uncertainty, persecution – may be the wasteland through which we walk.

We can rely on the Lord who promised he will never fail nor forsake us. Even temptation can serve to drive us closer to Christ, if we turn to him for the power to resist. Scripture reminds us that “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor 10:13).

Repenting, receiving, relying – this is how we’re to respond to Jesus’ inaugural address. “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.” As we journey through Lent to the cross, let us give thanks that the way of salvation is prepared for us, through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and let us prepare ourselves truly to receive the promise.