

Mark 1:9-15
First Sunday in Lent, 2015
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I was a hospital chaplain for about a year. After a month or so, I learned to expect the hard questions that patients and their families had about God and God's role in their suffering: "Why did God let my daughter die?" "How can God just do nothing while my cancer just gets worse?" "I every day pray for God to take her Parkinson's away, so why does he keep letting her slip away?"

As hard as these questions were to hear, what was harder still was some of the answers that well-meaning people offered. Friends and family gave answers like, "God never gives us more than we can handle" or "This is all just part of God's plan" or "God called your daughter home." I heard far crueller responses: "God must be angry with you" or "God is punishing him for his sins." Once I actually heard a man tell a friend who had just received a devastating diagnosis, "God is just testing you to make you stronger. Remember, even Jesus had to be tested." The friend had a theologically excellent response: "Yea...that was Jesus!"

Now, first, I do believe that all those folks really thought they were helping. I also happen to believe, though I never said it out loud, that those kinds of answers are worse than useless. I'll admit that I just don't know how to worship a God who plans to hurt people or who tests people with cruel diseases or infirmities that rob people of their strength and dignity. On the other hand, I do think that the man who tried to tap into our Gospel message—"even Jesus had to be tested"—actually pointed to something in the Gospel passage that may be more astonishing than he imagined. His friend had hold of it. This story points to a way out of the unintentional violence that we perpetrate on each other when one of us is mired in hardship.

This is not a peaceful passage, is it? In fact, it has some rather violent imagery. When Jesus comes up out of the water, he sees the heavens *torn apart*,

not gently parted like a velvet curtain, but ripped—split like the temple veil that tears from top to bottom as Jesus dies at the end of Mark’s Gospel. When the heavens rip open, the Spirit descends, not in the form of a dove, but “as if” it were a dove. The Spirit hovers just long enough for a voice from heaven to claim Jesus as the Son of God. And then, the Spirit that we portray so often as a gentle, calming dove becomes more like a harpy that *drives* Jesus into the wilderness.

Mark’s Gospel in particular emphasizes the uniqueness and mystery of Jesus the Christ. That’s the key. The Spirit casts *Jesus* into the desert. Not us. Never you and I. At least not in the same way. Jesus the Christ entered a wilderness place in order to overcome Satan with authority. Jesus faced tests and tribulations for the remainder of his earthly life. Even on the cross, and only in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus cries out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” God did not stop Jesus’ struggles, but was always present with him. God allowed Jesus to launch his ministry there in the wilderness, and sustained him to the end.

There is an importance difference between God’s allowing something to happen and God’s causing something to happen. That difference is often beyond our ability to work it out, especially when we are in the midst of certain kinds of wilderness. The essential, astonishing and comforting truth for us that we cannot enter any wilderness where Christ has not already been. No human difficulty where the Risen Christ is not already present, even now.

The challenging truth is that the loving Christ that wants to show up in other people’s wilderness experiences is often the Christ within *us*. Sometimes, the way Christ touches a suffering person’s pain is through us. You and I are sometimes the only presence able to physically acknowledge and witness another person’s suffering. Ours is not to talk them out of their pain: “Cheer up.” “It could be worse.” “Look on the bright side.” When we are willing just to witness, to *really see*, the reality of another person’s hardship, Christ can work in the space

provided. Ours is not to fix them: “Well, you should stop sinning.” “You must have done something to deserve this.” These are the approaches that Job’s friends jumped to, and God chided them, *scolded* them, for speaking wrongly. Just as God was always with Job, God is with every one of us in the thick of hard times, whether they know it or not. When people need to learn how to navigate a new normal brought about by death, pain or loss, our most fruitful gift is simply to sit with them in the ashes. When any of us are faced with re-learning how to get on, we can’t begin until we’ve been loved where we are and have been given the time and space to feel the loss.

We can confuse the desolations that the world and life throws us into, imagining them to be suffering that God has sent. From time to time, God *does* test and challenge us, but God—at least the God that I can worship—God does *not* inflict the pain of tragedy upon us or *choose* illness or *create* catastrophic losses—these are more likely the circumstances of life spilling over from the chaos, the wild places, at the edges of our lives.

When *God* prods us into wilderness tests and challenges us, we are not driven there to conquer sin and death—even our own. Jesus has already done that. Our God-given struggles have much more to do with winnowing away that which is not essential. That’s part of the purpose of Lent: to prepare our hearts through prayer and releasing our attachments so that God can purify our hearts and make them whole.

When the heavens cracked open at Jesus’ baptism, a new world of possibility opened. Jesus did not wander into the wilderness by accident or wind up there because he wasn’t paying attention or because God wanted to punish him. From a first century Mediterranean perspective, the honorable tribute—“This is my beloved”—would be nonsense without responding to a challenge. The Spirit drove Jesus into the desert for forty days of discernment, where Jesus confronted

Satan, the *ha-satan*. From Mark's Jewish perspective, "satan" was simply the title for a certain kind of challenger, not the embodiment of evil that came from Medieval Christianity. We do not hear exactly how the *ha-satan* challenged Jesus, but we can safely suggest that the challenges involved stripping away the non-essentials, especially those that mimicked his true purpose. Jesus emerging from the wilderness confirmed him as the Beloved Son, trustworthy and capable for what would come later.

Because Jesus met his challenge, there is forever after a world in which suffering, sin and evil has been brought under Christ's stewardship. Even in hardship, we walk in a world freed from slavery to sin, death and separation. None of that means that tragedy, pain and suffering are gone. Our freedom means that we no longer have to be afraid to be present to each other's hard times. We are free to be God's loving presence by moving without fear toward genuine hardship.

Aging is hard. Time begins to take away our mobility, our self-control, our friends and our ability to care for ourselves. When we are willing to be patiently present to each other, none of us has to be alone.

Unemployment is hard. Lack of work deprives us of our sense of security, our independence, our ability to be generous. When we are present as allies to each other, not rescuers, but *allies*, there is precious space to explore and process.

Divorce is hard. The death of a marriage breaks up more than a family unit. It can destroy dreams for the future and rob people of the experience of being loved. When we are present to each other without judgment, we provide small islands of love.

Death is hard. Death separates loved one from loved one, disrupting the calendar of normal expectations for spouse's birthday parties, children's weddings, replacing these with the yearning for the touch of ones we cherish. When we are

no longer afraid of death, we do not have to avoid it, cheer each other up or do anything but sit in the ashes of grief with each other.

The Beloved became flesh lived as one of us. Christ knows thirst and hunger and pain. Christ knows human disappointment, frustration and grief. Christ is with us in all the turmoil of our lives. The Beloved of God is the *first* to be moved by our frustration, our worry, our loneliness, our grief. Whenever we are at the tattered edges of life, we may be suffering or stumbling or bleeding through hard times, but the Beloved will always be with us; will always weep and cry out with us; will always and forever hold us in loving arms.

All of this cannot be left behind as untested religious lyrics for Sunday pondering. We have to practice in the disorder and beauty, the bitterness and the light of everyday life. When we can stand firm with Christ and drink willingly of the chalice that contains both joy and tears, both abundance and adversity, then we will have begun a blessed Lent.