

Sermon: Wilderness Man

Scripture: Mark 1:9-15

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The first Sunday of Lent always begins with Jesus' temptations in the wilderness which precedes his public ministry. Before he gathers disciples or teaches or heals or does really any public thing that will bring attention to himself, he first must contend with the wilderness. The account is given in Matthew, Mark and Luke with Matthew and Luke giving specifics about the encounter with the shadow, the deceiver. Mark, true to form, doesn't mince words. His account does not speak of Jesus being tempted to turn rocks into bread or to rule over nations or suspend the laws of gravity, rather he simply says "the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness for 40 days where he was tempted by Satan and accompanied by wild beasts and angels." Period. All we need to know if he had a mighty intense time in the wilderness, maybe our imaginations are sufficient to get a sense of what he was tempted with.

That his 40 days is correlated with Israel's 40 years in the wilderness would be obvious to any first century listener. Just as the Hebrew people were called to freedom through the Red Sea as the chosen people of God, Jesus at his baptism was called through the River Jordan as the chosen Son of God. Israel enters into 40 years in the wilderness and Jesus, 40 days the same. To be chosen of God is not as pleasant as it first sounds, apparently. To be chosen of God is to place God before and above all other priorities in life and what the Israelites and Jesus learn early on, is the difficulty of such a thing. We are drawn by natural animal instinct to self-service, self-preservation, self-advancement. To be chosen of God is to be about service to a higher good and the preservation and advancement of a much broader

circle of life, to the point of sacrificing the self for that greater whole. It's not exactly natural or easy... especially for a man.

If Jesus wasn't a man I wonder if he would have needed the lessons of the wilderness? I'm thinking about Jesus' maleness as we enter Lent this year, about his being a man, because of the shootings in Parkland, FL on Ash Wednesday this week and because of the on-going #metoo movement that has marked this past year. All of this violence and this abuse is done by men. Along with the problem of guns in our country is what a Huffington Post article referred to as toxic masculinity. Another young man picks up a too powerful gun and mows down his classmates. Another man is fired from NPR or the White House or wherever because he abuses the people, particularly the women, under him. That these are all men is not coincidental or incidental. We live in a culture that forms boys with a toxic sense of masculinity. Just a single case in point - the proliferation of movies and TV series where the hero is a masculine violent male maiming and killing the men and women around him. Hurray that there are a lot of movies now coming out where the hero is a heroine doing the maiming and killing but it's still toxic masculinity that writes the story line; masculinity defined by domination over, by aggression and violence, by repression of emotions, by might making right.

Jesus has to spend 40 days in the wilderness because he was incarnated as a man and because his masculinity does not easily bend towards self-sacrifice for the sake of a greater good, because his masculinity does not naturally make space for others. The first century Mediterranean world was an honor-shame culture and for Jesus to follow what God was asking of him will be for him to lose his honor as a man in that culture, pure and simple! He was going to touch lepers and relate to unmarried women and eat with sinners and he was going to be hung naked on a cross as a thief

and he was not going to respond in kind with violence to defend his honor. He had to discipline himself to respond not to the honor-shame categories of the culture but to the honor-shame categories of the Kingdom of God and those were quite different. In fact from the time he left the wilderness to the time he left the tomb, his culturally defined honor would constantly be shamed. There were many people amazed and impressed by his healings, teachings and miracles, but there were many more, and in the end most all of them, who were quite frankly embarrassed or ashamed of him. You don't turn the other cheek if you are a man! You don't weep with women if you are a man! You don't allow a foreign woman to best you in an argument if you are a man! You don't allow someone to mistreat you and then forgive them if you are a man!

How much has changed for men over the last 2000 years? Boys still are told they shouldn't cry. Men still believe manhood is associated primarily with competition and with domination over others. Males still don't know what to do with their rage and shame but to turn it on others in all forms of violence be that virtual or real.

To break his own powerful compulsion towards being a cultural man, Jesus had to be driven out into the desert to spend some time as a wilderness man. He had to go out there and be with the wild beasts in order to tame the wild beasts within him. He had to be out there to find a vulnerability deep enough to allow the angels to tend to him. This was so critical for his mission ahead, which was God's mission for him. He had to learn submission and he had to face his own powerlessness and embrace his identity in God, not his self-important culture-derived identity. What a mind-trip, what an impossible task, what an ordeal!

Could any other a man have done it? Jesus had to become a wilderness man before he could enter into "civilized" society because a

wilderness man learns that one cannot dominate the wilderness but rather he learns his humble place in the order of things. Wilderness man learns to listen and to value silences and open spaces and be receptive to what is offered when it's offered rather than conquer and dominate and control. He learns patience and endurance and maybe above all he learns that the real dangers in this world reside in his own head and his own soul. And a man who has given himself to the wilderness can hear better the voice of the Creator and receive better the healing power of the Spirit and access better the deeper image of the Divine which can be so thoroughly covered over by our cultural formation.

So one question for us today is how can we teach our boys the way of being a man according to Jesus, who discovered his manhood in service and compassion, mercy and love and submission to a higher good? Our boys are being formed everywhere they turn by a vision of manhood that is very different from the man who was Jesus. That is one of the greatest losses accompanying our becoming less-churched and less biblically literate, one of the biggest threats to sports replacing Sunday morning church - that our boys and men are receiving their influence from coaches and battle on the field and becoming less influenced by the real man who was Jesus.

We are now entering into the season of Lent when we journey with Jesus along the road to Jerusalem and the cross to reach the resurrection of Easter. My hope and prayer this season is that we, especially us Christian males (and mothers of males), will learn anew from Jesus how to be and form real men in this world, how to walk a road where our honor is based in the principles of the Kingdom of God and not our culture. The more men committed to a manhood defined by Jesus – be they Christian or not - the better off our whole world will be. Amen? Amen!