This, the Wilderness

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We are somewhere between the emperor Nero and the destruction of the Temple, in Mark’s gospel. His words, “In the beginning / of the good news about Jesus Christ” begin right there in that tumultuous time, the first of the gospel accounts, according to scholars. It may have been written in Rome, or in Antioch, in Syria. Imagine, if we can, the community gathered around these opening words of the gospel of Mark. The community is Greek speaking, most likely comprised of both Jews and Gentile converts.

Mark is not writing in an elegant style; he uses common Greek, the daily language of the people. His words get right to the matter of things. I like to think he was writing with fire, but that metaphor is too close to certain realities to be entirely comfortable as a poetic description. It is too close to the time of Nero and his mad persecutions, and of the Jewish Revolt that resulted in the destruction of the Temple by the Romans, and the burning of Jerusalem.

Mark’s listeners hear, in quick succession, Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist, the sky is torn apart, the Holy Spirit descends. And then we are told: “And the Spirit immediately drove him into the wildernesss.” Another translation puts it this way: “The Spirit forced Jesus out into the wilderness.” When I first read that, I thought, I can’t say *that*, can I? We just saw the Spirit as a dove descending. We like the dove, we get the dove. But -- forced? The writers of Matthew and Luke seem to agree that maybe they ought to tone things down; in far less dramatic terms, they that say that Jesus was led into the wilderness. And the sky is not torn apart in the gospels of Matthew and Luke; instead the heavens open, like a door or a window. But Mark’s terms are torn, driven, forced. The descent of the Spirit at Jesus’ baptism comes with turbulence.

And then comes the wilderness. We learn that Jesus is with wild beasts. What kind of wilderness is this? Mark doesn’t elaborate. But “wilderness” has deep resonance in scripture; Mark’s audience would have heard echoes of a familiar story resounding back and back and back, to wandering and covenant and testing and waiting, to an exodus from the bondage of Pharoah that gave their forbears freedom, but not certainty

. I imagine a frustrated listener standing up at this point in Mark’s narrative and saying, “Yeah, okay -- we know we’re in the wilderness; I get where you’re going with this. Can’t we ever have a story about some other place?”

Scholar Ched Myers writes that “‘wilderness’ connotes an uninhabited and desolate place, marginal existence....Symbolically, it [is] the site of a community in flight...or a refuge for the persecuted faithful who await deliverance” (Myers, 2008, 125). And what of the wild beasts that Jesus encounters there? In the book of Daniel, wild beasts refers to earthly rulers, representing, one commentator writes, not just a single earthly ruler but “the sum total of power as exercised by earthly rulers...the entire state mechanism that makes possible the [projects of the ruling powers]; in short, the genius of a nation.” (Myers, 130). This is no mere wilderness challenge trip.

We’re on the edge of our seats now, save for the listener who is disappointed because he’s heard this story. We want to hear about what *happened* to Jesus in this wilderness with the wild beasts. But we don’t get that from Mark. He tells us only that the angels wait on Jesus. And then Jesus comes out of the wilderness proclaiming the good news of God, announcing that the kingdom of heaven has come near. Really? John the Baptist has just been arrested.

You would think, or at least I would think, that Jesus would have a better strategy. I would think that if he has just faced the sum total of state power in the wilderness, he would be mustering some counter power, some grand plan to challenge it.

Instead he talks to fishermen, teaches at the local synagogue, speaks about the kingdom of heaven in small things like a mustard seed. And he begins to heal people. We don’t know what happened to Jesus in the wilderness; we can only look at how he comes back to the community out of the wilderness. And Jesus comes out of the wilderness with great tenderness. I don’t mean that he emerges as a merely nice Jesus. No. Niceness, even the perception of goodness, is not his concern. He will ask later: why do you call me good? (I would add that the empire also encourages people to be good.) He returns from the wilderness as a force himself, filled with the power of love, love that calls and heals and reconciles and restores people. It’s as if Jesus recognizes that of all things the powers have taken, one of the most essential, the most critical, the most necessary in the struggle, is human tenderness.

Tenderness. There is a poem by a Guatemalan poet, Rene Otto Castillo, entitled Apolitical Intellectuals, about those who ignore the reality of the struggles of the people in their country, while they entertain their ideas. I read it from time to time because it reminds me how easy it is to be lured into the position of the intellectuals that Castillo critiques. It is a place that theologians can inhabit as easily as intellectuals.

In the poem, Castillo writes that someday the humble people of his country will come, those who never had a place in the books and poems of the country’s apolitical intellectuals, but who daily delivered their bread and milk, their eggs and tortillas, and mended their clothes, and took care of their gardens, and worked for them. When they come to the apolitical intellectuals, the humble people of his country won’t ask about their style of dress, or their long siestas after lunch, or their futile struggles against [the philosophy of] “nothingness”or about their [theories of how] to make money. Instead, Castillo writes, they will gather to ask apolitical intellectuals this one question:  
 “What did you do when the poor  
 suffered, when tenderness and life  
 were dangerously burning out in them?”

This question brings me to my knees. I don’t know what Castillo’s religious  
leanings were, if any. He was a member of the Workers Party in Guatemala, brutally executed by the powers in his country, in 1967. I ask his forgiveness, quite sincerely, if I have used his poem in a context he would not approve. But when I think of his question: “What did you do when the poor suffered, when tenderness and life were dangerously burning out in them?” it sounds to me like pure gospel. Tenderness and life were what Jesus embodied in the face of an oppressive empire; he raised and spread tenderness and life among people. And he challenged those whose religious narratives had begun to take their cues from the empire, insisting on the ground of our true kingdom in the heart of a merciful God. This is what he brought out of the wilderness.

In our own time, tenderness and life are being crushed; they are dangerously burning out. There is a punitive attitude in the land towards those who are vulnerable, who have lost jobs or maybe never had one in the first place, towards those who are sick and struggle to pay medical bills, to those who’ve never had a place in our books and poems, while they deliver bread and milk and tend gardens, and harvest food for dinner tables. There is a punitive attitude towards towards those who don’t fit a narrow standard of success, wealth, and health, or perhaps maybe they once did, and now they no longer do.   
 When I was a hospice volunteer, I was called to the room of a man who had just been admitted to the Palliative Care Unit at the hospital where I volunteered. The man’s daughter and a nurse were already there when I arrived. An address book had been misplaced in the room and he was angry and barking orders at the people around him. He was a person whose profession would have given him a sense of confidence and self possession in life, and he was desperately trying to maintain that by pretending that he could continue to order his life here through commands and bluster. Of all people that I had encountered in the hospital, he seemed the most alone to me in a way that his swagger only highlighted. I didn’t cry often after a hospice shift, but that night I came home and sat on my porch and wept. I think this man was terrified. He may have even felt ashamed that he had become sick, perhaps considering it a weakness. Our culture doesn’t prepare us for such moments and in fact, pretends they don’t exist. Suddenly we find ourselves in a place we never expected to be. Who are we when the illusion of our control drops? A culture that proclaims invincibility as a sign of our worth has nothing to say to us at such moments. That is the wilderness.

There are many paths to the wilderness, some of them forced by circumstances. Loss -- of a loved one, or of health, or a job, or a sense of who you thought you were, or even just a sense of going through meaningless motions day after day towards no purpose that you can see. This was not how your life was supposed to turn out. Perhaps you felt that you were on a path, and then the path vanished like a dream. You come to the wilderness stripped of familiar signposts. You’re not sure where you are now. Our psalmist in today’s reading prays, “Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love,” for the psalmist is once again in some kind of trouble. This, the wilderness is where the people of covenant find themselves time and again. Can’t we ever have a story about some other place?

But this, the wilderness, is the story; the place where our faith was born.

The community listening to Mark is sitting among the shards of a destroyed Temple. Everything they thought was going to happen, and the way they thought it would happen, has vanished like a dream, or a nightmare. The Jesus who spoke of a mustard seed growing into a tree was executed by the same powers that have now sacked Jerusalem. In light of these things, they are forced to ask themselves: Who are we, as a community? Who will we be? What will survive? They are struggling to reconcile this Jesus, their light and hope, who did not meet the hopes that some might have had for a glorious restoration of a past kingdom. Not only that, in the words of writer Francis Spufford, in the end, “he was that man in the crowd; a man under arrest, and on his way to our common catastrophe” (Spufford, 2013). They lean forward into Mark’s story and hear these words: “In the beginning / of the good news about Jesus Christ.” Can it be?

They can’t even begin to imagine what they are beginning. They can’t imagine us, here, 2,000 years in the future looking back towards them. And yet here we are, friends, here we are. We are their children, born of the mustard seeds they scattered in the wilderness, seeds that did, indeed, grow into great trees.

And what news will we bring from the wilderness?

Myers, Ched (2008). *Binding the Strong Man, A Political Reading of Mark’s Gospel*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Spufford, Francis (2013-10-15). *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* (pp. 107-108). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.