

## Jesus in the Wilderness according to Mark

### A Sermon by Richard Bauckham

Mark 1.12-15

Mark's Gospel tells us that, after Jesus' baptism, when he was anointed with God's Holy Spirit as Israel's Messiah, the same Spirit drove him into the wilderness. And only after spending time in the wilderness did Jesus begin his messianic mission of announcing the arrival of the kingdom of God. Whatever that period in the wilderness was about, it was obviously important – the Spirit impelled him. It was a necessary prerequisite to embarking on his mission.

When we think of Jesus in the wilderness, we probably think of the much longer accounts in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, which tell us of the three temptations Satan put to Jesus and how he dealt with them. But this morning let's stay with Mark's much more concise account and see what it tells us.

The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. Wilderness is a word with all sorts of biblical resonances. Israel after the exodus wandered in the wilderness and was tested in the wilderness for forty years, as Jesus was for forty days. The prophet Elijah fled to the wilderness for safety and in the forty days he too spent there he had his most profound encounter with God there.

But more generally and more obviously wilderness for people in biblical times was a place where people didn't and couldn't live. It wasn't necessarily sandy desert. It could be the rocky terrain of the wilderness of Judaea. It would be whatever was alien and inhospitable and hostile to humans, the opposite of the fertile land where people settled and made a living from the soil. Apart from a few nomads, people would not travel through such terrain if they could help it, still less linger there.

For the wilderness that could not be home to humans *was* home to other kinds of creature with whom humans did not generally want anything to do. Wild animals, some of them dangerous to humans. And demons – the wilderness was thought to be the haunt of all manner of evil spirits.

Jesus goes into the wilderness – the non-human, in some ways even anti-human sphere of creation – in order precisely to encounter the non-human creatures. For some reason, it seems, he must do this before he can begin his mission in the human sphere.

Mark summarizes in three statements:

Jesus was tempted by Satan  
He was with the wild animals  
And angels ministered to him.

Three kinds of non-human being. None of them appear very much in the rest of the Gospel story. No wild animals, only domestic ones, those that belong in the human world. No angels again until after Jesus' resurrection. Not even Satan, at least not in any direct encounter with Jesus, though there are plenty of encounters with Satan's minions. Before Jesus could embark on his mission to people, to Israel, he had to sort out his relationships to these non-human inhabitants of the world – on their own territory, the wilderness.

Those relationships of course are all about being the Messiah, the one who has come to bring salvation into the world. How must the Messiah, if he is to be true to the vocation he has from God – how must the Messiah relate to the great adversary of God and God's people, Satan? How should he relate to the wild animals? And how to the angels?

Satan, of course, is intent on deflecting Jesus from his mission. These are no ordinary temptations, the little daily ones we all know about. Jesus did not have to go into the wilderness to be tempted in all those ordinary ways. What Jesus faced alone in the desert was the temptation to make some thing of his life that was not the vocation to which God was calling him. There were many ways of being some kind of a messiah and Satan suggested all of them to him – all except, that is, the true one. There were ways of being a messiah that would much more obviously bring success than the way that God required. How tempting to be the kind of messiah people wanted, the kind they would cheer all the way to his glittering triumph and his golden throne.

At the outset of Jesus' mission there had to be a decisive choice of God's way rather than Satan's. Everything else Jesus did followed from that. When John Milton decided to complement his great work *Paradise Lost* with another called *Paradise Regained*, he chose to tell only this little bit of the Gospel story: Satan's temptations of Jesus in the wilderness. Not perhaps the most obvious choice but an inspired one. For in *Paradise Lost* he had told the story of the original temptation, the one to which Adam and Eve succumbed. Their choice of Satan's way rather than God's was decisive for the history of the human race. Its damage could only be undone by someone who faced in a way the same choice but chose God's way rather than Satan's. That was the first messianic act, decisive for all that followed.

Mark then says of Jesus that he was with the wild animals. Not many people pause to think about that. Isn't it just a bit of picturesque scene-setting, evoking for us the alien or dangerous environment of the wilderness? I don't think Mark in this very concise account would waste words in that way. The animals are the second in a series: Satan, the wild animals, angels.

Through the Old Testament, if you look for it, from Noah onwards, runs a kind of enmity between humans and wild animals, the ones they don't domesticate and put to use in the human world. The animals are threats sometimes to human life, often to human livelihood: they have to be fought off, the way David the shepherd boy proved himself by fighting off the lion and the bear that would have carried off his lambs. So should the new David, the Messiah, do likewise, more effectively? Well, no, if the Old Testament prophets were to be believed. When the Messiah comes, they said, he will heal the enmity between the human world and the wild world of the other creatures. The lion will lie down with the lamb instead of stealing it. The little child will safely play beside the adder's nest. They will not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, says the Lord, in the book of Isaiah. A kind of paradisaal peace regained.

So Jesus does not go into the wild in order to defeat the hostile creatures of the wild. Mark says simply, 'he was with the wild animals.' 'With' is a little word but it suggests quite a lot. A couple of chapters later Mark tells us that Jesus appointed the twelve apostles to be with him. It's not a neutral term as though they just happened to be there. If Jesus was with the wild animals it was a peaceable and perhaps, in an appropriate way, friendly relationship.

While Satan was the enemy Jesus could only defeat, the wild animals were potential enemies of whom Jesus made friends.

Nowadays the word wilderness has a connotation it didn't have in biblical times. I guess many of you watched Simon Reeves's recent TV series called Wilderness. He went to areas of the world that are still largely unaffected by human encroachment. Some humans live there, but they live almost as guests in a world that belongs mainly to the creatures of the wild. Elsewhere humans have demolished the habitat of other creatures and driven them to extinction. Like the Indonesians Reeves saw feeding the whale sharks, the biggest sharks in the world, an endangered species, such people respect the other creatures, even love them. But the great wildernesses Reeves visited are some of the last. Already they are threatened by loggers and factory ships and the like. While people in biblical times usually thought of wilderness as threatening to them, nowadays it is the wildernesses and their wild creatures who are threatened by humans in our drive to subjugate everything else to human use.

Significantly, many of the wild animals Jesus would have encountered in the wilderness of Judaea are no longer to be found there. People – protecting themselves, making a living as best they could – have driven them out, sometimes to extinction. The image of Jesus spending time peaceably with the wild animals, leaving them their wilderness, leaving them to be themselves – I think is a suggestive one for us now.

Thirdly, Jesus encounters angels who minister to him. Now we might not expect to find angels in the wilderness. Demons yes, but not angels. I think the angels are there because Jesus is. When Elijah fled into the wilderness, an angel brought him food and drink. For Jesus, I think, the angels show him that God has not left him to fend for himself. This place devoid of other humans is not without God's provision. The angels are usually unobtrusive in their service, but here in the wilderness Jesus is aware of them – so that, once again, he can get his relationship to them established at the outset of his mission.

Well, in conclusion, a suggestion for a Lenten agenda a little different from usual – just in case this is right for any of you (it may or may not be). We could base a Lenten practice on any one or two or all of those three glimpses of Jesus in the wilderness that Mark gives us:

First - To be with Jesus in the wilderness may mean to sort out where your life is going in God's intention, to face up to all the temptations to take it in other directions that may be very tempting but are not God's will for you. Are you pursuing success or popularity or self-indulgence rather than the way God is leading you to serve him? Lent is a good time to think hard about that.

2nd - To be with Jesus in the wilderness may mean to sort out how we relate to the other creatures of God in this creation that is now so threatened by human destruction. Are we living peaceably with our fellow-creatures? That may mean: not just doing them no harm, but positively acting to protect their wild places and preserve biodiversity.

3rd - To be with Jesus in the wilderness may mean to become more aware of God's day by day provision for us - the unobtrusive ministry of the angels. As well as what we can do for God, it is very salutary to think about what God does for us, every day of our lives. This Lent we could become more mindful of God's presence and provision for us.

In case you want to remind yourself of those suggestions, the sermon will be on the website.