

LONESOME VALLEY
Sermon for Lent 1B: Mk 1:9-15
LPC, 3/1/09

Some months ago I talked with a young woman who had just received a cancer diagnosis. I say “young;” what I mean is, younger than me. Certainly too young to have cancer. This woman appeared to be going through the early phases of grief, alternating between bouts of denial and anger. However I could see she was working gradually toward an understanding that she was in for a long, difficult period, and that in one sense there was nothing for it but to just get through it.

If there’s a person, an adult person, who has been completely spared this phenomenon, I haven’t met him, or her. Sooner or later we all come up against something unpleasant that we can’t talk or pay or influence our way out of. We just have to get through it.

I am put in mind of the American folk hymn, “Jesus walked this lonesome valley.” The middle verse draws a parallel between Jesus walking his lonesome valley, and the rest of us walking ours:

You must walk this lonesome valley
You’ve got to walk it by yourself.
Oh, nobody else can walk it for you.
You’ve got to walk it by yourself.

I actually take issue with the message of this song, but we’ll get to that later.

Our Gospel lesson today from Mark is about Jesus walking a lonesome road. Immediately after his baptism by John, and the acclamation from heaven naming him as God’s Son, Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness. He is there forty days and subjected to temptation by Satan.

Why would the Spirit do this? What’s the point of deliberately subjecting the Son of God to privation and temptation? There are at least three points, and they are points of identification.

In the first place, Jesus is identifying with the people of Israel, and their forty years in the wilderness. Through Israel’s forty wilderness years, God was identifying Israel as God’s people, and the people of Israel were identifying themselves as God’s people. Similarly, although God has already identified Jesus as God’s Son at his baptism, Jesus is, while in the wilderness, identifying himself with God, and with God’s chosen people. There is one big difference though. The people of Israel sinned in the wilderness. They responded to their temptations and desolation by making an idol, a golden calf. Jesus endured his privations without falling into sin.

Secondly, Jesus is identifying with the suffering and death he will endure at the climax of his ministry. The Gospel of Mark thus has an interesting symmetry: Jesus begins with glory at baptism, followed by suffering in the wilderness. He will end with

suffering through crucifixion, followed by the glory of the empty tomb and the reported resurrection.

Finally, Jesus is identifying with us. Long before we walked our lonesome valleys, Jesus walked one too. There is nothing that we can go through that Jesus has not also experienced. That is why I take issue with that song. We never have to walk by ourselves. Jesus walks with us through our wilderness, in fullest compassion, having known his own grief and temptation.

We have been directed by our bishop today, on the first Sunday of Lent, to consider and repent of our church's complicity in racism and slavery. Now if there is anything akin to wilderness in our country's history, it is our history of racism and slavery.

It's important to draw a distinction however. Jesus did not create his wilderness. When we speak of the wilderness of racism and slavery, we must acknowledge, that in America we created ours.

What do I mean by "we"? Obviously I don't mean those in this room, on an individual basis. When I say "we" I mean human beings. I mean European colonists. I do mean our American founding fathers and mothers, who made the conscious, perhaps necessary, decision to leave the resolution of the slavery issue to the Civil War generation, and to every generation since.

We must get through the wilderness of our legacy of slavery and racism. We can shorten our collective wilderness sojourn by acknowledging a history of exploitation and repudiating any further complicity. Like Jesus, we can avoid further sin while we are in the wilderness. We can work toward the eradication of racial discrimination in every form. We can take seriously our baptismal covenant to respect the dignity of every human being.

We can also recognize that Jesus is with us in this lonesome valley, as in all our lonesome valleys. He will see us through. And the ending, as in the gospel of Mark, will be glory.