

**SPIRITUALITY**

**GOSPEL ACCLAMATION**

Matt 4:4b

One does not live on bread alone,  
but on every word that comes forth from the  
mouth of God.



**Gospel**

Mark 1:12-15; L23B

**The Spirit drove Jesus out into the  
desert,  
and he remained in the desert for  
forty days, tempted by Satan.  
He was among wild beasts,  
and the angels ministered to him.**

**After John had been arrested,  
Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming  
the gospel of God:  
“This is the time of fulfillment.  
The kingdom of God is at hand.  
Repent, and believe in the gospel.”**

**Reflecting on the Gospel**

Every year on the First Sunday of Lent, the gospel proclaimed is the wilderness temptation of Jesus. Mark’s account is honed to three short verses following immediately and urgently after the baptism of Jesus. The Spirit “drove” Jesus into the wilderness, says Mark. We often describe people as “driven”—by ambition, lust, desperation—but what drives Jesus is the Holy Spirit. He is tossed into the physical and spiritual space where, before he begins his public ministry, before he proclaims one word of the Good News, he must struggle with two consequences of his baptism: his naming as Son of the Father and his solidarity with sinful humanity represented by the crowds on the Jordan’s banks who were called by John to a baptism of repentance. Now there are no crowds; Jesus is alone with the Spirit of God and the spirit of evil, with the wild beasts and the angels, with communion and conflict, with the struggle—that will persist throughout his life and death—to be the faithful Son. He is alone with the memory of his ancestors and their wilderness wandering in what for them was not only a place of God’s revelation and promises, but also a place of their temptations and failures. Jesus will show himself to be the most faithful Israelite. The opposition between human sin and divine presence, between the “angelic” and the “beastly,” was starkly exposed in Jesus’s own psyche. And if we are honest and mindful, we know them in ourselves and in our own struggles to be faithful sons and daughters of our same Father.

The English artist Stanley Spencer (1891–1959) painted a “wilderness series” about the life of Christ. In one of these paintings he depicts Jesus sitting on the desert sands with a “wild beast.” But the beast is not a roaring lion or a skulking tiger. In his cupped hands he holds a small but deadly scorpion. Jesus is no wraith-like ascetic, but very much a plump “flesh of our flesh” man. Spencer may be suggesting that the really dangerous beasts are those small ones that can slither insidiously into our lives; the persistent sins and small infidelities that, almost unnoticed, can inject a paralyzing venom into our discipleship. Alternatively, we might read Spencer’s painting, and Mark’s account, positively: as a vision of peace and harmony in a restored creation in the hands of the New Adam on whom angels wait in service.

Jesus comes out from his wilderness experience strengthened for praise and pain and mission. The arrest of John the Baptist is the first storm that breaks over Mark’s gospel, but over it rises a Galilean rainbow of hope as Jesus proclaims his first words: “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.” On Ash Wednesday, the last words of that proclamation were an alternative that was pronounced as we were signed as baptized disciples of the tempted One and called to Lenten mindfulness of the struggle between sin and grace, success and failure, into which we too are tossed.

The desert sand is not under our feet but in our hearts. Its grit is the daily irritations and indefinable loneliness we often feel. We need these Lenten weeks of heightened awareness of the importance of uncluttered spiritual and physical space where we can come to grips with our pain, where we can discover the beauty of God and our sisters and brothers under the surface sands of our busy lives, and where we can allow our ears to be “dug out” (Ps 40:6; God’s Word Translation) by closer listening to the word of God in our Sunday liturgy. We may then become much wiser about the spiritual baggage that we, as wilderness travelers, need to keep or discard in the trek toward Easter.

**Focusing the Gospel**

**Key words and phrases:** [T]he Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert.

**To the point:** Before his public ministry begins, Jesus spends forty days alone with wild beasts and angels. For the people of Israel, the desert hearkened back to the time of the Exodus when God led them in the wilderness, feeding them with manna, and finally revealing himself to them on the top of Mount Sinai. In the desert the people learned to rely on God as they were formed into his chosen people through the gift of the Torah. Jesus’s time in the desert is the last step in his preparation to begin his public ministry. Having withstood temptation and received the ministrations of angels, he is finally ready to proclaim the “gospel of God.”

**Connecting the Gospel**

**to the first reading:** While in the gospel Jesus dwells among wild beasts in the desert, in the first reading Noah and his family are the ones who are surrounded by animals. The account of the flood in Genesis (and the retelling of it in today’s second reading from the first letter of St. Peter) records that only eight people survived the rising waters that destroyed the rest of creation. Along with these eight people, however, are a pair “of the clean animals and the unclean, of the birds, and of everything that crawls on the ground” (Gen 7:8; NABRE). When God makes the covenant with Noah and his family, it extends also to “every living creature” that accompanied them on the ark, indeed to “all living beings.”

**to experience:** In the gospels we don’t often hear of Jesus interacting with animals. His time of preparation in the desert appears to be not only a time to commune with God, but to also live within God’s creation. The covenant with Noah and his family can remind us that, though among the creatures, we are the only ones who have been created in “the image and likeness of God”; every living being is precious in his sight.

**Connecting the Responsorial Psalm**

**to the readings:** The book of Genesis tells us, “[W]hen the waters had swelled on the earth for one hundred and fifty days, God remembered Noah” (7:24–8:1; NABRE) and the waters begin to subside. Today’s psalm also speaks of God’s remembrance: “In your kindness remember me, / because of your goodness, O Lord.” In today’s first reading, God offers a sign of the covenant he has made with Noah’s family and with all of creation: “When I bring clouds over the earth, / and the bow appears in the clouds, / I will recall the covenant I have made.”

**to psalmist preparation:** At times in our lives a sign, symbol, or experience might have a profound impact on us and help call to mind our covenant with God, and with each other to live as children of God. This Lenten season, what sign or symbol might help you live more deeply into this covenant?

**PROMPTS FOR FAITH-SHARING**

In the first reading God institutes a covenant between himself and the earth. What role do you see creation playing in our relationship with God?

The psalmist says, “Your ways, O Lord, are love and truth to those who keep your covenant.” How would you like to grow in love and truth this Lenten season?

Today’s verse before the gospel reminds us, “One does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.” What nourishment have you received from God’s word recently?

After Jesus’s baptism, the Spirit drives “Jesus out into the desert.” Where do you find solitude and quiet to be with God?