

“The Kingdom Has Come Near”

Depths of Love – part #1, from umcsdiscipleship.org

Mark 1:1-15

[1 - title slide] *Welcome*

Prayer

[2 – zoo animals] How many of you have ever visited the zoo? What are your favorite exhibits and animals? (Solicit some answers.) I’ve always been partial to the penguins and the large cats. I just think they’re cool.

However, how many of you have ever been to Antarctica? Not so many. What about on a safari? I spent a week in South Africa a few years ago, and I’ll never forget my encounters with the big cats. There were no bars between me and the lion about thirty feet away. If he wanted me for a late-night snack, there was no stopping him. Fortunately, he didn’t. And while I haven’t been to Antarctica, I do remember seeing puffins in Alaska, and I remember, it was cold.

There’s a huge difference between a zoo and safari. In both cases, you go you go to experience animals. But only one of them you allows you to enter into their world, into the wilderness.

[3 – Lent cross and ashes] Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent, a forty-day journey to Easter, when we can experience something like entering the wilderness. This season can sometimes feel strange. After all, it seems like we just got done with Christmas. Only two months ago, we were celebrating how Christ entered our world, helpless, as a baby. Lent continues the story. The same Christ who entered our world at Bethlehem now enters the desert and invites us to enter God’s kingdom.

The Bible is mostly silent on what happened between Bethlehem and the Jordan River. Jesus was sort of offline for almost 30 years. We get one story when he’s about twelve. That’s it.

[4 – John the Baptist] The scene first opens in Mark chapter 1 with John the Baptizer. Here is this fiery preacher, a prophet who dresses and behaves strangely. He actually lives in the desert, makes it his home. People respond to his preaching. He shouts, “Repent and be baptized,” and they do. Yet John is not the Messiah.

[5 - John and Jesus] Next, the Messiah, Jesus, appears. Mark spares us the details, but the other gospels tell us about the conversation, how John is humbled to baptize Jesus. The heavens split open, the Spirit descends like a dove, the Father’s voice proclaims, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:11) Everything starts well for Jesus.

Then we read this nugget in verse 12:

“At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness.” (Mark 1:12)

[6 - sheep driver] The words “sent him out” literally mean “drove him” or “forced him,” like a rancher driving cattle. What happened to the gentle, dove-like Spirit? Jesus was baptized and immediately thrown into a desert camping trip with no gear! At least my South African safari was my choice. Jesus didn’t even get to celebrate the baptism, take pictures and cut the cake. I’m glad we don’t celebrate baptisms by sending people off to a forty-day survival trip in the Huron Mountains or Sturgeon River Wilderness!

The heart of today’s message is this: Why did Jesus go into the desert?

[7 – Jesus in the desert] Again, the gospel of Mark gives us sparse details. Mark simply says, for forty days, Jesus was tempted by the devil, was with wild animals, and angels attended him. (Mark 1:13) Not much of a journal entry. *Day 1: I went into the desert. Day 40: I came back out.*

So we have to read between the lines a little. The time period, forty days, might sound familiar. Noah experienced forty days and forty nights of rain. Moses spent forty years in Midian. Elijah also spent forty days in the desert. Each time, something significant happened at the end: God showed up.

The gospels say Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the desert. At first glance, that seems to clash with the doctrine of the Trinity, One God in three persons, in perfect unity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Does this scripture challenge that unity? Was it against Jesus’ will to be driven into the desert?

I don’t think so. Consider a modern-day example. Say you decide to fast. If you begin a diet, is it against your will? You might not enjoy it, but the choice ultimately is yours. The way I see it, Jesus chose obedience. He went willingly to the desert, the same way he went willingly to the cross. There is a huge difference between choosing something and enjoying something. We tend to

despise doing things we won't enjoy. Not so for Christ. It was the Spirit's will, so Jesus obeyed. The Spirit was like, “Hurry up! Let's go! So what if you haven't packed?”

[8 - scriptures] Look what happened at the end of Jesus' forty-day fast. The Bible says, he began “proclaiming the good news of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’” (Mark 1:14-15) If you look at the parallel story in Luke, the scripture says Jesus returned from the wilderness “in the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Luke 4:14) The desert did something to prepare Jesus for the next three years. It was necessary for his ministry, for his message. I think the fasting and solitude cleared Jesus' mind and gave him courage and endurance.

[9 - wolves] It seems so strange that Jesus went from a beautiful scene of baptism, encouragement, and affirmation from his heavenly Father, into a barren and dangerous setting. He even met with wild animals. Then again, maybe his desert experience is not as unique as we think.

Dr. Lisa Hancock of UMC Discipleship Ministries makes this interesting observation:

“We have those beastly moments from time to time, don't we? We find ourselves cast out into a world we aren't ready for, dealing with things for which we didn't prepare, wondering if we are going to survive. There are choices to be made, paths to follow; and we are never sure which is right, what will bring us back into the gentle blessing of the Spirit and what will drive us deeper into conflict with the adversary.”¹

She further wonders, who are these wild beasts with Jesus? What if they are a metaphor for us? What if another reason Jesus went into the desert was to be with us?

I wonder what those beasts did in the desert around Jesus. Mark doesn't say. Maybe they threatened him. I can tell you from first-hand experience that lions are not cuddly; they're scary! I wonder, however, if those beasts actually

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/depths-of-love/first-sunday-in-lent-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes/first-sunday-in-lent-year-b-preaching-notes>

came to him. I wonder if the prophecy in Isaiah 11:6 actually was fulfilled in some way:

[10 - scripture] “The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.”

Honestly, we don't know. However, I can see how the beasts could represent us. Some of us come to Jesus in pain, in anger, lashing out at God and others. Some of us come humbly, willingly, even timidly. Not all beasts in the wilderness are predators. Deer are also wild beasts. So are squirrels, skunks, snakes, toads, ostriches. Pick whichever animal you want to represent yourself. Is it possible to see yourself, in the desert with Jesus? Maybe you're hurting, maybe you're lonely, and he is there, hungry, thirsty, and yet, calm and at peace.

[11 - Diet, food] I'm not saying that Jesus didn't have a hard time in the wilderness. Of course he did. Fasting is never easy. Still, I think maybe Jesus knew the benefit of fasting. Healthline.com says, “Fasting may have potential health benefits, including weight loss, improved blood sugar control, heart health, brain function, and cancer prevention.” Maybe there were good, physical reasons for Jesus to be in the wilderness. However, I think the spiritual reasons far outweigh them.

Jesus was fully human. To understand our suffering, he endured it himself. He went into the desert for us, so that he can go into the desert with us.

[12 - Jesus in desert] Lent isn't all doom and gloom, giving up chocolate, slapping ashes on your forehead and crying, “Woe is me!” In fact, according to Matthew 6:16-18, we are supposed to do our fasting in private and not brag about it. Actually, Lent can be a time of remembering the depths of God's love. Remember that Jesus would not only come to earth as a baby at Christmas, but he would live as a human, grow up, experience all the aches and pains of life.

Jesus willingly chose to experience our frailty, even though as God, he didn't have to.

We can use the season of Lent to identify our own weaknesses, so that we can identify our need for Jesus. Frankly, I want to know God who knows me, knows my pain, knows my frailty, knows my weakness. God knows sometimes I'm no better than a wild beast, yet God also knows, by the process of sanctification, I can be stronger, kinder, more loving, and more in touch with my soul.

[13 - Man praying alone] I am willing to go into the desert of my soul with Jesus. I am willing to confront the "lion" of my pride. The "squirrel" of my anxiety. The "buffalo" of my impatience. The nasty, rotten, skunk-smell of my sin. That's what Lent can be for us, an opportunity to give those sins up, to fast from them, and to replace them with love, patience, kindness, self-control. (And maybe some spiritual anti-perspirant.)

[14 - title slide] Let's take these forty days and go with Jesus to those wild places. We don't have to fear them. Angels will attend us, if we stay close to Christ. The power of the Holy Spirit will come on us if we endure. The desert road to Easter will be filled with challenges and joys. We need to embrace it, to lean into it, and to walk with Jesus, who knows exactly what our desert feels like.

Let's pray.

Memory Verse: Mark 1:15

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Reflection Questions:

1. Have you experienced time in the desert, literally or figuratively? What was that like? What did it feel like to come back out?
2. Why would the Holy Spirit descend softly like a dove in one moment, and the next moment forcefully drive Jesus into the desert? What purpose did God the Father have for Jesus' time in the desert?

3. Why is it difficult for us to embrace disciplines like fasting and abstaining? From where do we draw strength to do the things that are necessary yet unattractive?
4. Lent is a traditional time of self-inspection, setting aside time to allow the Holy Spirit to speak to us. What practices do you want to take up in Lent? What indulgences do you want to give up? Ask Jesus to help you embrace the life he wants you to have in him.
5. Tell someone else about an experience you want to have during Lent and ask them to pray for you. Offer to do the same for them.