

The first Sunday in Lent B - February 18, 2018
40 days in our wilderness By Delmer Chilton

A few years ago, Damian Rossitis told this story in the *Readers' Digest*. He had just gathered his bags at the luggage carousel in the San Diego airport. He was standing with a large group of Marine recruits waiting for a military bus to take them to boot camp. They all still had their hair and were dressed in civilian clothes. As the drill instructor began to put them in lines and bark out an order to stand at attention, Damian heard a young man behind him muttering, "I think I've made a big mistake. I think I've made a big mistake." Damian felt sorry for him and tried to calm him down. Keeping eyes front, he whispered out of the side of his mouth, "Stay positive. It's only 12 weeks and it will be worth it when we graduate and become Marines.

The man behind him gave a huge sigh of relief and started laughing, "Thanks for clearing that up. I thought this was the line for the shuttle bus to Enterprise Rent-A-Car."

Mark gives us the *Readers' Digest* version of Jesus' time in the wilderness, just one verse: "He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan, he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him" (Mark 1:13). While it is tempting to fill in the blanks by looking over into Matthew and Luke's versions of this story—with their dramatic dialogues between Jesus and Satan—there is much to be learned by sticking with Mark's terse portrayal of Jesus' spiritual boot camp. This short version is a good outline of what we are called to be about in the season of Lent.

Lent is the 40 days between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday, excluding the Sundays. It began as a time for new converts to the faith to prepare themselves for baptism by intense study and spiritual discipline. The 40 days was modeled on many biblical images—the 40 days and nights of the flood, the 40 years of the exodus—but especially on Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness. It is a time of spiritual discernment, of individual and communal prayer and study. It is a time to examine our hearts and lives and to ask God to forgive and forget our sins by remembering the divine steadfast love and goodness (Psalm 25:7). Most of all, it is a time to remember God's covenant to be with us forever, no matter where we go or what temptations or wild beasts we face.

"The Spirit drove him into the wilderness."

That's bad, right? The Greek word translated "drove" is used in only one other place in the Gospels, when Jesus drives the money changers from the temple. It is not a gentle, placid, country drive on a Sunday afternoon sort of word. It is a violent, abrupt word. The image is of the Spirit as a bouncer, an enforcer, throwing Jesus into the wilderness. Jesus was probably not very happy about this, just as no child is happy when a parent pushes them to learn to do the laundry or clean their room, or no athlete is happy at being pushed beyond what they thought was their level of endurance, and no student is ever happy to be told that their essay is good, but it could be better. The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness to show him what he faced, both within himself and in the world. The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness because that was where he needed to be in order to prepare for the role he was to fulfill.

The truth is, we live in "the wilderness" every day. The violent action of the Spirit in driving us into the wilderness is a matter of waking us up to the reality in which we live, of making us aware of the temptations and wild beasts around us. We live in the midst of things that, in the words of Martin Luther King Jr., test "the content of our character." Until we are cast out and away from our comfort zones, most of us are unaware of the temptations to complacency that lurk amidst the wild beasts of racism, sexism, ageism, materialism, consumerism, and the fear of the stranger, and the loathing of our neighbors—wild beasts that surround us and threaten to devour our souls every moment of our lives.

In Lent, the Spirit is the drill instructor of our souls, pushing us hard, revealing to us things about ourselves and our personal and societal wilderness we'd rather not know, showing us our sly temptations are complicit with the oppression of others, pointing out the ravenous beasts of societal pressure that threaten to devour us if we get out of line, and promising us that God's presence (God's "angels") will be with us, guiding and comforting us. In these 40 days, we go to the wilderness so that, when the good news is proclaimed to us, we will repent, we will change directions, we will believe, we will get on the right bus and we will go forward as citizens of the kingdom of God.

I would like to end with you a story that author Walter Wangerin tells about an experience he had with his son, Matthew.

When Matthew was seven years old and in the second grade, he became fascinated with comic books--so much so, that one day he stole some from the library. When Walter found the comic books in Matthew's room, he confronted him, corrected him, disciplined him, and took him back to the library to return the books. Matthew received a stern lecture regarding stealing from the librarian and also from his dad.

The following summer, however, it happened again. Matthew stole some comic books from a resort gift shop. Again Walter corrected him, told him how wrong it was to steal and made him return the magazines.

A year later, Matthew once again stole some comic books from a drug store. Walter decided he had to do something to get his son's attention and to underscore the seriousness of stealing. So he took Matthew into his study and said, "Matthew, I have never spanked you before, and I don't want to now, but somehow I've got to get through to you and help you see how wrong it is to steal." So Walter bent Matthew over and spanked him five times with his bare hand.

Matthew's eyes moistened with tears, and he sat there looking at the floor. His father sensed that his son did not want to cry in front of his father, so he said, "Matthew, I'm going to leave you alone for a little while. You sit here, and I'll be back in a few minutes." With that, he stepped out of the study and closed the door behind him.

Once out the door, he says that he was overcome at the thought of what he had just done. He, himself, broke down and cried uncontrollably. When he had regained his composure, he went into the bathroom and washed his face. Then he went back into the study to talk to his son. From that moment on, Matthew never stole again. Years later, as Matthew and his mother were driving home from shopping, they talked about some memories of his childhood. They remembered the incident with the comic

books. Matthew said, "Mom, after that, I never stole anything again from anybody, and I never will."

His mother asked, "Was it because your dad spanked you that day?"
"Oh no," Matthew explained, "It was because I heard him crying!"

*from **Standing on the Promises or Sitting on the Premises**, copyright 1995
by James W. Moore, pp. 21-22*