

A friend's mother was once in the hospital at the same time the local bishop was. After his operation the bishop went around room to room, visiting all the patients. When he visited my friend's mother, who was recovering from a difficult surgery, he said, unctuously, "Well dear, I know exactly how you feel." And she replied, "Really? Did you have a hysterectomy too?" (James Martin, SJ, BETWEEN HEAVEN AND MIRTH, p. 96)

This one's really corny, but it makes me laugh. Do you want to hear it or not?

The friars opened up a florist shop to raise money for the poor. Unfortunately, all the florist shops were controlled by the mob. So the mob sent a thug named Hugh to 'visit' the friars. Hugh busted up the shop and trashed the flowers. The friars went out of business. The moral of the story is: Only HUGH can prevent florist friars!

OK, some background on this gospel. Mark ties Jesus' temptation directly to His baptism, which is narrated immediately before our snippet today. Jesus had just heard the heavenly voice say "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." Our translation omits the "AND the Spirit immediately drove Him out into the wilderness." Jesus didn't have much time to bask in his status as the beloved One of God. Which is similar to the chosen people Israel. Israel began its life as the chosen people by first going into the wilderness, after Egyptian enslavement. 40 days for Jesus is also a linkage with the 40 years of the Exodus. Mark indicates that Jesus did not go into the wilderness to be on a silent, contemplative retreat. He is literally driven out into the desert where He is put through trials, though Mark does not tell us just what those trials were.

Israel was tempted and tested in the wilderness, tested both by its rigors and human desire and waywardness. Israel often flunked the exam. Reading the story of Jesus in the wilderness, compared with Israel's bittersweet memories of its time in the wilderness, reminds us that the wilderness is a place of struggle. Who will survive and triumph in this time of testing?

Although Mark gives us no details about the content of the tests, we will see in Mark's Gospel the ways Jesus was tested by the popularity and the criticism of the crowds, by the political establishment, and by His own followers. In a way, this time in the wilderness is a preview of the struggles and testing that await Him.

This is the first Sunday of Lent and we, like Jesus, are thrust into the wilderness, asked to face our own desires and waywardness. Lent will end in a garden, Gethsemane. But even that garden was a time of testing and struggle for Jesus.

Sorry if we think that church should always be a place of light, joy, and upbeat cheerfulness. As we follow Jesus, He takes us with Him into the wilderness. There, temptations abound, and we are placed under threat. As we begin our 40-day Lenten journey, we are called to honesty about the trials and temptations of the Christian life -- and take heart -- that by following the way of Jesus, victor over temptation -- we may be strengthened in our times of testing.

Second, so what about us? When we find ourselves in new and threatening circumstances, we often suffer from fear. The headline I saw recently was: "Many Americans can't break the grip of fear and suffer from phobias they can't overcome." A virtual epidemic of fear was reported. The objects of American fear are diverse: gun violence, pandemic, economic stress, unemployment, crime, the neighborhood being overtaken by people who 'aren't like us.'

Right now, a major reason people are upset about immigration on our southern border is fear. Many are fearful that immigration brings crime, joblessness, and lawlessness – even though there’s not much data to support such fear. Some politicians have used our fears – unfounded fears or not – to their advantage, playing upon our fears, telling us, in effect, “Elect me and I’ll save you from your fear.”

And that’s one of the problems with much of our fear: it’s not rational. We are powerless in the face of it and can’t talk ourselves out of it. For instance, older adults fear being victims of violent crime. And yet, older adults, as a cohort, are the least likely age group to be victims of crime. The more TV an older adult watches, the greater fear the person has of crime, suggesting that sometimes our fears have little relationship to facts.

Another problem with fear is that we can’t help it. We speak of being ‘overcome by fear,’ as if fear is this force that jumps us, comes out of nowhere and is unjustified by the circumstances, as if some wild beast has overtaken us and we are powerless to defend ourselves against it. What is a ‘phobia’ if not some fear that, if we think about it, doesn’t make much sense? Our fear of heights, spiders, enclosing spaces? But still we are powerless to resist and no amount of reasoning with ourselves enables us to overcome its grip.

The First Sunday of Lent always focuses upon the temptations that Jesus faced at the beginning of His ministry. On the first Sunday of Lent, we are with Jesus in the wilderness as He faces temptation. We may remember that in some of the other Gospels, we have an account of a dialogue between Jesus and Satan. But not in Mark. With just a couple of sentences, Mark sketches in the briefest way what it was like for Jesus to be in the wilderness. All we are told is that Jesus was in the wilderness with ‘wild animals.’ That’s it.

Jesus is thrust out beyond the safe confines of His native village, out beyond the protective walls of Jerusalem, out in the wild, untamed, pathless wilderness. There He is encountered by, maybe threatened by ‘wild animals.’

Mark doesn’t tell us anything about the identity of those ‘wild animals,’ their species or how they were disposed toward Jesus, who is out there alone, vulnerable. That leaves us free to use our imagination. Who were those ‘wild animals’ and what did they mean for Jesus? Who were the ‘wild animals’ lurking in the darkness, ready to pounce upon Jesus?

When we diverge from the path we set out to travel, when we do something that is, as we say, ‘out of character,’ some action that is really counter to what we know we should be doing, maybe even what we want (in our better moments) to do, it often feels like we are being jumped, pounced upon by a force that’s not within us, but that has come to us.

“What were you thinking?” I asked a man who had just committed a terribly immoral act. “How long have you been a priest?” he asked impudently. “That’s a dumb question. Obviously, if I had been thinking, I wouldn’t have done this!”

Over the years I’ve had many in the confessional say, when they have done something they knew they should not have done, “I was just overcome by....” Or “I couldn’t resist the desire to...,” or “something just came over me.”

Maybe they are deluding themselves, but that’s what temptation often feels like, doesn’t it? We are jumped from behind, unsuspecting. We give in to an inclination that we may have felt before, but were able to resist. We are horrified by our own actions, “I can’t believe I did this!” we say. “It’s just not me.” As if some ‘wild animal’ has come out of the bushes, jumped us, and we are powerless to resist its clutches.

So what are some of the wild animals that we struggle with? Popularity. We care a lot about what other people think of us, often too much. We do and say too many things trying to get others' approval.

Cowardice. We like to go with the flow and not make other people uncomfortable. We don't want to make them uncomfortable, but sometimes, just saying, 'I found something that really makes a difference in my life and I'd like to tell you about it,' makes people nervous.

We're really bothered about some of the things that Jesus says about money. We like nice things. We don't want to tithe 10% -- that's a LOT of money! We've had nice things all of our lives, and maybe we need to admit that we like nice things more than we like pleasing Jesus.

Doesn't Jesus tell us that we ought to take risks and help people in need? We think about the story of the Good Samaritan. We look into our life right now and have to admit that most of the things we do, we do for ourselves. We wonder what Jesus thinks of this.

Or a buddy in our golfing group tells a joke that is really demeaning to women. Why don't we speak up? We think of ourselves as people who like challenges. We're not afraid to tackle hard jobs. But we might wonder if we're tough enough to be a Christian.

It's easy to be jumped by wild animals. Jesus was jumped by 'wild animals,' but He was not powerless to resist their clutches. And because of Jesus and His power to stand up to the 'wild animals,' even we, with our fears, weaknesses, and vulnerability, are also not powerless.

Behind this temptation story about Jesus, is a promise of Jesus: "I overcame the fear, temptation, and threat, and with my help, you can too."

I think that the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness by the 'wild animals' is told not simply as a warning (be careful, there are 'wild animals' out there), but as encouragement. Jesus stood up to His temptations. Angels came and ministered to Him, which is a biblical way of saying that He resisted temptation. So maybe, if we are trying to walk with Jesus, this story is a reminder that Jesus will walk with us. He who overcame temptation, who stared down the wild beasts and triumphed, will enable us to triumph as well.

As we go forth from here, out into the wilderness, otherwise known as the place where we live, know this: The one who defeated the wild beasts who would seek to harm Him, and change Him from His course, or allure Him and 'give Him false comfort, knows firsthand what we are going through. When we are tempted, when we feel like we are in the wilderness, the Christ is with us. Amen. (all of this adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, Jan-Mar 2024, p. 21-23)