

TEXT: Mark 1:9-15  
THEME: The Spirit drives us into the wilderness  
SUBJECT: Purification  
TITLE: Real Life

First Sunday in Lent  
21 February 2021  
Messiah Moravian  
Jerry Harris

Austin Farrer was chaplain of Trinity College, Oxford, from 1935 to 1960. His spiritual guidance to students was collected in *A Celebration of Faith*. He told students that temptation is what distracts us, beguiles us or bullies us off the path. Temptation is what makes *real life* different from the world of our dreams.

We dream a world which is wax under the moulding of our ambitions or of our aspirations; we meet a world which faces us with trials we have not the character to surmount, and with seductions we have not the virtue to resist.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh says something similar, only addressed to adults in midlife. The signs that presage growth: discontent, restlessness, doubt, despair, longing are interpreted falsely as signs of decay. In youth we accept these signs as growing pains. We take them seriously, listen to them, and follow where they lead. We know fear, naturally. But despite fear, we press through to greater freedom.

But in middle age, because of the false assumption it is a period of decline, we interpret these life-signs, paradoxically, as signs of approaching death. Instead of facing them, we run away; we escape—into depressions, nervous breakdowns, drink, love affairs or frantic, thoughtless, fruitless overwork. Anything rather than face them. Anything rather than stand still and learn from them. One tries to cure the signs of growth, to exorcise them, as if they were devils, when really they might be angels of annunciation.

Mark's temptation story is stark compared to Matthew and Luke's. Matthew's story is eleven verses of dramatic dialogue between the Tempter and Jesus. Mark condenses the story into two verses: "And immediately the Spirit cast him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by the Accuser, and was with the wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him." (Hart's translation)

Please note: the Spirit who cast Jesus into the wilderness is the same Spirit who descended on him like a dove in baptism. This "dove-like" Spirit (think Picasso's lithograph of the peace dove) becomes an irresistible force (think F2 category tornado). Mark, apparently, wants us to know that being blessed by God does not exempt us from the distractions, beguiling or bulling of the Accuser.

Lapsed Vicar, Rev. Thomas Marshfield, believes the scourge of our age is that all our dieties are housebroken. Far from demanding anything, they ask only how they can more meaningfully

enhance the lives of those they serve. Rev. Marshfield, a character in John Updike's *A Month of Sundays*, wants his religion in its "original stony jars or not at all!"

Rev. Marshfield and Mark are of the same mind. Jesus is "cast out" into the wilderness just as demons are "cast out" of the possessed. The very God who calls Jesus "Son, the beloved, my delight," forces him to confront his demons in the company of wild beasts. This Spirit, this God, is not domesticated. This God is not my butler.

Spineless theologies are inadequate to the wilderness experience. They may suffice in periods of prosperity, but when the bottom falls out of life and the wild beasts threaten, we need something more than sentiment. We need a Spirit who cares enough to strip us of all false securities and force us to confront the realities of life. This is what the classic Christian spiritual tradition calls the process of "purification."

The goal of purification is greater freedom in relationship to others, the world, God and oneself. The process of purification begins to correct distorted perceptions of reality, to disillusion us of false images of God and of ourselves. Purification is a movement toward more truthful relationships and more authentic self-giving to others.

Thomas Merton was cast out into the wilderness by his Abbot, with whom he had a very contentious relationship. For many years Merton attempted to live as a hermit on the grounds of the Abbey of Gethsemane. The Abbot required Merton to see a psychiatrist. Dr. Gregory Zilboorg was well known and something of a phenomenon among Catholics because of his conversion.

In July of 1956 at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, Zilboorg spoke with Merton in the presence of the Abbot. Zilboorg maintained that Merton's desire to be a hermit was pathological: "You want a hermitage in Times Square with a large sign over it saying 'HERMIT.'" Merton was stunned and moved to tears—tears of rage.

Zilboorg referred Merton to Dr. James Wygal, a psychologist practicing in Louisville. Their counseling sessions evolved into a friendship. That friendship was tested as Wygal warned Merton of the dangers of certain behaviors, telling him "You are on a collision course." Merton realized he was right, yet found it hard to act, at least immediately, on that realization.

The desert waits,  
ready for those who come,  
who come obedient to the Spirit's leading;  
or who are driven,  
because they will not come any other way.

The desert always waits,  
ready to let us know who we are—  
the place of self-discovery.

The desert, Merton wrote, is wherever we live with other people and learn to lose ourselves in the understanding of their weaknesses and deficiencies—which are also our own. There is no better means of getting rid of the rigidity and harshness and coarseness of our ingrained egoism, which is the one unbeatable obstacle to the illumination and action of the Spirit of God. The work of purification is accomplished in us by patiently and humbly loving others and sympathizing with their most unreasonable needs and demands.

And whilst we fear, and rightly,  
the loneliness and emptiness and harshness,  
we forget the angels,  
whom we cannot see for our blindness,  
but who come when God decides  
that we are ready  
for what they can give us. (Ruth Burgess)

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PRAYER: "Not at our beck and call"      by Walter Brueggemann

We call out your name in as many ways as we can.  
We fix your role towards us in the ways we need.  
We approach you from the particular angle of our life.  
    We do all that, not because you need to be identified,  
    but because of our deep need,  
        our deep wound,  
        our deep hope.

And then, we are astonished that while our names for you  
    serve for a moment,  
    you break beyond them in your freedom,  
    you show yourself yet fresh beyond our utterance,  
    you retreat into your splendor beyond our grasp.

We are—by your freedom and your hiddenness—  
    made sure yet again that you are God . . .  
    beyond us, for us, but beyond us,  
    not at our beck and call,  
    but always in your own way.

We stammer about your identity,  
    only to learn that it is our own unsettling  
    before you that wants naming.

Beyond all our explaining and capturing and fixing you . . .  
    we give you praise,  
    we thank you for your fleshed presence in suffering love,  
    and for our names that you give us. Amen.