

First Sunday in Lent, Year C
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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It's no secret that I am a country boy. I grew up on a mountain next to the ocean, and I think I've been trying to get back to the wilderness ever since. I've been in a twenty-year search to find that place where I can be in the woods while also having takeout delivered to my door. My seminary apartment was in a dense part of Chicago, but I was only about a fifteen minutes walk to Lake Michigan where, in the right light and with a little squint, I could pretend I was seeing the Pacific Ocean. My first apartment in my 30s sat directly next to a beautiful but small park, so while I was just one block from a traffic-jammed major commuting artery, from my bedroom window, I could see the seasons change in the colors of beautiful mature trees. Later, I lived in the rectory of a parish in downtown Chicago, and the noise of helicopters and ambulances almost never stopped, but I was just two blocks from Lincoln Park, with its huge fields, herons, turtles, flowers, and some space to breathe and pretend you're not in the third largest city in the country.

I loved that park, and I walked the dog there at least twice a day. It gave me a tiny sense of the wilderness that I longed for, and it sometimes felt like home. Right on the edge of the park was a beautiful brownstone home, with large trees in its tiny yard. I sometimes smiled when I saw this house because I had a hunch that the person who lived there craved the wilderness as much as I did. She had blocked out as much of the city as possible and had made her front yard kind of an extension of Lincoln Park. In the winter, I noticed that she would leave sunflower seeds on the snow at the base of her trees. I would often see songbirds gratefully eating the food, and I imagined a very contented elderly woman in her front window enjoying the show.

One morning, I had to get up unusually early. I walked the dog by street lamp light down the familiar two blocks to my personal patch of wilderness. As I came upon the bird lady's house, I noticed some motion and wondered what kind of songbird would feast at 5am in the dark. Imagine my surprise and horror when, instead of songbirds, I found myself looking at a swarming pile of about eight, bloated Chicago rats, fighting over the pile of bird food. I reflected later that the problem with wilderness, of course, is that it is wild.

Jesus is herded into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit directly after his baptism, and there for forty days, he fasts and then is tempted by the devil. I don't have to take you through any narrative athletics to show why the powers that be in the church chose this reading for the First Sunday in Lent. We, too, set aside forty days for fasting and wrestling with the demons in our lives as we examine ourselves and our communities in preparing for the Easter resurrection Feast. Many of us who have been through countless Lents kind of know the drill.

I want to offer what is maybe a twist or expansion on the theme. It's common to associate wilderness with deprivation, temptation, and even the devil. After all, those are big Lenten themes. But on this reading, I was intrigued that it was the Holy Spirit who sent Jesus there to wrestle. The wilderness is temptation, yes, but it has also been for generations of God-followers a place of revelation. Think about the Hebrews finding themselves in tents at the base of Sinai.

There, in the middle of nowhere, the glory of God finds its way into their midst. Think about Jacob wrestling with the angel on the banks of that river winding its way through the middle of nowhere. He falls asleep and sees a ladder connecting heaven and earth and then calls that place holy and sets up an altar to God. Think about Jesus, a few weeks ago, going outside of the city of Jerusalem to preach at the edge of civilization — reflecting God to the people on the edge. The wilderness isn't just one thing in scripture. It is a place of trial, of grace, of temptation, of revelation. It is the place we have to go to to get a better sense of who we are, of who God is, of what we need. It's sometimes a corporate experience. It's sometimes a singular experience. It's wild and unexpected; it's songbirds and rats.

And so, in these 40 days of Lent, in this wilderness that we are entering together, I would like you to be mindful. Know that you might very well face temptation, as our Lord did in today's Gospel. Know that you also might find the Glory of God as you wander these days, just like your ancestors did. The wilderness is always going to be a mixed bag. Sometimes it's songbirds; sometimes it's rats. And Lent is no different. Expect it all. There might be unexamined parts of yourself that you are not that keen to bring to the surface. I promise you that God already knows, has already forgiven you, and is just waiting for you to do some wandering right into God's holy presence. Observe a Holy Lent. Know that you will encounter devils, but you very well may encounter angels as well. Amen.