

Lent 1B (2021)  
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I speak to you in the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.+

Before coming to Australia, during the summer months when we lived in North America, all the Derrenbackers were usually able to get away to our family cottage in the Adirondack mountains of New York in the United States. It's a lovely spot on Big Moose Lake – quiet, out of the way, full of natural beauty and wildlife; it would be the closest we could get as a family on a regular basis to wilderness. One of the ways we would know we were in wilderness is that about 20 minutes before arriving at our camp, we'd lose our mobile phone coverage. Giving up cell coverage is one of the sacrifices we make to be at cottage.

But when we are at Big Moose Lake (and we do hope to return there once the borders open back up and international travel resumes), it is amazing what else is missing from our lives, things like traffic noise, the mundaneness of routine and the stresses of work. And of course there are things that are unique to the wilderness, those things we don't encounter in the civilization of Melbourne or other cities, things like the call of the loon or the other sounds of the lake or the occasional sighting of a moose or an otter. There are different smells that the wilderness brings with it, like the smell of a campfire or the scent of evergreen trees.

When we lived in North America, each summer, we would all look forward to our "wilderness experience" away from the civilization of our urban lives, for our wilderness experience could refresh us and rejuvenate us, cause us to sense new and different things, and potentially even change us as individuals.

The noun “wilderness” can indicate an area that is “wild,” a place where few people go. It can be defined as primitive, remote, and governed by natural processes. As such, the wilderness is often inhospitable and uninhabitable. As an inhospitable and uninhabitable place, it is a region not meant for human habitation. As a result, humans that venture into the wilderness may give up certain creature comforts – not just mobile phone coverage, but sometimes food and shelter. They may be vulnerable to extreme cold or warm temperature; they may even be vulnerable to an attack from a wild predatory animal.

Our Gospel reading from St. Mark offers us a brief story of Jesus’ “wilderness experience,” when he ventured from the relative civilization of Galilee into the wilderness regions of ancient Judea. There, Mark tells us, he spends 40 days being “tempted” or “tested.” Now the number 40 is not some arbitrary number. Rather, it is a number designed to remind hearers of the Gospel of other wilderness experiences from the Bible where the number 40 features prominently – Moses spending 40 days on Mount Sinai; the ancient Israelites sojourning for 40 years after the exodus from Egypt; the prophet Elijah spending 40 days on Mt. Horeb. It would have also reminded the first readers of the Gospel of the 40 days and nights of flooding rain during the time of Noah. In all these stories, the number 40 is associated with trial and testing. And this association between the number 40 and testing is, of course, seen in the story of the Temptation of Jesus.

It is no mistake, therefore, that the season of Lent is 40 days in length (46 when you count the six Sundays). In fact, the Latin word for Lent is *Quadragesima*, which means “fortieth.” The 40 days of this season are designed to remind us that Lent is a time of testing, of wilderness testing to be more precise, for Lent, in a sense, replicates the experience of Jesus in the wilderness. And in many ways, our Gospel reading presents Jesus as a model – the ultimate model if you will – for us to follow. In our short Gospel reading from St Mark, a lot

happens at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus ventures south from Galilee to Judea to be baptized by John along the Jordan River. At his baptism, Jesus is anointed with God's Holy Spirit. This same Spirit then "drives" Jesus "out" into the wilderness where he is tested for 40 days. After this period of testing, Jesus returns to civilization and begins proclaiming the Good News that the Kingdom of God has now come near.

In this short reading, we see a pattern emerge that begins the ministry of Jesus – baptism, testing, proclaiming. There is a particular sensibility or logic to this pattern. Baptism begins the ministry of Jesus and is what then equips him to enter into a time of testing. This time of testing, then, prepares Jesus for his confident proclamation of the Good News of God.

I think this in many ways is the pattern for the Christian life – baptism, testing, proclaiming – with the Christian life cycling between testing and proclaiming throughout our lives after baptism. But let's focus on the time of testing, as we have just begun the 40-day season of Lent.

Again, it is in the wilderness where we give up certain things, but also are tuned into new and different experiences, experiences that are often unlike the experiences of civilization. Lent is also a wilderness experience, a journey through wilderness. It is a season that is different from the other seasons of the church year. The liturgical colour changes from green to purple. There are no alleluias, no bells. We might give up on certain things and certain tasks that we enjoy the other 300-plus days of the year. We are more intentional in our prayer and devotional lives. We are more consciously disciplined. We are more deliberately prayerful. And we are also more self-reflective, particularly reflective of our own sin and those darker corners of our lives that need the revealing light of Christ. And as we are in a wilderness experience, we are more attentive to the things that are different from the rest of the year. Lent is a time to pay attention to those differences. We ask God if those differences, those new things

we sense, are his ways of speaking to us and teaching us through the testing we experience on our Lenten wilderness journey.

If we look at today's Old Testament lesson, we see, I think, one of the things that testing can produce in our relationship with God. Our reading from Genesis brings us to that moment after the flood (which was, of course, produced by 40 days and nights of rain) when the waters had receded. There, we see God establish his covenant with Noah and his descendants, promising to never again destroy the earth with flood waters, the sign for this promise being, of course, the rainbow. Testing produces a promise from God; testing, you could say, has the potential to produce trust and a sense that God will keep his promises.

We see this in our Psalm as well where the Psalmist declares that it is in God, and God alone, where the Psalmist puts his trust. And we see in this Psalm the lessons that come from the experience of testing. The Psalmist reminds himself that God is steadfast, that it is God who strengthens, that it is God who instructs and leads, and it is God who is merciful. Lent, I believe, is a season that serves to remind us of these basic but important characteristics of God – his steadfastness, his strength, his instruction, his leading, and his mercy.

Lent is a journey through the wilderness. Things are different. We are more aware of the tests we are undergoing along the way. But we need to remember that we are not journeying through the wilderness of Lent alone. Christ is there. He too experienced a 40-day journey in the wilderness.

The wilderness can do more than challenge and test us. It can also change us, and change us for the better. This is what the wilderness of Big Moose Lake does for me and my family each summer when we are there. As the wilderness experience prepared Jesus to proclaim the Gospel, the Good News of God's Kingdom, our Lenten wilderness

can also prepare us to be more effective disciples, sons and daughters of God's Kingdom, and more effective proclaimers of the Kingdom. So my fellow disciples, look for things that are different in your lives during your Lenten journey in the wilderness. Look for the signs that indicate the presence of Jesus on this journey. Listen more carefully for the voice of God who leads you. And in doing so, ask God to prepare you during this time to be more faithful disciples of Jesus.

Our Psalm today is a very appropriate Psalm for the first Sunday of Lent. It is a Psalm of supplication and petition. In it, the Psalmist makes a number of requests of God. And I close with the Psalmist's prayer, a prayer for us as we begin our journey together through the wilderness of Lent. Let us pray:

Make me to know your ways, O Lord;  
teach me your paths.  
Lead me in your truth, and teach me,  
for are the God of my salvation.  
Amen.