

The First Sunday in Lent. The scripture text is taken from Mark 1:9-13

Just out of curiosity, how many of you like to read the articles in Reader's Digest magazine? Have you ever noticed that some of those articles, are edited versions of articles that have been published elsewhere?

Mark's Gospel, in a sense, is the "Reader's Digest" of the Gospels. If you look at Mark's Gospel, it is the shorter version of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The writer of Mark's Gospel leaves out a lot of details that are found in the other gospels.

A good example of this, is found in our gospel narrative for today. The writer of Mark's Gospel doesn't include the details of the temptation narrative, (in other words, Jesus' conversation with Satan) which is found in Matthew and Luke.

The writer of Mark's Gospel wanted the early believers to know that Jesus triumphed completely over the enemy, and they can triumph too, when they are tempted.

In Mark's Gospel, chapter 1, verses 9-15 begins with Jesus' baptism and leads to His retreat into the wilderness where He was tempted by everything God opposes.

Jesus went willingly into the wilderness, but the Spirit is pictured as moving Him to battle Satan's temptations.

Jesus often went into the wilderness during His ministry. It is in the wilderness where we often meet God.

We don't choose to go to wilderness places, such as times of trial, temptation and struggle. They happened to us. Even when the challenges are caused by our actions, we rarely seek out or even want such hardship. Even when we face life's challenges, the Holy Spirit, will make use of us.

All of us, have wilderness experiences from time to time. These experiences often force us to confront the negative experience of our lives. They force us to strip away our pride and worldly resources and come to God in faith.

Some people have this misconception, if you believe, that if you follow God's will, you will have a life of ease.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The way of God often involves circumstances where we must trust in God and draw on His truth and His strength.

God tests us, to help us to grow, to show us, that we have the faith and the ability to stand up to the testing, (the circumstances in our life), that we will trust in God in all times, (especially the difficult times) and to strengthen our faith and our Christian character.

At the same time, Satan has his own purpose, to turn us away from God, and to tempt us to sin. It is our responsibility, not only to teach people the difference between right and wrong, but also to motivate them to want to do the right thing.

Satan and much of human society, want to make us do the wrong thing. Jesus is the Son of the living God, but His earthly life was full of challenges, that He had to endure.

God sometimes uses the devil to test people. God's purpose is to strengthen our faith, but Satan wants to destroy our faith any way that he can.

You can rest assured, that we will face the trials of life, but we can endure, if we draw strength from Christ, after all, Christ's faith was strengthened by His time in the wilderness.

When we turn away from God, we find ourselves pursued by God in the person of Jesus Christ.

When we become His followers, His "No", becomes our rejection of evil. His, "yes", becomes our battle cry of hope for God.

With His victory over evil, Christ can now proclaim the coming of the Kingdom, because He can announce that which He possesses, namely, the Kingdom.

After the temptation in the wilderness, Jesus started His mission of preaching the good news of salvation.

Jesus announced the Kingdom's arrival by saying that it was time for the Kingdom to come. It includes the good news of hope, peace, promise, and eternal life.

The Kingdom is more than simply the rule of the Holy Spirit within us. The Kingdom will ultimately include the restoration of all creation.

The wilderness can be a lonely place. Jesus was alone emotionally, and physically. As Jesus was in the wilderness, it was a good time for Satan to make his move in attacking Him.

Satan tested Jesus' character. Jesus was tempted to take of His needs first, but His character included a reservoir of strength, that He could draw on when He was tempted. And that the reservoir of strength was the "Word of God".

We are often led into the wilderness, just after moments of triumph in our lives, just like Jesus was led into the wilderness after His baptism.

When we are in the wilderness, our character is also tested, especially when we are tempted. Do we let our faith guide us, or do we give in to worldly pleasures?

When we are in the wilderness, we don't know how long the journey will last, or what is on the other side, but it is a time of preparation.

Lent is a wilderness journey for all of us. We are invited to embark on a journey that will take us through a wilderness that will toughen our faith so that, at the end of the journey, when we are at the foot of the cross, we will be victorious.

The arrival of the Kingdom comes with a sense of urgency, and this sense of urgency is often portrayed in Mark's Gospel. For example, when Jesus appears on the scene, He is preaching the need for belief and repentance, for the kingdom of God is close at hand,

The arrival of the Kingdom of God requires an urgent response. God controls the timing not us. Every sermon that is preached or heard, and every testimony we give, must have an urgent tone.

Our lives, and God's patience, are short when it comes to accepting or rejecting Christ. The good news is decisive. The call to repent and believe is urgent.

Jesus calls on us to turn around and to walk with God. It is a theme that is repeated over and over again throughout the Bible.

Repentance loosens our hold on the world and strengthens our hold on the good news. It calls us to trust in God all the more.

Jesus preaches repentance, which requires a change of heart and mind. It is a full-time, on-going commitment to change.

When we repent, we are to turn away from the world, (in other words, whatever distracts us, and we are to turn towards God).

Now will be repentance be easy? The answer of course is "No". This is why we rely on the help from God's Holy Spirit, which will move us, in the direction we need to go.

The scriptures tell us, that Jesus spent 40 days and nights in the wilderness. The number 40, is often associated with intense spiritual experiences.

Jesus' temptation experience in the wilderness, was an intense spiritual experience. Look at what He had to endure, hunger, sleep deprivation, He was in a very hostile and dangerous environment.

Satan was doing everything he could to make Jesus doubt that He was the Christ, and that God had a plan and a purpose for Him.

Jesus' temptation was in a sense, a fore-taste of His entire ministry. It involved, assaults from the forces of evil, He was dealing with suffering people, He had to deal with the religious establishment who hated Him, and He had to deal with disciples, who just couldn't get it!

Today, we have begun our wilderness experience. Lent is a good time to think things over, to reconsider, and to be more aware of our own limitations, our own mortality, and our need for God and the transforming grace He offers us through faith in Christ.

Even as we look at our own broken and sin-filled lives, we can take comfort in the knowledge that Jesus, has preceded us in this journey.

God in His timing and in His perfect will, sent His Son, into this dark, sin-filled world, in order to be joined to our brokenness and redeem it.

Jesus said in John's Gospel, chapter: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him, may not perish, but may have eternal life." (John chapter 3, verse 16).

When we find ourselves in the wilderness of disease or addiction or loneliness, or depressed, or suffering, or any other things that may confront us, or challenge us, our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ has been there before us. He meets us in our wilderness to bear our burdens with us and for us.

Lent is a time for us, to loosen our grip on the world and draw closer to God, and His grace. It is a time for us, as Christians to take a journey through the wilderness to the foot of the cross.

We can't avoid this journey, but we can take comfort in the knowledge, that God will bring us through it to the other side.

God will not deliver us from the suffering we will endure on this journey, but He will be there for us, He will never leave us or forsake us, but by His grace, we will be transformed by it, to make us better and stronger in our faith. Let us begin our walk into the wilderness this Lenten Season. Amen

Let us pray:

Lord God You are with us as we begin our journey into the wilderness of Lent. Remind us, that when we are in the wilderness, we are never alone, and that You walk beside each and every step of the way. Lord God, by the power of your Holy Spirit, remind us, above all, that we are an Easter people, won through the victory of Christ over sin and death. And as Easter people, we are people of hope, of faith, of love, and of light, and that nothing this world or the devil can throw at us, will ever change that. All these things we humbly pray, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.