

LOST

MARK 1: 9-15

The First Sunday of Lent, March 1, 2009

University Church of Chicago

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It came to pass, there was a certain minister who preached to his little flock of “the world today,” “the modern predicament,” and “how to solve the economic crisis.” A member of the congregation complained of not being addressed by the sermons, that the homilies were too esoteric and unrelated to the Bible, the Christian faith and his own life. But his complaints were turned aside with admonitions against smallmindedness and provincialism.

In the course of time, the minister and the layman attended together a church convention in a distant city. When the minister showed some anxiety about their losing their way in a large, strange and busy metropolis, the layman assured him there was no reason to fear. With that word, he produced from the rear seat of the car a globe of the world.

Have you ever been lost? You wandered into a strange place while hiking in the woods in northern Wisconsin, perhaps, and you became disoriented. Or you were driving your usual route to work from Hyde Park to the North Side one day and you took a turn into a neighborhood and among people you had never seen before. Or you got turned around when you exited a building in the Loop; you thought you were on Adams Street only to discover that you were on Monroe.

The Bible is full of stories of lostness. When they escaped from Egypt, the Israelites didn't ask either Moses or God for details about how they were going to get to the Promised Land. As a result they spent forty years in the wilderness learning the holy art of being lost. They faced not only snakes but also hunger, thirst, and terrible homesickness. Did I mention the wrath of God?

The prophet Elijah gets lost in the desert while fleeing the fury of a queen named Jezebel, which is how he comes to hear the voice of God in the sound of sheer silence. The people spend decades in exile in Babylon—a cultural wilderness they might never have survived without their practice in the literal wilderness of Sinai.

In today's Gospel lection, Jesus of Nazareth consents to becoming lost, to spending forty days in the Judean desert. Mark's account of the story is brief—two sentences: “And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”

Jesus told stories about lostness. Luke's Gospel collects three of them in chapter fifteen: The Parable of the Lost Coin, the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Son. Of course, the latter story is

the most famous because it strikes at our hearts—telling of a son who leaves home, wastes his life, and courageously returns. Helmut Thielicke appropriately titled it “The Parable of the Waiting Father.

Those are big stories about being lost. Mark ties Our Lord’s baptism to the temptation. John the Baptizer is doing his thing, his ministry of preaching God’s reign and baptizing converts when Jesus walks into the scene. He perfectly embodies John’s call to repent of the world’s ways, repentance not only from the sins of the world, but from the whole sinful world. This kind of repentance amounts to nothing less than death—death to the old life, death to the old ways, death to the world’s categories.

And the Spirit “immediately”—PAY ATTENTION! IMMEDIATELY!—drove him into the wilderness. Where “he was with the wild beasts...” This story is told in one form or another in all four of the Gospels, and it is always read on the First Sunday of Lent in the Common Lectionary. The linkage is clear: Mark wants us to understand that Jesus’ baptism is followed immediately by his temptation. And that is true for us as well. The demarcation between church and world, between religious and secular, between spirit and flesh is not often clear.

But, truth to tell, it seems removed from you and me. I am tempted. So are you. But the wild beasts in my life are carefully hidden under layers of education and proper clothing and good manners. My choices are not often between clear good and clear bad, but between bad and worse or good and better.

You and I get lost when we put all our eggs in the basket of our own egos, when we become so self-absorbed and self-centered that we cannot enter into the life of another person or feel any real empathy with another’s pain. When John Updike died two weeks ago, I immediately remembered a poem he wrote that wittily voices this concern:

“THOUGHTS WHILE DRIVING HOME”

Was I clever enough? Was I charming?

Did I make at least one good pun?

Was I disconcerting? Disarming?

Was I wise? Was I wan? Was I fun?

Did I answer that girl with white shoulders

Correctly, or should I have said

(Engagingly), “Kierkegaard smolders,

But Eliot’s ashes are dead”?

And did I, while being a smarty,
Yet some wry reserve slyly keep,
So they murmured, when I'd left the party,
"He's deep. He's deep. He's deep."

I have a theory about Western movies—I have a theory about everything—that centers around the classic Western, "High Noon." Do you remember that one—the story of the good, righteous sheriff who is married to a pure woman who just wants peace and quiet? Gary Cooper as the sheriff and Grace Kelly as his wife. He comes to the final showdown in the street of the small town as he faces the bad guys—at the risk of losing the woman he loves, because she is tired of all the evil versus good, all the clear distinctions. She just wants to get away from it and live a normal life.

According to the Winkler Theory of Modern Cinema: when Gary Cooper faced down and killed those outlaws in "High Noon," when he faced them with ambiguity and ambivalence in his heart, when a woman's desires got in the mix and confused the Western hero, it sounded the death knell on that genre of movie. We have not had a good Western since "High Noon." The Western, you see, depends on the John Wayne type—the man who possesses no ambivalence or doubt, the guy who just knows he's right and begins to shoot.

Mark fills this story of the wilderness with momentous echoes from Israel's past. As Barbara Brown Taylor has asked, "Is that Jesus with the wild animals or Adam naming them in the garden before the fall? Is that Jesus in the desert for forty days or Moses in the wilderness for forty years? Is that God's voice coming from heaven or the voice of the prophet Isaiah, beholding the servant in whom God's soul delights?"

I stood in front of the television set last Wednesday night to hear our President make one of the most impassioned, intelligent, forthright speeches in our nation's history. Time after time even John McCain and Mitch McConnell and John Boehner had to rise to applaud. That address to the Congress called us to face a crisis like none we have ever experienced and laid out a plan for changing our circumstances.

And then. And then, after the speech, the television newsreaders who are hired because they are pretty and the professional pundits who used to work in the White House began to pick it apart, to parse the details. And they lost the big picture and the message in the process. Then, of course, came the polls to determine whether you and I liked what we heard.

Life's choices, you see, are not settled for us on Main Street at High Noon. We seldom experience such clear choices, and even if we have the moral fortitude to handle clearly the recognizable evils, we often lack the moral choices we have to face. From everything to John McCain vs. Barack Obama, from Monica Lewinsky vs. Bill Clinton, from Hyde Park vs. Woodlawn, the University of Chicago vs. Harper

Court, to what to do about public housing to what it means to care for the poor, the choices are muddled.

“In mirrors I see myself,” writes that wonderful Lutheran pastor, Walter Wangerin. “But in mirrors made of glass and silver I never see the *whole* of myself. I see the me I want to see, and I ignore the rest.”

We try to avoid those mirrors that do not allow us to hide the ugliness of our lives. You undoubtedly in your life at least one person who is a mirror, the one whose suffering in her face reflects with terrible accuracy your own selfishness. It’s easier to look away than to face what has caused the misery of another person.

Lent puts mirrors before us, mirrors that God is holding in front of our faces. In this self-flattering and self-indulgent culture, we are called to look at the truth about ourselves.

In my life, I have lost my way more times than I can count. I thought at one time I would play baseball well enough to make the major leagues; but with a lifetime batting average of .297 it was not possible. I had the most success of my career coaching football in a small town in Oklahoma, but God kept pushing me in other directions. I set out to return to the South to teach and ended up in Chicago. I thought God was calling me to teach so that I could escape all the pettiness and pretense of the local church, but over and over again God sent me to one local church after another. And at some point God said to me in that very silent voice through circumstance rather than audibly, “Rip, you are a pastor. That’s not what you do. That’s who you are.”

But here’s the truth: I would not give a single one of those experiences back. I have found things while I was lost that I might never have discovered if I had stayed on the path. I have lived through parts of life no one in his right mind would ever willingly have chosen. I have found treasures in the wilderness that outweigh the wages I sought on the straight and narrow path.

The Bible is a great help to me in my lostness, since it reminds me that God does some of her best work with people who are seriously, truly lost.

In Jesus of Nazareth, God is made audible and visible. Miracles followed him around. Angels attended his birth and ministered to him in the wilderness. In him, the Word of God was translated into the acts of God. But not everyone could see and hear God in him. His miracles tended to be intimate ones. They did not change the political destiny of the people, as Moses had. Jesus’ miracles saved people one at a time as he laid hands on their sick heads, rubbed mud on their blind eyes, evicted their demons with a few loud words from his lips.

According to the synoptic Gospels, God spoke out loud only twice during Jesus’ life—once at the River Jordan and once on the Mount of Transfiguration. “This is my Son, my Beloved. Listen to Him.” John’s Gospel mentions a third time during the last week of Jesus’ life, but it only highlights the problem. When a voice from heaven spoke to him, some of those standing nearby heard it and said it was thunder (John 19:29).

There is always another explanation. You say God spoke to you directly in a way that you could hear. I take that as metaphorical language. God's voice, as Barbara Brown Taylor has said, is a whisper, never a shout. In order to catch it, we must hush, lean forward and trust that what we hear is the voice of God.

One of our nation's best preacher/storytellers, Fred Craddock, tells of returning to a little church of his childhood in eastern Tennessee. He had not been there in years. Walking into the sanctuary, he noted that the congregation had purchased new stained glass windows since he had last been there. Admiring the windows, he noted that at the bottom of each window was the name of its donor. But he did not recognize any of the names.

'You must have had many new folks join this church since I was a boy,' said Fred to one of the members. 'I don't recognize a single name.'

'Oh, those people aren't members here,' said the man. 'We bought those windows from a company in Italy. They were made for a church in St. Louis, and when they arrived, they did not fit. New windows were made for that church and we bought these windows that did not fit. The price was so cheap that we could afford it.'

Craddock then asked why they did not remove the names.

'Well,' the man said, 'we thought about it and we decided to leave those names. We thought it would be good for us to sit here on Sunday mornings and realize that there are some Christian people beside us in the world.'

On those days when I am lonely for the simple world in which I grew up, I think of all those faithful angels who, like those in the desert who ministered to Jesus, minister also to you and me. The story of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness, when he lived with the wild beasts, temptation and struggle, concludes with the fact that angels came and ministered to him.