

Sermon 3-10-24

Heather Harriss preaching

Last Sunday I was walking into church with Anne and Rick Hoback and Rick asked, "What's up with the number 40 in the Bible?" I said, "Rick, that is what I am preaching on next week!"

What is up with the number 40? It shows up a lot! The season of Lent is 40 days, excluding Sundays. Noah's family and the animals were on the arc for 40 days and 40 nights as the rains fell down. Moses was on Mount Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights, neither eating nor drinking before receiving the 10 commandments. Elijah travelled up to Mount Horeb for 40 days and 40 nights. He was tired and discouraged, full of despair, but still he continued to Mt. Horeb. God spoke to him in a still small voice, reminding him what was most important and that God was with him. The Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 years full of regret, fear and worried about what they would eat, what they would drink. And then the manna came, all that they needed, provided. Some say there are over 150 times that 40 is used to designate a momentous occasion in the Bible. A new one for me, was to learn that the Prophet Ezekial lay on his right side for 40 days to signify that God's people needed to repent. Of all these other examples, this was a pretty good way to spend 40 days!

So we see some patterns, in the Bible when a story is framed by 40 something significant is happening, there's going to be a change, there may be challenging hardships and terrible things to endure AND there are new perspectives, new growth, spiritual renewal and transformation. When you hear the number 40, God is at work, showing up; in our solitude, in community and in all of creation.

Consider all that happens in 40 years so many changes. Forty years ago it was 1984, oh my goodness, think of all the changes we've experienced in these last 40 years! Things ending and new things emerging. Where are the times and places in the last 40 years you have experienced the presence of God?

The number 40 indicates a sense of completeness, if something happens over 40 days or 40 years, it's complete, what needed to happen has happened.

Others point out that we come from an oral tradition and our stories were told again and again before they were written down, there were a lot of things to remember, so when the storyteller said, 40, the listener knew this meant, something difficult was happening and it was going to take a long time, and God was going to be in the midst of it all.

With this context let's return to our scripture, "At once the Spirit forced Jesus out into the wilderness. ¹³ He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among the wild animals, and the angels took care of him.

Mark's gospel devotes only two verses to the occasion. familiar with the three tests the devil puts before Jesus are in Matthew and Luke , but Mark's version is striking for its brevity and mystery.

We can read Mark 1:13 as a transformed creation made harmonious, or it may hold out the promise of keeping at bay all the still-dangerous elements of creation. Either way, the imagery contains a sense of reconfigured boundaries. Old rules and expectations no longer apply when Jesus is present.

Jesus tells those who listen that God is bringing new realities into existence; Jesus shows us what these realities look like through his actions and words.

Because Mark leaves the details to us, we can consider different readings. We know Jesus was tempted by Satan, there were wild animals and angels. We can read this as the wild animals are a dangerous threat to Jesus, a part of a world where there are terrible unexplainable things, a world where the strongest and meanest dominate, a world with suffering and death. A world where we must contend with evil. Mark tells us Jesus encounters this evil and angels were with him. Evil is present and so is the presence of God, in our scariest challenges, in the darkest moments, somehow, even then, God is present.

We can also read, that the wild animals, being in the presence of Jesus, of love beyond understanding, something in them shifts, re-orient, is transformed. In the presence of Jesus, the wild animals put aside their survival instinct, in the presence of Jesus, like little children, the wolf and the lamb just want to be together in his presence. God is present in our darkest night and God's love is transforming all of creation. In the 40 days of Lent, we are invited to enter deeply into this knowing.

Eileen Campbell Reed writes, "What is the purpose of Lent? Learning to pay attention. And what is the purpose of paying attention? Being present to God and each other and all of creation. And what happens when we pay attention and become more present to God and the world around us? We are transfigured into people fully alive as God intends humans to be. We are made for this kind of holy paying attention, this becoming fully ourselves.

This is the work of Lent. The purpose of learning to pay attention. To see the world, ourselves and the sacred that is in all of it. It is to be moved by the presence of something holy."

Richard Rohr writes in his book, *Everything Belongs*, "We know God by assessing our full humanity. We access our full humanity when we meet God" So let us consider the 40 days we are in. How is your Lent? Like Noah, are you hearing there is something for you to build? A clarifying call to living with purpose and direction? Have there been moments like the Israelites had, wandering in the wilderness, complaining about everything, convinced terrible mistakes had been made, full of regret, grasping and fearful and then there was manna. Manna every day, always enough. Has your Lent been like Elijah's? disillusioned, exhausted, convinced nothing you can do will

make a difference, but still trudging up to Mt. Horeb, still seeking God and hearing God in the still small voice, always, already there. Have you had moments like Ezekiel's? lying on your side, maybe feeling judgement and anger for people being ignorant and stubborn, but you commit to this practice of prayer, to know God through paying attention and discovering God already always there.

The power of God's presence in the stillness and the silence, God's language of embrace and love is a force stronger than our greatest despair. So we encourage one another not to give into despair but rather to keep paying attention to whatever is before us and trusting in the power of love and grace.

Karoline Lewis writes, "**Jesus enters the wilderness only with the promise of God's presence.** Not with fighting skills, not with self-help strategies, not with techniques for passing the tests, but only his personal knowledge because of God's direct words to him alone that God will be there. the temptation of Jesus in Mark calls our attention to our greatest temptation — the temptation to think that God is not present.

We are tempted to believe that God is absent. God has given up. Withdrawn. Why? Well, you name it. A whole host of reasons.

Mark calls us to remember, just as God was present in these desert journeys in the wilderness, God is with us in the wild, lonely places of our lives.

"As we continue our Lenten journey, remember the truth of your baptism: you are claimed; you are chosen as God's beloved; you are empowered to set out in search of your voice and your vocation. The work is not easy in this wilderness called life. But the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God is this: in him the time has been fulfilled; the kingdom of God has come near. Our human lives have been invaded by the presence of the Divine and nothing will ever be the same. And *that* is where to begin."